

## The Public Art of Civic Engagement

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The concept of civic engagement by museums and other cultural institutions appears at first glance to be a noble and laudable endeavor. But beneath the surface there is often a problematic intersection of motives and results that should be examined much more closely than it has been. If one recalls that public museums began as agents of nationalism and as institutions geared towards 'civilizing' the working class, one needs to look more critically at ideas of museums and civic engagement.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly important when the method of engagement involves the sponsorship of socially-oriented public art projects, because these efforts are not merely invitations for participation, but rather reach out and exist in the lives of citizens beyond the museum. As artist Peggy Diggs has said, "Public art is constructed to live in public space."<sup>2</sup>

When institutions sponsor art projects in the public realm that specifically endeavor to engage communities in a civic sense, questionable issues arise in the areas of ideological ownership, target and goal definition, and perceived benefits. This is the case whether the goal is to improve social capital, to revitalize communities, as treatment for perceived social ills, or all of the above. Certain questions should be asked repeatedly of every public art project that seeks to engage communities socially. What, really, is being promoted by the cultural institutions sponsoring such art? Who defines the targeted communities and how are they defined? What are the ideological and financial sources of this sponsorship? What are the impacts of these projects? How and by what methods are the effects and/or the success of such endeavors as civic engagement evaluated, if they are evaluated at all? Finally, what are the ideological and practical consequences of such institution-sponsored public art?

I will discuss in particular two public art projects sponsored by the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut. Both are cited as examples of arts-based civic dialogue and briefly described in *Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue*, a report commissioned by the Ford Foundation and published in 1999 by Americans for the Arts.<sup>3</sup> In 1993, the Atheneum invited Peggy Diggs to create a public project concurrent with an exhibit there tracing the evolution of her work from the studio to the public sector. The result was titled *The Hartford Grandmothers' Project: An Exchange with City Teens*. The project took the form of lottery-style scratch-off cards that were distributed in perforated sets of nine with an explanatory folder to 22,000 Hartford citizens via the city's daily newspaper, *The Hartford Courant*, on June 16, 1994. One side of the cards displayed comments from senior female residents of the city, directed at the city's youth and expressing fear, anger and frustration with escalating gang violence. The flip side of the cards displayed a gold scratch-off bar that when removed revealed a Hartford teenager's response.

*The Grandmothers' Project* was an interactive piece that orchestrated a candid exchange between mutually estranged members of the museum's immediate urban geographical community. Diggs began this project with four months of interviewing elderly women in senior centers and religious groups across Hartford, inquiring as to their thoughts about the city, their safety and security. She discovered that they were most concerned with the young people of Hartford. Diggs then compiled the women's comments and took them in search of responses to teenagers in community centers, housing projects, high schools and churches within the city. The scratch card medium and the format of its use to obscure the

teen replies was suggested by the fact that many elderly women perceived teenagers to be hard to reach and difficult to understand.<sup>4</sup> Here are two examples of exchanges included on the cards:

*Grandmother:* "This is not the life we want to live, nor the life we had in mind for you."

*Teen Response:* "This life is not our choice. If it's like this, then it's like this."

*Grandmother:* "What I'd like to say to the kids out on the street committing crimes now is this: what do you see for yourselves in the future?"

*Teen Response:* "I don't have a future."

While distributing the sheets of cards in the daily newspaper can be read in part as an administrative ploy to attract interest in the museum, the tactic brought the exchanges and the social trouble they indicate to the attention of the greater population of Hartford. Clearly the work succeeded in fostering a dialogue within the immediate geographic community of the Atheneum, a community that remained well defined because of the clarity of focus of the artist. But the dialogue didn't continue much further. According to the brief description in *Animating Democracy*, "Throughout the summer and autumn following the *Courant's* distribution of the cards, Diggs returned to coordinate meetings bringing together the elderly women and teenagers for conversations with each other."<sup>5</sup> In fact, however, these meetings never occurred. As the artist informed me, the elderly women were terrified of any contact with the teens. "It was shocking, really," said Diggs.<sup>6</sup> Other than a few brief articles in the *Courant*, there is little more information available on the impact of the project, even from Atheneum curators. Though the major support for the project came from the Atheneum and the Hartford Courant publishing company, they appear to have had little interest in documenting any effects.

