

What Does Democracy Look Like?

By Lucy Winner and Katt Lissard



Flyer for the Democracy Project. Design by Pat Brown. [Click here for a slide show of images from the project.](#)

One of the most popular chants heard at recent anti-war demonstrations around the country is a call-and-response about democracy. It has an infectious rhythm and is passed back and forth, usually between a single voice posing the challenge, *Show me what democracy looks like!* — and an exuberant, raucous group reply that goes: *THIS is what democracy looks like!*

In the spring of 2004 we embarked on a project with a group of students at the Metropolitan Center of Empire State College, the State University of New York's alternative college for adults. We wanted to uncover what democracy looked like to our students, right now, in New York City. Our "Democracy Project: A Laboratory in Arts and Civic Dialogue" encouraged students to explore ways to "perform democracy" — that is, to respond to current political, social and civic matters by making art together. The goal was for students to examine their own experiences and expectations of "public" acts of citizenship — marching, performing, participating on a jury, politicking. This looking would lay the groundwork for a multidisciplinary performance. We wanted to use the arts as a means to engage ourselves, our students and the larger community in dialogue.

We called the Democracy Project a laboratory because it was, in many ways, an experiment. Our approach included the challenging notion — unusual in an academic setting — that the workshop would be run as democratically as possible. The group would share artistic decision-making, and the final presentation would reflect diversity and, hopefully, consensus. We had no idea what form the presentation would take. We had no idea what this democracy would look like. That would depend on the students and on our work together.

Beginning with Art

In our first session we asked students to talk about a personal experience they defined as “of democracy” as well as one “of no democracy.” This proved to be a galvanizing entry point. While we didn’t presume that only activist students or political artists would be drawn to the project, it was surprising that more than half labeled themselves “apolitical” or “someone who hasn’t been involved much in things.” Thus, we ended up with a mix of people from their late 20s to their late 50s with a variety of artistic backgrounds — musicians, actors, writers, visual artists and doll-makers as well as those new to art. Political experiences ranged from involvement in Black Liberation struggles to work in agit-prop street theater to what they described as “nothing at all.” One student had never voted.



Beth Sorrentino - up-to-the-minute history lessons. Photo by Tim Connor

To inspire the move from personal experience to artistic expression we introduced the words of W. E. B. Dubois: “Begin with art, because art tries to take us outside ourselves. It is a matter of trying to create an atmosphere and context so conversation can flow back and forth, and we can be influenced by each other.” We proposed to use theater, music, dance, visual art and creative writing as exploratory vehicles to contribute to the urgent conversation that had begun on September 11, 2001.

We divided the 13 weeks of the workshop into three parts: Generating, Gathering and Creating.

Generating

During the first phase we wanted to establish some ways of working, and to help develop a common vocabulary and a series of reference points. We gathered readings from American history, using Howard Zinn’s “People’s History of the United States” as a basic text. We studied early Greek democracy and went to see a production of Aeschylus’ “Agamemnon.” We read dramatic literature and writings about arts and civic dialogue. Students responded to the readings and viewings through discussion, group exercises and journal writing. Finally, sociologist Alan Mandell gave an overview of social theory, and led a discussion by posing the provocative question: “Can we exist in a society of astonishing inequality and still be a democracy?” This question became central to the work and a springboard for students’ individual explorations. By the end of the first phase, each student had developed an individual focus — for example, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, Greek democratic process, and the history of the United States presidential vote — and we began to prepare for part two.

Gathering

In the fifth week, we handed the reins to the students. Students each gave a 45-minute presentation in which they offered up the results of their particular investigation into some aspect of democracy in a performative/artistic context. Again, the range was as diverse as the students. Investigations included everything from a participatory improvisation built around fear and ostracism, to the creation of on-the-spot protest songs, to an abstract lecture on "marginalization and the majority," to the beginning scenes of a melodrama based on the election of 1876. Following each presentation, we held a feedback and brainstorming session to uncover what the presentation had inspired. By the end of this four-week period we had an exhaustive list of potential ideas, including visual, musical and aural elements as well as many possible forms that our final presentation might take.

Creating

We gave ourselves the next five weeks to plan, create, build and rehearse a public presentation. First, we needed to find a frame that would collect and contain the expressive cacophony our students had engendered without silencing any of it. It was at this moment that we encountered the most significant strains in our attempt at "democratic" process, but finally we came to a consensus: We would make a museum of democracy modeled on P.T. Barnum's 19th-century American Museum. Barnum's "democratic" and immensely popular museum housed wild animals, dioramas, historical reenactments, freak shows, melodramas, lectures and staged battles. It was a sensational mix, understood by some to be "morally uplifting and instructive" and by others to be "a vulgar jumble of chaos and disorder." Our students were drawn into the Barnum legacy of populism and spectacle, and the museum became the perfect prototype for our emerging performance/collage.

We spent several weeks scripting, scoring, cutting and rehearsing. We made a trip to Materials for the Arts — a not-for-profit organization that recycles discarded lumber, notions, theater sets, office furniture and other "trash" for use by artists and educators. There we grabbed anything that looked like it might be useful in our museum. We gathered piles of black stage curtains and yards of other fabric — black, royal blue, sheer white and Victorian floral, along with some odd prints of cowboys and clowns that intuitively seemed to connect to our themes. We also took empty picture frames, faux-marble foam-core flats, piles of toy guns, telephone wires and computer parts, cans of spray paint and huge rolls of white seamless paper.

