

## Reasons to Collaborate

Collaboration is on the minds of many these days, as **Lori Gross**, director of the Museum Loan Network, pointed out while welcoming participants to the last of the MLN’s three “think tanks.” A number of other organizations and agencies are sponsoring conferences and projects related to the topic, as well.

Why the resurgent interest in an old idea? “Solo practices are insufficient to meet the challenges and new complexities of classrooms, parenting, and the changed workplace,” Gross explained, quoting Vera John-Steiner, author of a new book titled *Creative Collaboration*,<sup>1</sup> which disputes the romanticized notion that creativity emanates from an isolated, solitary pursuit.

John-Steiner argues that joint thinking and shared struggle account for most of our artistic and scientific advances, and that collaboration is crucial to our future as a society. Gross agreed. “We need to have many different perspectives to meet the new challenges we face,” she said. “And as John-Steiner suggests, ‘Collaboration thrives on diversity of perspectives and constructive dialogues between individuals negotiating their differences, while sharing [a] voice and vision.’”

With such thoughts as a backdrop, participants in the MLN convenings looked at collaboration as a creative process—indeed, a potentially transforming force. What made their exploration unique was the focus on museums and the centrality of objects of cultural heritage—and their creators—in that lens.

In describing the kinds of creativity and transformation that can result

from collaborating with others, however, participants identified a cluster of compelling reasons to get involved in such projects, as well. For example, collaboration can help:

- **Engage new audiences.** When the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) and the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) joined with visual and performance artist **Joyce Scott** on a 30-year retrospective of her work, the collaboration drew people for whom the BMA previously simply didn't exist.

"My work is socially and politically aggressive," Scott told participants. "So we devised strategies that would help people understand what they were seeing, but not guard them from knowledge." Catalogue essays oriented people to the context for her work, powerful in its references to civil rights struggles, while "family rooms" featured interactive and hands-on experiences (like writing stereotypical terms they had heard people use on walls covered with butcher paper). Performances attracted people to the museum during evening hours. All told, Scott reported, "The exhibit offered reasons and ways for African-Americans and Latinos, who hadn't felt welcome before, to come. Some have even become docents."

- **Refresh and augment perspectives.** In making it possible for composers to join with curators in planning exhibits, a collaboration between the American Composers Forum and the Museum Loan Network has stimulated a number of insights, some perhaps life-changing, for everyone involved.

While working with the Western Heritage Center in Billings, Montana, on an exhibit dealing with Frederick Billings, the city's name-

As a visual and performance artist, **Joyce J. Scott** views collaboration as a way to "unpack baggage" and "break out of the boxes" we find ourselves in as individuals and as a country. Scary undertakings, she concedes. Still, "when we talk about art we need to talk about being instrumental in changing society," she says. Why? "Because it's incredibly liberating to encourage a *congress of spirits*, a so-

ciety that's more giving, more internal. And I say 'if not us, then who? If not now, then when?' If everybody brings, then everybody sings."

In her view museums should take the lead in such work, and artists are uniquely positioned to assist, to serve as links between museums and communities. (Then, too, "when we talk about art and don't have living artists involved," she notes, "that's very

problematic.") "Not all artists want to engage," she's quick to admit. But those who *are* interested can be "catalysts," helping to forge new relationships between museums and other community institutions, for example, particularly schools and civic groups.

By nature artists observe, she explains, and since they both live in communities and function as artists, they have a dual perspective to offer.

sake, for example, **Jim Cockey**, a composer from Idaho, realized how visually oriented his museum collaborators were—when they thought about music, it was usually as instruments or sheet music. Thanks to their collaboration (which also involved two Vermont institutions with extensive archives on the Billings family), the exhibit will feature an aural component. Two sound booths will present archival music from the Billings collections, recorded by residents of Billings and Woodstock, Vermont. The hymns, parlor songs, dances, and instrumentals capture a rich dimension that would otherwise have been missing—the sound of earlier times.

- **Allow new understanding and meaning to develop.** When **Rick Lowe** and a group of fellow artists “stumbled” upon a series of 22 small shotgun houses in a Houston neighborhood, they immediately recognized them as being “symbolic, even iconic” to the African-American community. And they vowed to “elevate them” to that status in people’s minds by creating activity around them.

