

ART AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: MAPPING THE CONNECTIONS

A project of the Walker Art Center's Education and Community Programs Department

"The metaphor for the museum is no longer a church or temple, but a lively forum or town square."

—Kathy Halbreich, Director, Walker Art Center, 2004

In 2003, with the support of the Bush Foundation, the Walker began exploring ways that links between contemporary art and issues of concern to the community can be made more apparent. We know that artists deal with contemporary issues in their work, but how can these connections become part of public life? **How can a contemporary art center become a forum for civic engagement?**

This knowledge map incorporates national field research about art and civic engagement, conversations with artists and colleagues, and insights drawn from interviews with 30 Twin Cities community activists and leaders. It attempts to bridge two complex ideas—the town square and civic engagement—and to better define what potential these concepts hold for Walker programmers and audiences.

The map proposes four major roles that art, artists, and cultural programs can play in the creating a Walker town square experience and a spectrum of activities that allow for genuine civic involvement by participants. The intent is to invite curators and programmers to consider open-ended questions that will lead the Walker into a more socially conscious approach to planning events, exhibitions, and hands-on learning experiences.

Why a Town Square?

In the early stages of planning for its building expansion, the Walker began using the concept of a town square as a metaphor for the kind of social experience the new spaces were meant to offer. The new Walker is envisioned as a place sparking with conversation, debate, and differing opinions stemming from the art presented there.

This metaphor was tested in the public sphere when interviewees were asked to describe their ideas of a town square; they responded by talking about fictional spaces full of art, politics, spontaneity, inspiration, celebration, music, ritual, conflict, and resolution. They imagined a commonly owned, universally used public space where all worlds of people collide.

A Town Square Is a Place That Feels:

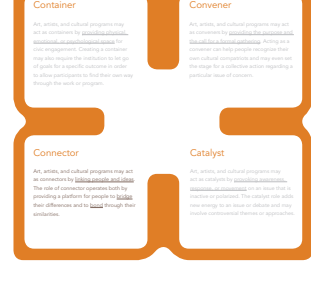
Spontaneous
Unstructured and flexible
Commonly owned
Safe for all opinions
Family-friendly
At the heart of a community

where . . .
Exploration
Connection
Political speech and protest
Performance
Public Art
Entertainment
Beauty
Nature
Self-expression
Refuge
Celebration
Ritual
Challenge

happens.

What Is the Walker Town Square?


Rather than being any specific physical place, the Walker Town Square will be a philosophy of programming that incorporates the spirit of an imagined town square and puts it into play in innovative ways. In the Walker Town Square, the three different roles of art, artists, and programs create communal and meaningful audience interaction where a diversity of ideas are embraced and promoted. This is called the 4C Model of Experience.



What Is Civic Engagement?

The term "civic engagement" is frequently used in the fields of museum education and cultural development, and many descriptions of it exist. Perhaps the broadest definition of civic engagement is the exercising of personal or collective agency in the public domain for the betterment of one's community.

Four ways that Walker audiences can exercise agency are through the activities of Commentary, Dialogue, Action, and Leadership. This is known as the Spectrum of Civic Engagement Activities, since the levels of intensity and involvement for both participants and Walker programmers increase as one moves from left to right.



How Do the Town Square and Civic Engagement Meet?

The Town Square and Civic Engagement are related but not synonymous.

The Town Square is a communal atmosphere where participants feel connected to their values and interests. Civic engagement is the active involvement visitors have with the social issues raised by Walker programs. The Town Square can happen whether or not civic engagement is a programmatic goal, but civic engagement always occurs within a Town Square atmosphere.

Civic engagement for the individual begins by recognizing personal values and connecting them to social issues in the collective sphere.

Social Potential: Start with the Art

The social potential of the art is the capacity the work or program has to address and possibly affect specific social issues in a community or between groups of people. This is a crucial starting place for developing relevant programs.

Some things to consider:

What is potentially meaningful and moving about the work?
What issues does the work bring up?
Are these issues present in local communities? How are they manifest?
Who could help answer these questions? (Community advisors, Walker staff, and so on.)
Given the issues present in this work and who might be interested in them, who is my primary audience?

The 4C Model: Roles Art and Artists Play in the Town Square

Roles are about the kind of energy you want your program to have, or the spirit that already lies within the art. Will your experiential focus be on exploration, challenge, connection, celebration, reunion, action, debate?

Container, convener, connector, and catalysts are offered as roles for art, artists, and cultural programs that can help create conditions for meaningful and productive civic engagement. Identifying a primary role for your program may help you to set more specific engagement goals.