In 1996, in partnership with the Connecticut Childhood Injury Prevention Center (CCIPC) of the Connecticut Childrens' Medical Center, the Atheneum sponsored *The Manhole Cover Project: A Gun Legacy*, by Bradley McCallum. At once more complex yet more simplistic than the *Grandmothers' Project*, this work was intended to provide a counterpoint to a concurrent major exhibit of the fine and decorative art collection of Hartford firearms manufacturer, industrial magnate and philanthropist Samuel Colt. According to Atheneum Associate Curator James Rondeau, *Sam & Elizabeth: Legend and Legacy of Colt's Empire*, at the museum from September 8, 1995 to March 9, 1996, "memorialized the inventor of the *Colt .45*" inside, while outside, "*The Manhole Cover Project* addressed the issue of contemporary gun violence."<sup>7</sup>

The project's initial incarnation consisted of a temporary outdoor installation in the Atheneum's public courtyard of 228 manhole covers made from the steel of 11,194 firearms confiscated by the Connecticut State Police since 1992, which served to frame a continuous audio component featuring testimonials of Hartford individuals whose lives had been profoundly affected by gun violence. At the close of both exhibits in March 1996, twenty of the manhole covers were permanently installed in Hartford streets surrounding the museum and in neighborhoods where a disproportionate amount of gun violence had occurred. The practice of recycling firearms as public utilities was not new to Connecticut. McCallum's contribution to these manhole covers was to emblazon each one with the statement, "Made from 172 pounds of your confiscated guns," as well as the Latin motto of the Colt family, "Vincit Qui Patitur," which translates alternately as "he who suffers, conquers" or "he who perseveres is victorious."

Garry Lapidus, associate director of the CCIPC (which co-sponsored the project), said, "we saw it as a great way to educate the public about the issue of gun violence."<sup>8</sup> In his essay for the exhibition brochure, Rondeau states that the installation of the covers in Hartford streets provides "a long-term reminder of the complexity of Hartford's gun legacy," and the language on them "offers both a straightforward didactic as well as a call to action."<sup>9</sup> But whom does this project really speak to? Who, beside the five Hartford students who conducted the interviews for the audio component, is actually being educated? At the time, the Atheneum was not collecting zip code information, nor any demographics about their visitors other than the breakdown of seniors, adults, students and children.<sup>10</sup> From my personal experience, I can make a qualified guess that the museum's audience was dominated by persons from the upper and middle-class suburban towns surrounding Hartford, and that other than urban school groups, most Atheneum visitors would not have been at risk for gun violence.<sup>11</sup>

As for the permanent installation of the manhole covers in city streets, it bears pointing out that Hartford is not much of a pedestrian city. Will the youth of the inner city be impressed by the subtle and ironic metaphors of the manhole covers? Will they understand the Latin motto of the Colt family, or its translations?<sup>12</sup> Will the accusatory and didactic tone of the statement, "Made from 172 lbs. of your confiscated guns" inspire realization and comprehension of the part they may play in gun violence? The direct responses of city teenagers to the elderly women of the city gathered by Peggy Diggs in the *Grandmothers' Project* suggest that by and large that will not be the case. Furthermore, will pedestrians even see the statements embossed on the dark steel disks in the street? One imagines they would more likely be looking out for potential armed assailants, or at least vehicles.

As with the *Grandmother's Project*, there is almost no documentation of the impact of *The Manhole Cover Project*. The current (2003) Curator of Contemporary Art at the Atheneum, Joanna Marsh, explains that the only information she has found on the effects of these socially engaged endeavors are the periodical and newspaper articles on them.<sup>13</sup> What can the point of civic engagement be for the Wadsworth Atheneum when they don't know who their audience is and they don't investigate the impact of their projects? Such a lack of concern with evaluation and critical analysis makes one wonder if the motivations for civic engagement might have more to do with institutional self-gratification than with any real desire for social or political activism.

