go_HOME: Exploring Issues of Exile and Displacement Case Study: CEC International Partners/Artslink

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This reflective essay by Jeanne Pearlman documents the context, content, and unique circumstances of go_HOME, an international artist residency intended to generate dialogue about issues of exile and displacement. The project was centered in conceptual art, operated globally as well as locally, and experimented with real and virtual dialogue. In her role as Animating Democracy's project liaison to go_HOME, Pearlman observed the project as it unfolded. She engaged with organizers and artists in joint inquiry to draw insights and deepen understanding about the work of arts-based civic dialogue along a persistently challenging project path. Here Pearlman situates the go_HOME project within the context of ADI's evolving and multifaceted perspective on arts-based civic dialogue.

Go_HOME was a project of New York City's CEC International Partners through its ArtsLink program. CEC is an international arts exchange organization that develops programs to encourage and support creative cooperation among artists and cultural managers, enriching communities in the United States and in Central/Eastern Europe, Russia, and Eurasia. Project co-directors were Fritzie Brown, ArtsLink program director at CEC, and Katherine Carl, a New York writer and curator. The CEC originally described the project as follows:

> *Go_HOME* was an international project designed to explore strategies for renewing communities broken by war and ethnic conflict. With the sponsorship of ArtsLink, two artists from the former Yugoslavia, Danica Dakic from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sandra Sterle from Croatia, established an experimental, open-door home in New York City linked to a virtual home on the internet. Both artists had ultimately fled their homeland and established "new homes," Sandra in Amsterdam and Danica in Düsseldorf. Once the fighting ceased, they both tried to return to their country, but found that life had changed so completely that they could never "go home." The ADI [Animating Democracy Initiative] project was conceived as a way to explore the issues of displacement and exile and the impact of these issues on the artists' creative practice. The project began in September 2001, with the arrival of both artists in New York City and the establishment of a shared residence in an apartment in downtown Manhattan. The attack of September 11 had a profound effect on the project, as the artists had only recently arrived in New York and the shared residence was located a few blocks from the World Trade Center. Danica Dakic chose to remain in the apartment; Sandra Sterle, who was accompanied by her partner, Dan, and infant son, Adrian, relocated to Greenpoint, Brooklyn. A series of [four] planned dinners was organized to include artists, immigrants, refugees, academics, policy-makers and other interested persons. These dinners were broadcast using live-streaming technology to other sites and gatherings throughout Europe as a way of achieving an encounter that could be both

intimate and global. The artists' activities in New York, and particularly these dinners, were the foundation for a comprehensive Website, which chronicled and disseminated the ideas, artwork, and discourse on the project.[1]

The project participants made the decision to mine, as a civic issue, the complex notions of home, displacement, and exile.

We wondered if it was possible to establish a virtual home to replace the artists' original home in their original, now lost, country. We shared the utopian goal of creating a kind of democratic global home by engaging the Internet's potential global dialogic capabilities. This goal was not driven by a sentimentalized nostalgia for home but rather an interest in founding a home that better suits the increasingly fluid, borderless lives of contemporary immigrants.[2]

THE PARTICIPANTS

Danica Dakic (artist) born 1962 in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, creates architectural installations with video to investigate the corporal and global aspects of language as exemplified in her video installation *Zid/Wall* (1998), which is a mesmerizing collage of 64 peoples' mouths telling stories in different languages. She studied at the Academy of Art in Sarajevo, the Academy of Art in Belgrade, and with Nam June Paik at the Academy of Art in Düsseldorf. She currently lives in Düsseldorf and Sarajevo.

Sandra Sterle (artist) of Croatia works with photography, video, installation, web projects, and performance. Costuming herself as various characters, she investigates shifts, areas of overlap, and gaps in identities and in the multiple mediums she employs. She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, Croatia, and at the Academy of Art in Düsseldorf, and currently teaches video art at the Art Academy in Split, Croatia, living there and in Amsterdam.

Fritzie Brown (project co-director) is director of CEC's international exchange program, ArtsLink. Brown has a background in both arts management and contemporary art. Before coming to New York she was director of operations at Headlands Center for the Arts, an artists' community near San Francisco.