Container

This role may be appropriate when . . .
The artist's work provides a physical space for people to be or create.
The work or program being considered can provide an atmosphere where people feel empowered to express their opinions.
The work or program can help boost a community's collective self-esteem by celebrating an achievement or success.
The work or program's primary impetus is to provide a safe and encouraging atmosphere for the discussion of difficult community issues.

Connector

This role may be appropriate when . . .
The ideas being addressed by the work or program are linked together in unusual or novel ways.
The work or program creates opportunities for participants to connect to their own heritage and culture.
The work or program can bring members of a community from different generations, cultural backgrounds, faiths, and lifestyles together for shared experience and interaction, such as connecting older mentors with young people.

Container

Art, artists, and cultural programs may act as containers by providing physical, emotional, or psychological space for civic engagement. Creating a container may also require the institution to let go of goals for a specific outcome in order to allow participants to find their own way through the work or program.

Convener

Art, artists, and cultural programs may act as conveners by providing the purpose and the call for a formal gathering. Acting as a convener can help people recognize their own cultural compatriots and may even set the stage for a collective action regarding a particular issue of concern.

This role may be appropriate when . . .
The work or program offered is in response to an event that has captured the community's attention or requires a communal response.
The work or program being considered can help mark a community's life cycle or important historical events.
The work or program brings people together for deliberation or collective decision-making.
The work or program's focus or concern is of broad interest to the community and can provide a common ground for consensus-building among people with similar interests.

Connector

Art, artists, and cultural programs may act as connectors by linking people and ideas. The role of connector operates both by providing a platform for people to bridge their differences and to bond through their similarities.

Catalyst

Art, artists, and cultural programs may act as catalysts by provoking awareness, response, or movement on an issue that is inactive or polarized. The catalyst role adds new energy to an issue or debate and may involve controversial themes or approaches.

This role may be appropriate when . . .
The work or program brings people together to discuss a topic that lacks consensus or is a source of disagreement.
The work or program has the potential to mobilize new players or get people to take action on an issue.
The work or program can assist in revealing the assumptions in a community regarding divisive civic issues.
The work or program serves as the focal point for the exploration of an issue, and allows participants to experience multiple or alternative perspectives of it.

The Spectrum of Civic Engagement Activities

Four ways that visitors are civically engaged are through Commentary, Dialogue, Action, and Leadership.
The boundaries between these categories are often fluid, and programs may contain elements of one or more. Defining a primary outcome is helpful in focusing programs.

*The use to these activities is inspired by the Spectrum of Approaches for Civically Engaged Art put forth by the Animating Democracy Initiative.

Commentary

A public expression of personal opinion or belief in the form of written or spoken statements, explanations, or criticisms.

For Commentary, consider:

How can you provide easy access to information that visitors need to construct informed and considered opinions?
How can you create opportunities for individuals to capture and share their responses, opinions, or beliefs virtually or in person?
How can you create an environment that encourages people to develop opinions about an issue and is supportive to all views?

Dialogue

The process of individuals or groups sharing and learning about others' beliefs, feelings, interests, or needs with the goal of improving understanding and trust.

For Dialogue, consider:

How can you encourage participants to engage directly to learn about others' views and share comments, thoughts, or feelings about issues in the work?
How can you make space for one-on-one conversations, small group discussion, or larger group dialogue?
How can you make a space for those voices and opinions that are not present in the dialogue or have been excluded?

Action

A mode of addressing an issue, policy, or event in a direct manner that attempts to make an immediate or measurable change.

For Action, consider:

How can you create opportunities for participants to address the issues in a direct and active manner that could lead to change?
How can you provide information and resources for further action on the part of individuals or groups?
How can you encourage or support the formation of an organized group of concerned citizens inspired by a Walker program or experience?

Leadership

Leadership involves the ethical use of power and empowerment, leading by example, exerting influence, and motivating and inspiring others to realize their potential.

For Leadership, consider:

How can you lend institutional support or commitment for a particular community action or project?
How can you organize citizens around a particular project or issue through its Artist-in-Residence program or other events?
How can you show the way to a desired goal by organizing others, supporting existing projects, or by modeling an outcome?

For all activities, consider

In general, more resources are required to create a program as you move from Commentary to Leadership along the spectrum. Consider staff availability and financial and technical resources as you decide the type of program to undertake.

Given your resources, what activity would be have the most impact for your audience?