Students worked at home, designing, recording, writing and painting. Huge dolls were fabricated to represent the candidates Tilden and Hayes in a melodrama of the election of 1876. A Materials for the Arts poster board with images of suburban homes for sale was turned into a case-by-case incident report of domestic shootings for an exhibit about the Right to Bear Arms. Random people on the street were asked to recite anything they could remember of the First Amendment to be used as a video-loop installation.

Throughout the final two weekends students came and went as their schedules allowed, transforming the gallery, the largest room at the Metropolitan Center, into a scene shop and construction site filled with ladders, drills, two-by-fours, matte knives, scissors, push pins, swaths of fabric, sheets of poster board, water bottles, soda cans, coffee cups, Chinese-food containers and general chaos. Using fabric and foam-core and paper, they redesigned the space. Walls and passageways appeared: separate alcoves for the various "exhibits" were sectioned off and a central performance area for the melodrama was defined. Staff, faculty and administrators at the Center checked in periodically to marvel at how the space was becoming unrecognizable and to wonder what could possibly come out of the mess. And as their museum began to become a reality, the students themselves became increasingly energized and excited about inviting the public to see what they had done.

The result, The Museum of Democracy's Hall of Curiosities, in the spirit of Barnum, was a multifaceted, contemporary installation and performance. It was both fun fair and civics lesson, entertainment and intellectual provocation. The museum itself exceeded our expectations and the Democracy Project as a whole inspired many of our students to become more actively engaged in the world around them. Colleen Cosgrove, a student/former actress turning playwright, wrote, "Due to my participation in this project, I marched in a protest and voted for the first time in 20 years... I realized that as long as I am a citizen I do have a voice and an opinion worth expressing"

This was what democracy looked like!

A Quick Tour of the Hall of Curiosities:

"The Incredible Shrinking Vote (disenfranchised)" by Jimmy Simopoulos. In order to enter our museum, visitors had to cast a ballot provided by our own version of Uncle Sam (Jimmy in costume). They then inserted the ballots into our voting machine, which shredded it, the curls of paper visible through the clear Plexiglas face of the machine, joining the mangled votes of those who had gone before.

From there they passed under our large antique-framed sign, "Welcome to Our Hall of Curiosities," and walked along a four-paneled wall, "Standing/Under the Vote" by Colleen Cosgrove. These panels presented excerpts from various amendments that pertain to voting, as well as highlighted information about the Electoral College. The information was focused and made more compelling by the use of collage and wordplay.

Visitors next encountered a table with free copies of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights along with political fliers and buttons.

As they rounded a corner, they came face-to-face with Beth Sorrentino's video installation of person-on-the-street videos, "The First Amendment." While the loop was running, visitors could also color inside or outside the lines of their favorite candidate on the large cartoonlike papers provided, and also get some up-to-the minute history lessons.

Directly to their left, in front of faux-marble walls emblazoned with definitions of Democracy and Ostracism, was Val Hawk's "Foundations of Democracy: An Exercise in Ostracism." Dressed in flowing Greek toga, Val invited visitors to cast ballots the way the ancient Greeks did -- by writing the name of the person they would like to see banished from the community and tossing it into a Greek vase.

Moving clockwise from Ostracism, visitors encountered Keith Kirk's "Exclusion: The Column of No," which was, literally, a column covered with signs: No Jews, No Blacks, No Women, No Trespassing, No Gays. Next to this, under another framed sign, "The Right to Bear Arms," was Kirk's vintage-glass museum vitrine on an antique stand filled with guns and the images of suburban-home domestic crime scenes.

Across the performance space was Judith Delgado's "Civic Dialogue Parlor." Visitors were invited to step into a frilly, genteel world of flowered walls and delicate spindled table and chairs and converse with Judith about politics... or anything else that crossed their minds.

In a corner draped with red flags and camouflage, sat Paul Sachs, "The Last Protest Singer." In front of a poster collage of anti-war slogans and images of musicians like Bob Dylan, he took requests and sang some of the songs he had created specifically for the museum. Occasionally he was joined by the rest of the Democracy Project "company" to sing the song they created collaboratively, "Where's My Democracy?"

In the opposite corner cordoned off by yellow police tape and glowing orange fluorescent traffic cones was Jimmy Simopoulos' silent installation, *The New American Emergency Flag*. Using the degrees of colored "alerts" issued by Attorney General John Ashcroft, the image highlighted a new "flag of fear" under which Americans have been asked to live.

In the center was the performance space. On display were two life-sized dolls of 1876 Presidential candidates Tilden and Hayes. At designated times, playwright and barker Colleen Cosgrove gathered audience members for the performance of "The Stolen Election or The Melodramatic Race. This raucous and stylized performance revealed startling similarities to the stolen election of 2000."

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Katt Lissard is currently a visiting Fulbright professor at the National University of Lesotho in Southern Africa where she directs student performance projects and works in theater for development that addresses the country's high rate of HIV/AIDS infection. She is also a playwright whose most recent piece, "The Law of Falling Bodies," was produced as part of the New Millennium Festival. She's on the graduate faculty of the Goddard College Interdisciplinary Masters Program and adjunct faculty at SUNY/Empire State College.



Katt Lissard and Lucy Winner in rehearsal