Once *Project Row Houses* got under way, the Menil Museum became a collaborator, showcasing the houses as being both “beautiful forms” and “cultural objects.” “My screaming about the importance of these little shotguns had little impact compared to the imprimatur the Menil brought to them,” Rowe told the MLN’s “think tank” participants. Believing a museum should be a “steward of wonderful objects, defining and elevating them,” Menil’s Director Paul Winkler enlisted the support of the greater Houston community in underwriting the houses’ rehabilitation. Today, *Project Row Houses* is a growing, living entity where local, regional, and international artists are offered residencies of up to five months to work on the idea of a “holistic neighborhood” and to interpret



Project Row Houses

They can thus help people “step outside their own bubbles to entertain new options. We’re not talking here about whether *museums* can and should change,” she emphasizes. “We’re talking about whether *human beings* can change—can come to see diversity as something zesty, something to embrace. But change is hard for humans. It takes courage—to listen, and to accept that change is in-

cremental. We just need to be more courageous in what we do.”

What transformations might artists help catalyze in collaborating with museums? Scott envisions “mutable models”—off-site shows that “share the wealth,” taking objects into spaces and places where they can be seen in new ways and by many more people, with artists using their “strength, vitality, energy, and intel-

ligence” to be mentors, facilitating that interaction. “That would be gracious,” she says. Much of the new programming that museums offer (like evening hours and free admission days) is useful. Moreover, “there will always be support for museums.” But, says Scott, “the question is ‘who will come?’” She would answer both the “who” and the implied “why” of that query as fully as possible.

its symbolism. As part of this idea, the project offers after-school daycare and housing for young mothers.

- **Conceive new ways of operating.** After hearing a number of collaborations described, the MLN’s third and final “think tank” broke into smaller groups to examine concrete aspects of collaboration. One of the four “breakouts” was eager to discuss the relationship of museums to “the social construct,” as they termed it. Others considered the details of managing and evaluating collaborations, as well as the adaptability of collaborative models.

With newly released findings of the 2000 census in mind—how the forces of immigration, technological innovation, and a dramatically diversified family life are reshaping the country—group members posed for themselves tough questions: What might museums do to promote social justice and equity, community, and democracy through their collections and programming? In what new ways might they operate? With traditional views everywhere under challenge, they noted, museums are already trying to answer fundamental questions about the objects they collect, the narratives they expound, and the “unjust paradigms” inherent in traditional policies.

Reporting back to their colleagues, the breakout group offered some answers to the two questions. Collaborating with their communities, they said, could provide a way for museums to continue this reckoning with “tradition” in a positive way. For one thing, museums could get community members involved in the process of determining what we value, since at the moment tension exists between museums as repositories of “what we value most” and that ongoing process. For another, museums could place themselves in the mainstream of dynamic, democratic discourse by increasing the diversity and number of voices at their board and staffing “tables” and by providing for reality-based, intellectual rigor in their scholarship, expressing suitable regard for the cultural objects and art they exhibit.

Finally, museums could use artistic collaboration, and the civility and respect they foster for their partners’ perspectives and traditions, as a model for how social justice and equity can be practiced, breakout members suggested. And by employing collaboration to re-think their influence and re-form their structures, museums would also see themselves as a force within democracy.

- **Accomplish what cannot be done alone.** When a consortium of organizations in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, proposed to the American Composers Forum (ACF) that they host an artist in their “dying mill town,” those attending the second convening learned that they were looking for a shot in the arm which no one alone could provide. And that’s just what they got in their collaboration with the composer Barbara White, according to **Linda Hoeschler**, the ACF’s executive director.

The state college, local art museum, historical society, and an arts business known as Fitchburg By Design spearheaded the effort, but many more got involved in “creating a march that could lead them on”—including the city’s mayor and city council, as well as schoolchildren and high school band members, with whom White worked directly. Twenty thousand people attended the premiere of *Raging River, Rolling Stone*—in a town of 50,000. Moreover, as a result of the fervor and pride the collaboration generated, the town’s arts organizations are now consulted on economic development matters. As one of the participants noted, “The life of the community gave rise to the life of the arts here and vice versa.”

- **Create access to resources.** When **Joseph Petner**, principal of Cambridge’s Haggerty Public School, became involved in a four-way collaboration with the DeCordova Museum, the Underground Railway Theater, and Harvard University’s Project Zero, he told those attending the third MLN “think tank,” he was delighted.



Art Works for Schools

After 30 years in the field, **Joseph Petner** is convinced that “we have lost our sense of purpose when it comes to public education,” in no small measure because schools have become isolated from other community resources. For him, collaboration with these community resources—museums among them—thus represents a way to alleviate the estrangement, to take advantage of opportunities that would otherwise be missed. “Transferring the knowledge and values of society should be the work of everyone,” he points out. “Schools are given the responsibility, but it’s not work we can do alone. It’s

about the kind of access we give to people who may not have the privilege of wealth or education—or both.”