If you need to, how can you strike a balance between what your community wants and the resources you have?

Challenges

Here are a few challenges that were discovered when interviewees were asked to talk about the function of contemporary art in their communities:

Contemporary art reflects contemporary life, which is often violent, ugly, and challenging. Many visitors want to experience renewal, inspiration, and escape, and be nurtured by art. How can this be reconciled?

Visitors often want to experience art in an emotional or visceral way, rather than thinking about it intellectually. How can an atmosphere for experiencing art in different ways be encouraged?

Flexibility can be difficult for large institutions. How can the Walker be more immediately responsive to local current events? How can it be spontaneous within the parameters of its programming timelines?

The environment at the Walker can be disempowering to people who do not know the codes and language of contemporary art. How can this institution be an empowering place instead?

The Walker and the organizations interviewed share a common goal to improve the community. How can this agenda be made more explicit?

Civic engagement is a two-way street. How can the Walker recognize what it has to offer its community partners and what they have to offer the Walker?

Interviewees most frequently referred to art as a verb. They talked about art as the act of making, doing, connecting, and listening.

Collaboration

Civic engagement and the Town Square are both concepts that suggest a communal atmosphere, purpose, and involvement that make collaboration a necessary programming element. Internal collaboration, community advisors and partners, even advice from colleagues in the field can help shape and guide a program toward more meaningful and socially grounded visitor experiences.

Some questions to consider:

Are there groups in the local community dedicated to working on the issues you identified as central to this work?
Are there advisors who could help you identify these groups? Who are they?
Are there past partners that would be ideal to collaborate with again?

Evaluation

Evaluation is necessary to measure and reflect on how well your civic engagement goals were met. The type(s) of evaluation you choose will depend on your goals and the nature of your program.

Some issues to consider:

Thoughtfully define what success will look like for you, your audience, and other participants (community partners, visiting artists, discussion leaders). Multiple definitions of success will most likely emerge. How will you measure each of these?
Input from your audience is essential. How will you collect feedback?
How did available resources impact your success and ability to achieve your goals?
How might you refine your efforts the next time?

Credits

Developed and written by Reggie Prim, Sarah Peters, and Sarah Schultz.
Designed by Amy Pogue Brady.
Edited by Kathleen McLean.
Funding for this project was provided by the Bush Foundation.

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Special thanks to Barbara Schaffer Bacon and Pam Korza, whose work greatly influenced this project.

“An Art Center is a ‘town meeting’ in a field of human endeavor as old as man himself. By definition, it is a meeting place for all the arts. It provides space in which the public can both participate and be a spectator.”

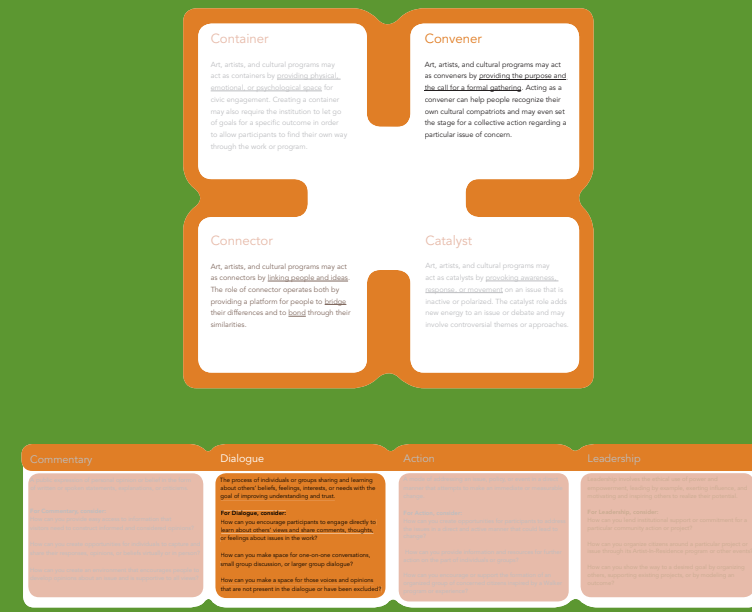
—Daniel Defenbacher, Director, Walker Art Center, 1944

PROJECT: Undisputed Champions:
Celebrating Minnesota Boxing History
Sunday, September 28, 2003 2-5 pm



Undisputed Champions
photo by Cameron Wittig

CONVENOR / DIALOGUE



Organized in conjunction with Walker Art Center exhibition *The Squared Circle: Boxing in Contemporary Art*, this event celebrated a rich tradition of cultural diversity in Minnesota's boxing history. An advisory group of individuals from the boxing community helped organize the afternoon.