Katherine Carl (project co-director) is a writer and curator in New York. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in art history and criticism at the State University at Stony Brook and works at Dia Center for the Arts.

Location One (technology partner/dialogue site) is a media-based art gallery that is committed to exploring digital content and creativity and serving as a catalyst to transform artistic expression.

Marjetica Potrc (participant: Dialogue 1) is an urban anthropologist, artist, and architect from Slovenia who creates large-scale architectural projects that evolve from her in-depth research of specific instances of migration. She is the recipient of the Guggenheim Museum's 2000 Hugo Boss Prize.

Branimir Stojanovic and **Milica Tomic** (participant: Dialogue 4) live and work in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Stojanovic holds a graduate degree in philosophy from Belgrade University and has published numerous articles on contemporary philosophy and psychoanalytic theory. In her

[1] CEC Final Report for the Animating Democracy Initiative, 2002. p. 2.
[2] Ibid.

work, Tomic highlights the disjuncture between personal experience and historically and media-constructed images.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In the first part of this case study, I have chosen to examine three elements of the *go_HOME* project: (1) the artwork that was created to document the context and the content of the four-month artists' residency in New York; (2) the fourth dinner/dialogue that took place at Location One; and (3) the website that serves both as a canvas for the creation of original artwork and as a site for documenting the project. In the second part, I will attempt to situate the *go_HOME* project within the context of Animating Democracy's evolving and multifaceted perspective on arts-based civic dialogue.

The Artwork: Artists' Residency, New York City, September–December 2001

Sandra Sterle's Diary: Sandra Sterle chose to document her *go_HOME* residency by creating an online diary of her experiences in New York. I view the diary as an installation with images and text, compiled to fully utilize the virtual framework and to provide a lens through which to give voice to this artist's experience of the residency.
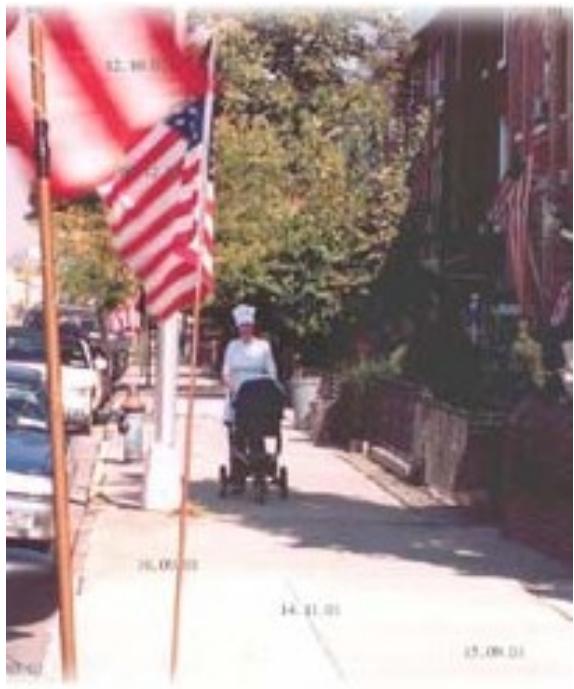
The virtual diary opens with an image of a young woman, dressed in a white jacket and toque pushing a carriage down a narrow, tree-lined street. Sterle's composition of the image at first suggests a rather common domestic scene. Yet, there is a collection of disconcerting elements within the image. Two large U.S. flags sit in the foreground, the closest one recognizable, yet out of focus. The more distant flag reads very clearly and distinctly, but appears somewhat precarious owing to the flimsy, makeshift pole upon which it flies. The entire left side of the image is filled with cars, lining both sides of the street and forming a single lane of oncoming traffic. The viewer struggles to find another human being on the street, but there is no sign of life—just the strangely costumed young woman, pushing the carriage. The baby, like the imagined passengers and drivers who should occupy the phalanx of empty cars, is invisible. There is no time to reconcile the universe inhabited by the solitary chef de cuisine and her young charge, because the image begins to fade; and in its place we see a series of dates randomly scattered but clearly linked to something behind the curtain. These are the invitations to read/view the various entries, and the artist's design of an almost indecipherable table of contents suggests confusion and disorder, an acknowledgment that temporal events are less linear than we might expect. Again, time does not stand still, and the image of the young woman fades in again.