The implicit motivations of cultural institutions sponsoring civically engaged public art projects appear to be the maintenance of institutional social relevance and establishment of social capital. There is a growing sense that in order to justify their existence in contemporary society, museums must act on perceived social problems in their communities. But, as in both of the projects described above, those problems tend to be framed by the institution and/or the artists, not the community itself. Furthermore, these communities are often ill-defined or constructed from without, again by the institution/artist, as supposedly "coherent social entities awaiting outreach."<sup>14</sup> This is a dangerously self-serving and self-deceiving approach. While *The Grandmothers' Project* is in some ways a thoughtful exception to this disturbing trend, I believe the reason for that lies with the individual artist's honest and spontaneous approach to her subject, rather than any conscientious imperative of the sponsoring institution.<sup>15</sup>

An important underlying motivation for sponsorship of civically engaged public art is clearly to maintain funding from socially- and community-focused foundations (such as the Ford Foundation).<sup>16</sup> What results is a lot of sponsorship for activist art, or art that poses as

such. When one is engaging in social activism, I believe one ought to be well aware of influences and effects. It seems to me that there needs to be a great deal more analysis of why museums are doing what they are doing. Targeted communities should be defined organically and with as much clarity as possible. They should not and cannot be framed by outsiders. Cultural institutions need to have a clear understanding of their motivations and be honest and transparent as to their goals. Finally, effects must be documented and evaluated if civic engagement by these establishments is to be something other than a suspicious and insidious cultural phenomenon masquerading as art.

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<sup>1</sup> For a general history of the public museum, see Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, London/New York: Routledge, 1995, especially Part 1: History and Theory.

<sup>2</sup> Peggy Diggs, "Artist's Statement," at <http://www.williams.edu/~pdiggs/>, web site of the artist, accessed 11/29/03.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Cheryl Yuen, and Pam Korza, *Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue*, Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts, 1999, pp. 71-73.

<sup>4</sup> Peggy Diggs, quoted by Pamela Mitchell in "Artist Hopes to Draw Teens, Elderly Closer," *Connecticut* section, statewide edition, *The Hartford Courant*, June 23, 1994, no page number available.

<sup>5</sup> Bacon, et al., p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> Phone conversation between Peggy Diggs and the author, 12/19/03.

<sup>7</sup> James Rondeau, exhibition brochure essay, *The Manhole Cover Project: A Gun Legacy*, Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1996, no pagination.

<sup>8</sup> Alberta Eiseman, "Sam, Elizabeth and the Victims of Guns," *The New York Times*, January 12, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Rondeau (n.p.).

<sup>10</sup> Pat Faulds, Atheneum Information Officer, in an e-mail message to the author, 12/19/03.

<sup>11</sup> From 1982 until 1990 I lived in Middlesex County, about fifteen miles outside the city of Hartford.

<sup>12</sup> Even the unidentified author of an editorial praising *The Manhole Cover Project* in *The Hartford Courant* couldn't get it right, misquoting the statement as "He who preserves (life) is victorious," in "Transformed Guns Serve Purpose in Streets," Our Towns/Hartford North editorial, *The Hartford Courant*, May 13, 1997 (no page number available).

<sup>13</sup> Joanna Marsh, in a phone conversation with the author, 12/15/03. The Curator of Contemporary Art at the Atheneum during both both projects was Andrea Miller-Keller.

<sup>14</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, p. 151.

<sup>15</sup> Diggs began her project by reading the local newspaper and asking herself whose voices she did not see represented. She then sought out those voices and gave them an audience. Mitchell, no page number available.

<sup>16</sup> This goal is expressed throughout *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2002, particularly in the contributions by Ellen Hirzy (pp. 9-22), Christopher Gates (pp. 23-28), Miriam Noland and Katie Goatley (pp. 45-58), and Irene Hirano (pp. 77-78). The theme is pervasive, and more often than not vaguely articulated.