This program CONVENED a community that had become dispersed and disconnected using contemporary art centered on a theme relevant to their lives.

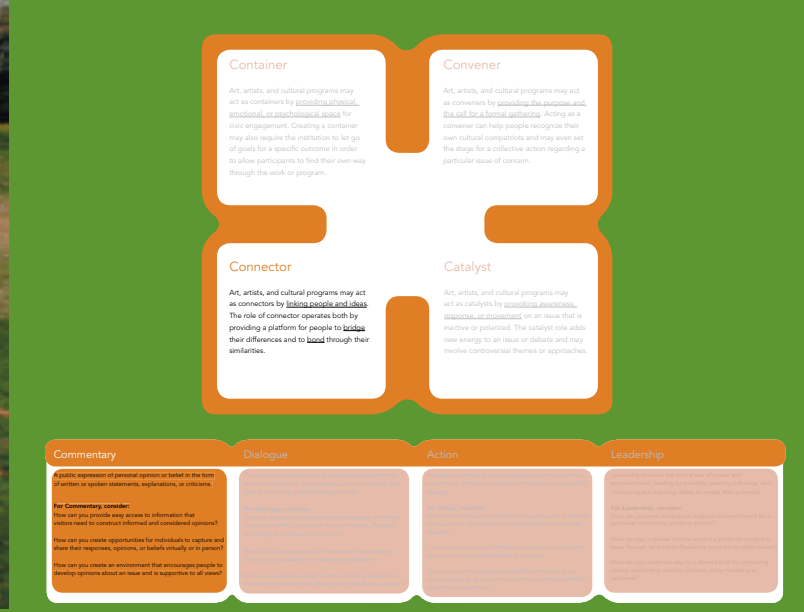
This event generated DIALOGUE among members of this community about the shared value of supporting youth and community through the sport of boxing.

PROJECT: Garden Project with Audio Narrative, Ojibwe, Lakota, and
Dakota Truths and Myths from the Invisible Present, Past, and Future
Walker Artist Residency - Sam Durant



Students with Garden Project
photo by Cameron Wittig

CONNECTOR / COMMENTARY



Visual artist Sam Durant explored Native American themes through a yearlong residency with Native students that resulted in a collaborative work installed in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden that links the history of Minnesota's native tribes with the local history of European lumber barons.

This project CONNECTED Native youth to their cultural history and community, as well as contemporary art and artists.

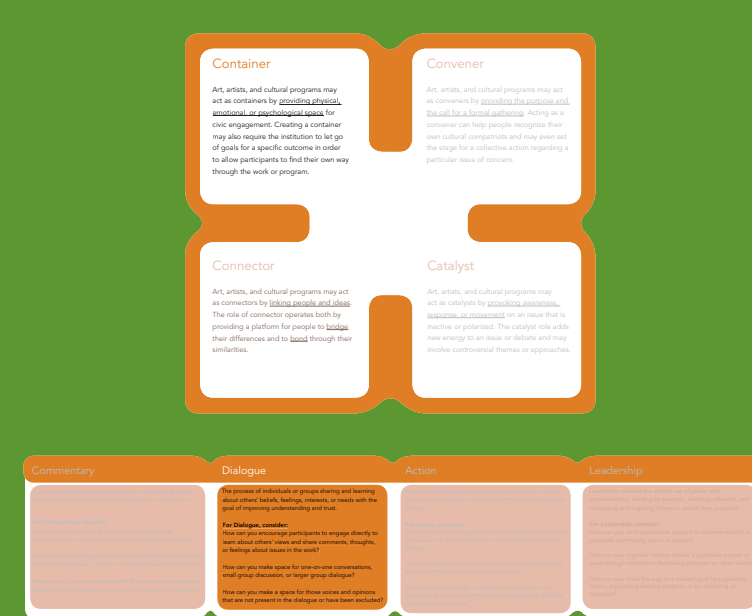
The students COMMENTED on their experience and lives by creating raps, telling stories, writing poems and reading historical texts that Durant recorded to accompany Garden Project as a soundscape. For more info, visit projects.walkerart.org/durant.

PROJECT: Minneapolis and St. Paul are East African Cities
Walker Artist Residency - Julie Mehretu
Date?