Ultimately, we enter one of the portals and find Sterle's daily diary. The first entry reveals that Danica Dakic and Sandra Sterle arrived as planned in early September. They were joined by Sandra's partner Dan, and their baby, Adrian, all of whom settled into the Tribeca apartment rented for them by CEC.

September 10, 2001 The first thing that makes us realize we are in NY is the level of the sound all around us. Noisy, loud, crowded. Danica, Fritzie, and Katherine came to pick us up from the airport yesterday… .We have been thinking about [the project] more in terms of building a temporary home than an art project, and I am both anxious and excited .. . ..It always makes such an impact to walk into the space of your future life. [3]

The next morning, everyone was in the apartment in Tribeca.

September 11, 2001 First morning coffee. Dan and me still trying to introduce our new home to Adrian who seems to be nervous about changing so many environments in such a short time. After all he is just three months old. We have been with him to four different countries, on two continents. As we sit and talk in the kitchen, we hear a sound of a plane, which seems to be flying too low. The very next moment we hear the plane crushing into something. We are looking at each other in silence for a few seconds, and Dan says, "This sounds like kamikaze!"

The phone rings. Dan picks up the horn. I have Adrian in my arms. It is Fritzie. She asks if everybody is ok? Yes, we say, why? She is explaining something to Dan and from the expression on his face I am starting to realize that whatever happened must be serious. Dan repeats her words to let me know: a plane crushed into the World Trade Center; one of the Towers is on fire. She is watching it from the roof of her building. We are very close. The tower might start to fall down. O, my god! O, my god. . . . Dan asks Fritzie, are they planes or missiles? Are they planes? Fritzie says, "Yes, they are both planes." Still, this must be an attack. Another plane crushed into the other tower. They are both on fire. . . .

The funny thing is that all this time I actually don't have any idea about where we are. We have just arrived and I don't have a clue about how far the World Trade Center is from where we are now. The only thing that we did yesterday was bringing our dirty laundry (mostly Adrian's) to the laundry around the corner. What now? What's next?

All of the collaborators were concerned about Sandra's baby. The noise from the cleanup crews at ground zero pounded the apartment incessantly. Adrian developed a hacking cough, and Sandra and Dan were very much afraid that there might be pollutants in the air that would have an adverse affect on the child's health. Fritzie Brown found another apartment for Sandra, Dan, and the baby, in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. The apartment wasn't big enough for everyone, so the artists agreed that Danica would stay in Tribeca and the others would move.

October 1, 2001 The new apartment here in Greenpoint is very comfortable. Our small family starts to function. . . . The neighborhood around North Henry Street is not really what you imagine when you think of New York. Most of the people around here are Polish origins and quite some number of them came here recently…noticed many people on the street don't speak English. Almost every house in the neighborhood has an American flag in front. Flags hanging from the windows, covering the front doors, decorating gardens made of fabric, plastic, paper, flowers. . . .

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[3] Sandra Sterle Diary, www.project-go-home.com/gohome/NYdiaries/nydiarysandra2.html
The italicized entries are taken from Sandra's diary, which is accompanied by photographs of the events that took place during the four-month residency.

The collaborators continued to see each other frequently for dinner and planning, but the concept of creating a "home" the artists would share was lost in the rubble of the attack. Nevertheless, despite the physical separation, the artmaking and dialogue continued. Katherine and Fritzie established a relationship with the Parsons School of Design, and Sandra and Danica worked with students there to create the website and to begin to envision an expanded dialogue.

> **November 7, 2001** At Parson's - New School of Design every Wednesday. Students are helping us in making this website. We are helping them to learn how to [work] with artists in developing their ideas and contributing with technical and aesthetic solutions for various problems. There are some wonderful people here, but it's not easy neither for us nor for them to find common ground. Life here in New York, and everything that has happened here, makes me very tired and nervous.