As principal of the Haggerty Public School in Cambridge, Massachusetts for the past dozen or so years, Petner has put his philosophy into practice, inviting a range of institutions to work with the elementary school—a “whole school inclusion model.” Local hospitals, for example, have helped Haggerty students and their families understand health and nutrition. And in a collaboration dubbed *Art Works for Schools* the DeCordova Museum, Underground Railway Theater, and Harvard’s

Project Zero have sought to augment the range of thinking skills employed at Haggerty.

By creating access to these resources, Haggerty has expanded students’ options for learning, Petner says, but the interactions have benefited *everyone* involved. Through the five-year old *Art Works* project, for example, teachers not trained in the arts feel they have acquired a new “repertoire of tools” to reach youngsters, especially “non traditional” learners. Students have gained ways of thinking with which they’d had little experience, and have ventured into arenas unknown to them before.

Why? Because “collaboration is some of the most important work of democracy, especially in making resources available to public education.”

In this case, the collaborators’ goal was to make progress in integrating the arts into classrooms: they wanted to figure out how the kind of thinking one does in the arts can be transferred to other subjects. Project Zero personnel helped the collaborating partners understand the value of teaching not only thinking skills, but also “thinking dispositions,” which involve a learner’s motivations, sensitivities, and inclinations. Ultimately, museum and theater representatives worked with Haggerty teachers to create a curriculum that gives children experience in finding and exploring problems (especially comfort in “hanging out in the problem space”); constructing interpretations and distinguishing between observations and interpretations; taking on different physical perspectives and psychological points of view; and, finally, making metaphors and comparing disparate things.



Art Works for Schools

- **Provide benefits to individuals.** While the impact of collaborative activities on groups and institutions occupied much of the discussion in the MLN’s three convenings, many participants were privy to the subtle benefits of collaboration that accrue to individuals, as well.

For one thing, participants saw how collaborations enable indi-

Petner cites an example: “What started out as an exercise in perspective-taking and visual art,” he explains, “ultimately became role playing and an exploration of interpersonal relationships and disagreements.” And families have benefited as well. Involvement with the project has “opened up new ways of expressing themselves and communicating,” Petner reports, not to mention the novelty of sharing an aesthetic experience. The latter is crucial, he believes: “in concentrating on reading and writing,” he says, “we lose sight of other things that are important in a child’s development, and we have

helped families appreciate that.”

In the process, these collaborations have also “redefined the schoolhouse.” They transformed where it is and whom it serves, and this has energized the community. But cooperation this ambitious takes time, Petner cautions. These are not brief interactive visits by artists or others, which function more as entertainment. “Meaningful collaboration requires an investment over time,” he stresses.

Perhaps the best “bridge” Haggerty built to the community came as it sought to design and build a new schoolhouse and involved as much of the community as possible in doing it.

“Throng of people were involved in selecting the architect,” Petner recalls, and there were an “endless number of meetings” in the four years it took. But it was worth it. “You can see the hand of children and of families throughout the building,” he says. The product was thus much greater than a physical structure. “Schools are central to the life of the community,” he emphasizes. “Children come here, and so do families. Schools are about our lives together and the work we share enabling our children in their learning and development,” he concludes. “They’re the *ultimate collaboration*.”

viduals, as well as institutions, to do their work by providing complex incentives—such as opportunities to do something one might want to do, but otherwise wouldn't have the occasion for. The composer **Jim Cockey** spoke of how the opportunity to compose a piece had drawn him into his relationship with the Western Heritage Center, for example. For another, Cockey bore witness to the complex chemistry and interaction that collaborations can engender when he described how his relationship with the Center developed—and how these interactions stimulate creative juices and nourish ideas.

Those who attended the third meeting saw yet another benefit as they watched visual and performance artist **Joyce Scott** and composer **William Banfield** re-create their discovery of each other's aesthetic philosophies. Improvising a response to one of her sculptures, Banfield on the piano, and Scott in gesture, voice, and movement, engaged in a “spontaneous” interplay of song and riff. The exchange that participants witnessed, Banfield later explained, resembled the “layering process” that gives those involved in collaborations many and repeated opportunities to learn—new ways of making connections, new craft and management techniques, and new methods of gaining perspective. “The true fascination with what's occurred may come even later,” he said. “There's a long-lasting appeal.”