JULIE MEHRETU with students during her Walker Artists Residency
2002
photo: Cameron Wittig

CONTAINER / DIALOGUE

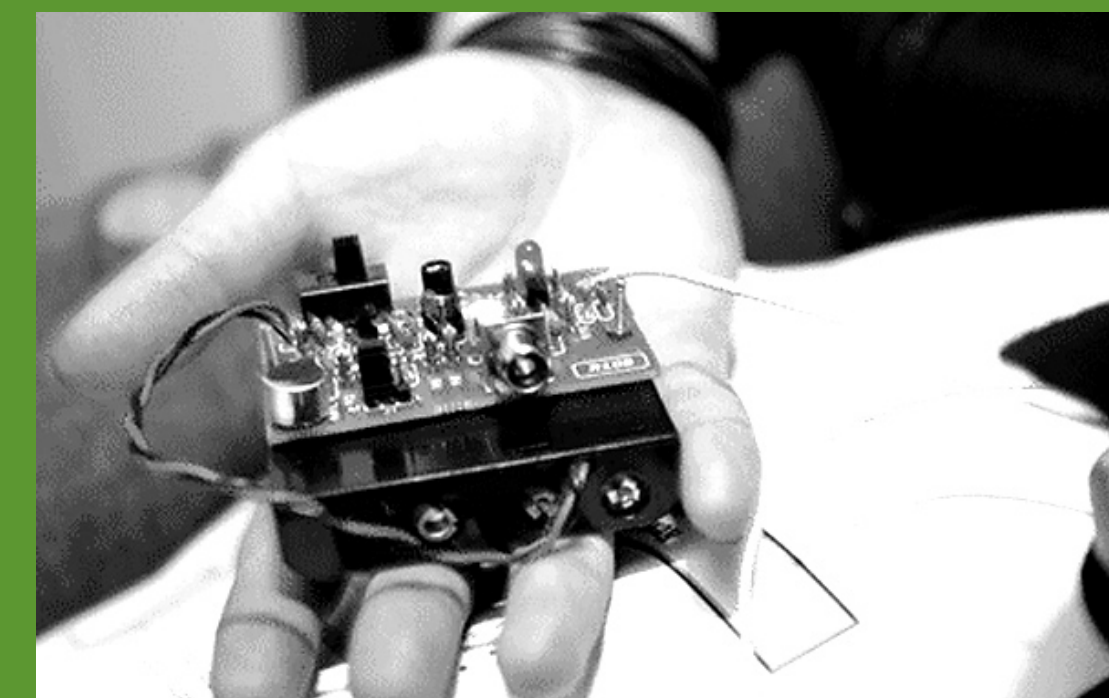


Painter Julie Mehretu worked with 30 high school students from the Twin Cities' East-African community for several weeks to document their daily activities through photographs and ambient sound recordings.

The project served as a CONTAINER by creating a space for meaningful self-exploration that encouraged participants to investigate their family histories and see their own lives as newcomers to Minnesota in a new light.

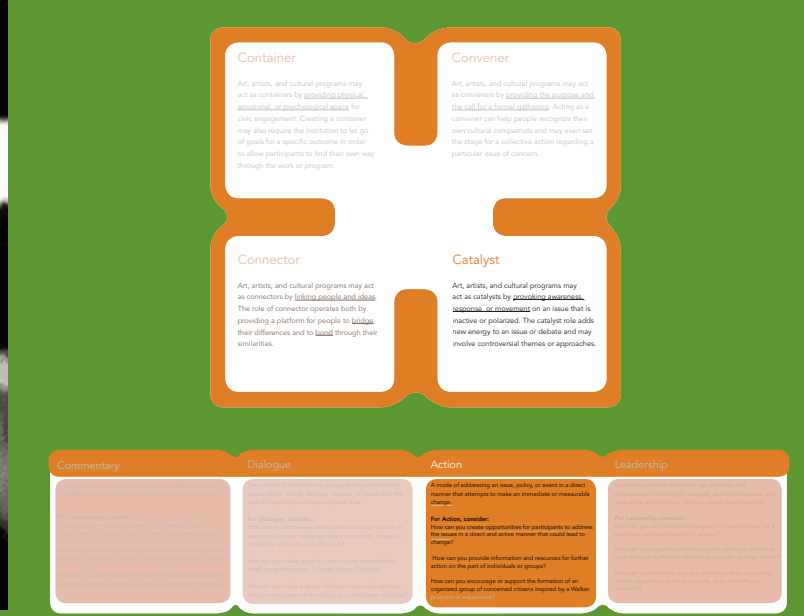
DIALOGUE around these investigations occurred when the participants presented their stories at the Walker during the exhibition of Mehretu's paintings. Their projects have been gathered on the Web site tcEastAfrica.walkerart.org,

PROJECT: Radio Re-Volt: One Person/ One Watt
Walker Artist Residency—Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla
June–October, 2004



Radio Revolt photo by Witt Siasoco
photo: courtesy Jim Carlin

CATALYST / ACTION



Artists Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla helped shape a residency project that addressed issues of media ownership through five months of workshops where participants built legal, low-wattage transmitters to create their own micro radio stations

This project CATALYZED awareness of the micro radio movement and introduced ideas about the individual voice in alternative media during a media-saturated election season.