When Flight 587 crashed in Queens on November 12, Sandra and Dan were deeply concerned about the safety of flights in and out of New York City. Dan was scheduled to return to Europe in mid-November, and Sandra did not want him to fly alone.

> **November 12, 2001** It is evening. My confusion has reached the top. I don't really know what I want to do now, but I am about to decide whether I'll to go back to Europe with Dan and Adrian. Dan was supposed to fly on his own to Europe today. We have been preparing and packing his stuff the last few days. Everything was packed, he was about to go to the airport and then we heard on the radio that all the airports in New York are closed. A plane with passengers has crushed in Queens this morning. They are saying there is no evidence that this is another attack, but still. . .I am scared. I am afraid to let Dan go alone, I am afraid to stay with Adrian.

> **November 16, 2001** I feel strange every time I have to take the subway. There is this feeling that something unexpected can happen every moment. People are looking to each other with more attention than usual. We are deciding to go to Europe. After all, most of the things we planned to do for the project are done. There is one more dinner in December, but I am deciding I'll participate online.

After many days of discussion and concern, Sandra Sterle left New York with Dan and Adrian on Saturday, November 24. Although Sandra promised to return for the final dialogue on December 16, she ultimately participated from Croatia where she and her family were staying.

Sandra Sterle's images: Each entry is accompanied by photographic images that document or comment upon the experiences Sandra describes. Domestic images are juxtaposed with burning towers, gaunt faces, American flags, and deserted checkpoints. The photographs that accompany the entries dated October 10–25[4] resemble a strip of film stills that begins by capturing Dan and the baby at the Laundromat, with the camera as an accidental observer of this most mundane aspect of

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[4] Website, www.project-go-home.com/gohome/NYdiaries/October.html.

urban life. Sterle then shifts the mood with a series of images that return us to our initial encounter with her New York world—the street outside the apartment and the flags that she again references in the October 1 entry. The series continues with an interior shot of Dan and the ever present carriage flanked by the flag-draped window on one side and an overlay of a Coca-Cola bottle on the other. The figure, wearing his partner's signature toque, is carefully sandwiched between the emblems of the United States, the flag, and commercialism. The costume is at once charming and disconcerting. Is anything real about this drama, or has everything—diary and accompanying images—been staged to meet the viewer's expectations of the idealized domesticity that the *go_HOME* project hoped to create and which was lost in the aftermath of 911? Sterle plays with these concepts by continuing to insert her costumed self into the pictures. Chef Sandra—close up, blurred in the distance, or gazing seductively at the camera—sends us postcards from the New World, tangible souvenirs of her holiday in America. The festivity is dimmed however, by the presence of the U.S. flags, emblematic not of the glitz and glamour of "I Love New York," but rather signifying the wounded nation where patriotic fervor envelops the urban landscape.

***Sunday Diary* by Danica Dakic:** An examination of *Sunday Diary,* the virtual installation created by Danica Dakic, reveals that the diary offers a scrapbook of newspaper headlines demarcated by dates on a series of successive screens. As the disembodied virtual traveler moves through the screens, we relive the events of the artist's visit to New York through the lens of one coming to the United States seeking "home" and rediscovering the futility of the search.

September 9	'Wherever you go, you don't feel safe,' a woman laments'
September 16	'U.S. Attacked to keep safe those that remain'
September 23	'Seeing the Unimaginable Freezes the Imagination'
October 21	'Trying to plan for the unthinkable disaster'