Collaborations also have the effect of meshing the “solo” with the “chorus,” it was suggested. When partners sit down to collaborate, a participant pointed out, they represent not only themselves, but also others with whom they have institutional or personal relationships—and they give voice to both. That forges a sense of community, which in turn gets shaped as common goals are articulated. Moreover, this “connectedness” sustains community.

1 Vera John-Steiner, *Creative Collaboration* (Oxford University Press, 2000)

## PROJECT ROW HOUSES

**Rick Lowe**, artist and founding director of the project, describes *Project Row Houses* as a “social sculpture” that depends on a broad range of collaborators. *Project Row Houses* is a public art project involving artists, museums, and the local community. The site—22 renovated shotgun-style row houses located in Houston’s Third Ward neighborhood—provides a place for the creation of artworks that both engages the community in the creative process and celebrates African-American history and culture.

“What started as the single vision of an individual became a very significant community project,” Lowe explained. Initially, he was inspired by John Biggers’ *Shotgun Series* paintings that placed communities of shotgun houses within an African cultural context. Lowe sought to re-create the atmosphere of these paintings. When he started working with other African-American artists who wanted to establish a positive creative presence in the Houston community, they “stumbled” upon the shotgun row houses. With limited funds and resources, but with the help of volunteers, the artists started by renovating one of the shotgun houses. Museums joined in through an initiative led by the Menil Museum that enlisted the cooperation of other Houston museums, as well as corporations, foundations, and art organizations to support the renovation of the remaining houses. It was the museum, Lowe noted, that showcased the row houses as “cultural objects.”

For nearly 10 years, *Project Row Houses* has been involving artists in issues of neighborhood revitalization, historic preservation, community service, and youth education. Through five-month residencies, local, regional, and international artists are commissioned to transform a house in ways that resonate beyond the African-American community. The project also offers after-school education programs and transitional housing and services for young mothers and their children. Once again, museums have become closely involved in the collaboration. This year, eight institutions will each get a chance to “curate” a house for a five-month project. They will either rotate objects from their own collections or commission artists to create specific works. As Lowe believes, “It is important for museums to look at places outside their own walls for collaborations to take place.”

*Project Row Houses* website: <http://www.neosoft.com/~prh/>

## ART WORKS FOR SCHOOLS

A collaboration between several Massachusetts organizations (the DeCordova Museum, Underground Railway Theater (URT), Harvard Project Zero, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and seven public schools), *Art Works for Schools* is a program that teaches high-level thinking in and through the arts. Using an interdisciplinary approach, the project's purpose is to help teachers and students discover the power of the arts to inform and enrich thinking across school subjects.

The development of the *Art Works* project led the partners to rethink the way they work. "As the project progressed," **Debra Wise**, URT's artistic director, notes, "we found ourselves adjusting and focusing our ways of thinking to help facilitate working together." For the Haggerty Public School, simply launching the collaboration had import. "Collaboration is not a luxury in public education; it's a necessity," notes **Joseph Petner**, Haggerty's principal. "The collaboration forced us to reconstruct our understanding of what we do and how we do it, to rethink the teaching-learning process." The DeCordova Museum also found itself changed in fundamental ways, Laura Howick, its manager of Outreach Programs, reported. "We no longer think just about teaching shape, line, etc.—all those good art education concepts." Now, they incorporate ideas from the *Art Works* curriculum.

Initially, the project was to last three years, but thanks to two year-long extensions, it has now gone five. It was the DeCordova Museum that pulled the partners together. They approached both Harvard's Project Zero and the Underground Railway Theater to put together a proposal for designing a curriculum that would offer teachers tools for teaching thinking through the arts. Core concepts were shared with schoolteachers, who tried activities in their classrooms and reported on their successes, challenges, and recommendations. The classroom was then brought into the museum. Through drama techniques and with the guidance of professional actors, the children were able to enter the world of the painting or sculpture they were viewing. Striking the pose of the figures portrayed in the works of art, the children would then improvise an imaginary dialogue and begin to understand the perspective of the different characters. Although some students were initially reluctant to participate, the process proved extremely successful. Christine Colbath, a Haggerty third grade teacher relates: "The experiences—both in class and at the museum—helped deepen my students' ideas of what perspective is. They were able to transfer this experience directly to our social studies content to take on a persona in a Colonial biography project." By combining drama with the visual arts, the students could learn across disciplines, enrich their thinking, and have fun at the same time.

*Art Works for Schools* website: <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/Research/ArtWks.htm>