Participants took ACTION to create radios and conduct mini broadcasts all over the city. Additionally, a conference concluded the project and brought together local, national and international visionaries of media culture for a weekend of discussion and collaboration. For more information, visit projects.walkerart.org/radio

RESOURCES

Organizations

Special thanks to the 31 groups who took part in the research-gathering phase of this initiative:

Basilica of St. Mary
Bloomington Art Center
Center for Neighborhoods
Center for the Study of Art & Community
Chrysalis, a Center for Women
Mayor RT Rybak—City of Minneapolis
Compas—Community Programs in the Arts
Cooperativa Mercado Central
District 202
Hennepin County Community Corrections
Hope Community
Interrace Institute at Augsburg College
Jordan Area Council
KFAL-FM
Minneapolis Arts Commission
Minneapolis College of Art and Design
Minneapolis Empowerment Zone
Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board
Minnesota State Arts Board
MN Citizens for the Arts
Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program
Pillsbury House Theater
Powderhorn Philips Cultural Wellness Center
PrideAlive
Skyway Senior Center
Springboard for the Arts
Star Tribune
Temple Israel
U.S. Bank
[underline](http://www.underline.com) Magazine

Web Sites

The Wallace Foundation
<http://www.wallacefunds.org/WF/>
The Wallace Foundation's Web site features research reports commissioned by the foundation. The site features downloadable PDFs of all of its major research reports.

Americans for the Arts
<http://www.artsusa.org>
Home of the Animating Democracy Project, bibliographies of arts, and community-related publications and resources.

Animating Democracy Resource Center
http://www.americansforthearts.org/animatingdemocracy/resource_center/
This site features an extensive online database of resources related to art and civic engagement.

Community Arts Network
<http://www.communityarts.net>

Sam Durant
Walker Art Center Garden Project with Audio Narrative, Ojibwe, Lakota, and Dakota Truths and Myths from the Invisible Present, Past, and Future-plus Retrocession Monument: Direction through Indirection (Bronze Version), 2003
bronze, stainless steel, MP3, audio system
Courtesy Blum and Poe, Los Angeles
Bronze sculpture fabricated by Anurag Sculpture Studio, Stillwater, Minnesota
Sam Durant's artist residency and commission were made possible by generous support from The Wallace Foundation

Selected Books, Articles, and Reports

Don Adams and Arlene Goldberg.
Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development
(New York: Rockefeller Foundation, 2001).

American Association of Museums.
Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums.
(Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2002).

Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Cheryl Yuen, and Pam Korza.
Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue
(Washington, D.C.: Americans for the Arts, 1999).

Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland, eds.
The Citizen Artist: 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena: An Anthology from High Performance Magazine 1978–1998
(Gardiner, New York: Critical Press, 1998).

Nina Felshin, ed.
But Is It Art?: The Spirit of Art as Activism
(Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

Pam Korza, Andrea Assaf, and Barbara Schaffer Bacon, 2002.
“INROADS: The Intersection of Art & Civic Dialogue” available August 2004 from
<http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/intro-commdev.php>.

Kevin F. McCarthy and Kimberly Jinnett.
A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts
(Sacramento: RAND, 2001).

Jennifer Amdur Spitz and Margaret Thom, eds.
Urban Network: Museums Embracing Communities
(Chicago: The Field Museum of Natural History, 2003).

Chris Walker, Stephanie Scott-Melnyk, and Kay Sherwood.
Reggae to Bachmanoff: How and Why People Participate in Arts and Culture.
(Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2002).

Patricia A. Wilson.
“Deep Democracy: The Inner Practice of Civic Engagement” in
Fieldnotes: A Newsletter of the Shambhala Institute 3 (February 2004).
Available from <http://www.shambhalainstitute.org/Fieldnotes/Issue3/>

To download a printable workbook that accompanies this Map, go to learn.walkerart.org/civicengagement (final url TBD)