The fragments of text are reminiscent of Hannah Höch's early experiments with photomontage as a means of social commentary and yet have the slightly sinister tone of an anonymous, threatening letter, a reflection of our own worst nightmares. After a few seconds, a figure emerges in the lower left corner of the screen. We see a young woman, clothed in white, lying on her back, eyes closed, as she is propelled through the text in a digital recreation of movement through water. Like Höch's female forms in her early Dadaist work, Dakic inserts the female figure into the detritus of mass culture. The woman who swims through the clippings, seemingly oblivious to the text ranging from searing social critique to mundane advertisements, signifies the multiple contradictions in Dakic's work. The phantasmagoric water through which our heroine swims would destroy the thin newsprint and wash away the words Dakic has chosen to signify the journey from the former Yugoslavia to New York. The words remain, the swimmer moves as though through a still, clear lake while remaining perfectly dry, unchanged by her surroundings. The arm movements allude to the potential to glide effortlessly through water, but the body actually moves in a series of jagged, awkward motions, like a series of still photographs imposed upon and beneath the text. Dakic makes no pretence that her artifice is real. She wants the swimmer, whom we may assume is

the artist herself, to be discovered as an illusion. The virtual swimmer is a figment, the big lie in the work. Dakic—as the model exile—moves through the chaos of her not-so-safe haven, seemingly serene and undaunted by her surroundings. It is not surprising that Dakic has chosen to utilize artifice and illusion in her piece. After all, we are in virtual space where the core question is not whether we are experiencing reality, but rather, does anyone care what is real?

The Dialogue

The *go_HOME* project clearly intended to establish its dialogue activity in virtual space, with the original project design focusing on streaming live video during the four dinner conversations, each of which focuses on a different aspect of the civic issue of exile and displacement. These include: *Architecture of Migration* (September 23) dealing with the physicality of how displacement and exile are expressed; *Women Who Move Too Much: Relocating Culture, Reproducing Home* (October 4) which explored the impact of gender-based roles in the conceptual framework of displacement; *Transitory Cases: Language, Media, and Migration* (November 11) developed to address the linguistic/semiotic constructions of exile; and *Imagined Homes: Nationalism and Globalization* (December 16) taking the discourse to the international level to include the political implications of globalization and war.

The four dimensions of this complex civic issue were defined by both the artists and the project directors to encourage multiple perspectives and points of view. Although the website does not offer opportunities for interactive, online dialogue, the transcripts of the project's dinner and simultaneous web dialogues are posted and intended to serve as a catalyst to stimulate discussion.

Examination of one particular dialogue illustrates the complexity of utilizing new technologies. The fourth dialogue, *Imagined Homes, Nationalism, and Globalization* took place at Location One in New York and at the Center for Contemporary Art in Belgrade. In addition to Fritzie Brown and Katherine Carl, the guests in New York included Joseph Ademovic, architect from Mostar, Bosnia, living in New York; May Joseph, performance theorist, teaching at New York University; Drazen Prantic, web media specialist and writer; and Irit Rogoff, art historian Goldsmith's College, University of London. They were joined by the guests in Belgrade, Milica Tomic, artist; Branimir Stajonovic, art theorist; and Aleksander Boskovic, anthropologist; Svebor Midzic, translator. By that time, Sandra Sterle and her partner Dan had left New York and participated from Zadar, Croatia. The participants in Belgrade were visible to the New York participants through streaming video, but their voices could not be heard. They participated by typing their responses and comments.

There is a model of virtual dialogue developed by new media theorists that envisions transparent technologies where identities move effortlessly from real space to virtual space. The *go_HOME* participants struggled to create a more traditional face-to-face interaction with the streaming video and were disappointed and frustrated with the outcome. At one point in the transcript, Katherine Carl reads a message from Belgrade:

"The people in Belgrade are very concerned, they are feeling cut off. They can see us, but they can't hear us. They are asking if we can see them."[5]   The transcript of the dialogue reveals text that explores the topic of globalization interspersed with commentary about the failure of the technology that would allow all of the participants to function as full participants in the dialogue.

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[5] Transcript, *Imagined Homes,* website: www.project-go-home.com/gohome/dinners/nationalism.html

go_HOME-New York: Milica, could you pose a question to our guests?

b92-Belgrade: over the chat or by voice?

go_HOME: I am not hearing you so we must rely on chat.

b92: Milica would like to explain how did come to pass that she and Branimir are not in NY but here in Belgrade

b92: also, Milica would like to pose question

go_HOME: Katherine has already read your statement, so that has been covered.

go_HOME: Please!

b92: oh, great thanks Katherine.

go_HOME: This is Fritzie, but that's ok.

b92: So would you like us to pose question over net or by voice streaming?

