

Foreword

A year and a half ago in Lexington, Kentucky, the Museum Loan Network (MLN) gathered a group of leaders in the fields of art history, dance, theater, philanthropy, art, public television, science, history, education, libraries, and museums to grapple with the issues concerning the museum as catalyst for interdisciplinary collaboration. Originally, we envisioned this “think tank” as one of a series of annual meetings that the MLN would sponsor on a variety of issues relevant to the museum world and to our work at the Museum Loan Network. The MLN, which has always been more about collaboration than competition, facilitates the long-term loan of art and objects of cultural heritage among U.S. institutions as a way to enhance the installations of museums and enable them to better serve their communities. The MLN had recently broadened its focus from “art objects” to that indefinable melange, we were calling “objects of cultural heritage.” Through our grant projects, we had seen the energy and excitement that results when museums of different types work together and when university professors, rabbis or dance troupes become involved in these museum projects. Therefore, it seemed reasonable and relevant to assemble thinkers from a variety of fields for a meeting exploring interdisciplinary collaboration.

We were right—but we were very wrong. What began in the springtime of 2000 near the Keeneland racetrack could not be fully explored in one meeting—or even in two or three. What we all learned over the past year and a half was that the subject was so rich, it could not be exhausted. Although we have made great progress, we are only now—at the end of three convenings involving nearly 40 people—beginning

to understand some of the issues, challenges, and hopes of collaborations, and the role that museums and their collections can play. We hope that this publication will itself act as a catalyst—a beginning, rather than as a conclusion or a finale.

As the topic was so fertile, we ultimately decided to hold three meetings on the subject of *Museum as Catalyst for Interdisciplinary Collaboration*. In April 2000, those gathered in Lexington, Kentucky, developed a framework for thinking about collaboration. Six months later participants prepared for their own discussions by attending MIT’s colloquium, *Asking the Right Questions*, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, where noted artists, philosophers and linguists pondered issues of human nature and “artists’ stories.” After listening to the discourse of these inspiring speakers, the group analyzed partnership case studies and observed themselves creating collaborative relationships in hypothetical situations. This charette approach of creating hypothetical and workable models clearly demonstrated the considerable challenges that we all face when trying to collaborate, rather than compete, in the nonprofit world of arts and culture. In the third meeting, once again held at MIT, we expanded the group to include more artists and watched these magicians’ imaginative collaborations unfold before us. At this last session, the participants’ discussions led them into breakout sessions exploring topics, which they devised, on *collaboration and evaluation*, *collaboration and society*, *managing collaborations*, and *models of collaboration*. All of the conversations we had in the course of the three meetings are reflected in this publication.

After the meetings concluded, we realized that these “proceedings” must function as a work in progress, reflecting its subject both in content and format. Hence, rather than create a chronological thesis, we decided to produce a document containing six separate, but related “essays” on themes that emerged from the conversations—*Reasons to Collaborate*, *Building Blocks*, *Hallmarks of Successful Collaborations*, *Managing Collaborations*, *Evaluating Collaborations*, and *Readiness to Collaborate*. Each section contains “rifts” that harmonize and play off the essays. Created months after the last meeting, these “solos” allowed the selected participants more room to discuss ideas that had surfaced in the meetings.¹ Their thoughts were thus both informed—and transformed—by the dialogue that took place. We had always hoped that these meetings would result in more than talk—that those who attended, whose presence is significant in a wide variety of fields, would return to their life’s work and be affected by what happened in the discussions.

Furthermore, we believed that the meetings would result in practi-

cal models of successful collaborations. To that end, we include examples of innovative partnerships. Although we selected several that the MLN has been involved in—as we know them well and they are close to our hearts—there are many, many more that we could all emulate and learn from. *Museums, Composers, and Communities (MCC)*—a partnership between the MLN and the American Composers Forum, is actually a direct outgrowth of these meetings. By inviting composers to collaborate with museums and their communities, MCC adds a unique dimension to the individual projects and enriches the museum experience. In one year, we have watched these interdisciplinary projects transform the way the museums and the composers operate.

In the spirit of collaboration, we end the document with *After...words*—a collection of words and phrases that the participants contributed when asked for a “final word.” In retrospect, I realize that I should have asked for a “beginning word.” Hopefully, you, the reader, can find in this publication some entry point—to begin your own examination of collaboration and the role that it can play in your own work, lives and communities.

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These days, one more often stops to count their good fortunes and I

am lucky enough to see mine each morning when I arrive at work. The MLN, the convenings, and this publication would not exist without the tireless devotion and flawless professionalism of the staff of the MLN; Michele Assaf, Mark Wright, and Ginger Hargett. Finally, I wish to express my profound admiration for all the participants whose wisdom and beauty always far exceeded their age and who gave selflessly of their precious time and ideas. Without their thoughts, only blank pages would follow. Most of all, I thank you, the reader—for now it is up to you to finish what we have only just begun.

Lori Gross

1 These passages were written by Caroline Marshall after interviewing the noted participants, with the exception of that of William Banfield, which was adapted from a longer essay which he wrote.