Sandra and Dan from Croatia: hello fellows.

go_HOME: Hello Dan and Sandra. Milica yes. . . in writing over chat, please.

Sandra and Dan: is discussion already going on?

go_HOME: Milica?

b92: If the other side of globalization is ethno fundamentalism, would it mean that only space of freedom would be in between anvil of globalization and hammer of ethno fundamentalism. How to invent this space, because it has to be invented.

b92: to Sandra: yes, but there is problem with the sound

Srdjan Normal: no image here.

Sandra and Dan: Problems of this world can be solved by people who don't have this problems.

go_HOME: We are now talking about the "former nonaligned countries" and . . .

b92: could you please speak a little bit more clearly, and can you hear us?

go_HOME:. . . that the Bush alliance is unnatural.

go_HOME: I will ask Milica's question when there is a moment. They are heavy into this discussion.

Sandra and Dan: people change alliances very often nowadays. ARTWORLD IS NOT DIFFERENT, NOT VERY DIFFERENT, FROM POLITICS.

b92: Sasa B: hi! I am not quite sure whether you can hear or see us . . . but speaking of alliances, I am not quite sure whether you genuinely believe that there could be any such thing as a natural alliance???

go_HOME: Sandra and Dan (this is from Fritzie not the guests) . . ..why would it be?

b92: there is also Sasa's question.

Sandra and Dan: PROBABLY OUR WORLD IS BECOMING MUCH MORE FRAGMETED THAN BEFORE.

b92: can you see us?

go_HOME: We can see but not hear

b92: to Sandra that is consequence of globalization.

b92: can you hear now?

Sandra and Dan: I believe so!

go_HOME: no, no sound.

go_HOME: keep typing.

b92: ok.

go_HOME: Sorry, I am having trouble breaking into the discussion...

b92: is there any chance of interruption or break any time soon?

go_HOME: yes..

b92: great[6]

The participants in the *go_HOME* dialogue advanced a definition of home that was highly developed around the issues of displacement and globalization. May Joseph offered her definition.

> There is actually no core to what we call home. It is like an onion. There are different layers that we experience, which create forms of belonging, and they shift, and traumatize, and . . . mutate. This all makes up home, but there is no singular essence of home.[7]

Jonus Ademovic responds.

> I think that home is a point from which circles of family, friends, neighborhood, city, state, and world emerge. During the war in my hometown, Mostar, the first two circles of family and neighborhood broke down. When this happened, it was much worse than anybody could ever imagine. When I read the letter from Milica and Branimir, [artist Milica Tomic and Branimir Stojanovic, a art theorist, both of whom were participating from Belgrade] who described themselves as immigrants within their own city and country, I was thinking about this condition and their experience. Maybe they feel that their primary circle, their family, friends, neighbors, or their home is intact, but there is this vacuum between state and the world. The world abandoned them just as their state abandoned them.
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> Katherine: The participants in Belgrade are asking you if you have a home, Jonus
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> Jonus: I have a home as long as my parents are alive.[8]

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

The Website—www.project-go-home.com

The artists used the physical residence and the website, a virtual home on the Internet, as a common meeting ground for engaging the interested public in dialogue.[9] This text from the *go_HOME* website captures the artists' intent to blur the boundaries between real and virtual space. Their use of the term *virtual home* signifies an attempt to expand the question of "what is home?" to include the possibility of a noncorporeal existence. While the question of whether home can exist in cyberspace remains unresolved, there is a sense that by situating the question on a website, the dialogue will extend beyond the life of the physical phase of the project. Clearly, the artists viewed the website as the project's ongoing legacy, intending that it serve both a documentary function and as an opportunity to raise critical issues on exile and displacement. It was hoped that the website would stimulate dialogue in various settings in the lives and cultural practices of a broad cross-section of global visitors.[10] The website features four main sections:

- Sterle and Dakic's diaries described above.

- Archives from the dinner/dialogues with transcripts and images.

- Virtual exhibitions of work by guest artists Marjetica Potrc and Milica Tomic.

- Archives that include texts and virtual artwork by dinner guests, a bibliography of relevant materials, and complete recipes from the dinners.

These elements exist within a multilayered, complex architecture, which allows the visitor to roam among the various artworks, dialogue transcripts, and chats. A rich and complex area of research is emerging regarding the role of websites such as this in stimulating new thinking around whether the Internet will be simply a giant extension of the Home Shopping Network or alternatively will fulfill its potential to become the site of new opportunities for engagement and intervention. The *go_HOME* project certainly appears to have played an important role for its participants and those who continue to use the website in advancing a more intellectually rigorous, internationally based and aesthetically sophisticated platform for virtual dialogue.

GO_HOME AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE ANIMATING DEMOCRACY INITIATIVE

In their recent article, *INROADS: The Intersection of Art & Civic Dialogue,* ADI project co-directors Pam Korza and Barbara Schaffer Bacon and project associate Andrea Assaf describe the potential value that the arts and humanities can bring to the discourse on important civic issues. The article references several Animating Democracy projects that

> . . . demonstrate the potency of the arts and humanities to illuminate civic issues in their communities. More specifically, they aim to get people talking together, in a focused and

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[9] *go_HOME* Website, www.project-go-home.com/gohome/project_gohome.html. It should be noted that while this was the original intent of the artists, ultimately the evolving circumstances that surrounded the project allowed few opportunities for structured dialogue activities in the apartment.

[10] In a recent correspondence dated 1/30/03, project director Katherine Carl describes one example of how the project continues to inspire new forms of dialogue: Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss, an architect from Serbia now living in New York, who participated in the first *go_HOME* dinner was inspired by the format of the dinner dialogues to create a series of international and interdisciplinary forums in Belgrade on architecture and art www.normalgroup.net/normalization. Students who have little or no access to such discussions came consistently to all of the six dialogues, each of which lasted many hours. Also the discussions took place at diverse institutions, from the National Library to an alternative art center, thus opening up these stale entrenched organizations to new topics and types of interaction. This cannot be underestimated in terms of building civic dialogue.

purposeful way, about issues that affect their lives, in hopes of better understanding the complexities, dimensions, and implications of those issues.[11]

The authors cite examples of work by Susanne Lacy, Judy Baca, and John O'Neal to acknowledge a history of community-based artists using their creative expression to draw attention to important civic issues. The term they use to describe this type of creative practice is *arts-based civic dialogue*.

> The arena of practice that Animating Democracy has termed "arts-based civic dialogue" is not new. Nor is arts-based civic dialogue in itself a movement, but rather part of a continuum of community-based practice and civically engaged cultural work that engendered significant public discourse on issues of consequence, such as civil rights, war, AIDS, globalization, and more. . . . [12]

A critical question to examine is how the *go_HOME* project adds to the body of knowledge that Animating Democracy is seeking to develop in the area of arts-based civic dialogue. I will contend that while the project fits well into its conceptual framework of the role of art in facilitating and creating dialogue opportunities, *go_HOME* functions somewhat outside ADI's definition of democratic participation that is grounded in civic participation movements in the United States. In addition, *go_HOME* also calls into question the often privileged position of cultural institutions in determining the relationship between art and civic life by positioning artists as central in the decision making that determines both the projects aesthetic and dialogic boundaries.

In the *INROADS* article, the authors identify four ways that the arts can contribute to meaningful and productive civic dialogue:

> **Art as the *SPARK* for civic dialogue** - Art can be the focal point that explores dimensions of a civic issue, the questions surrounding it, and multiple or alternative perspectives on it.
>
> **Art as an *INVITATION* to participate -** Art can bring people to the conversation who might not otherwise participate. It can bring forward the voices of those often silenced or left out of public discourse.
>
> **Art as *SPACE* for civic dialogue -** More than just physical environment, the arts and humanities can offer psychological, experiential, and intellectual space conducive to reflection and discussion.
>
> **Art as a *FORM* of dialogue -** There are many ways in which art itself is dialogic. Key elements of dialogue can be identified in various artistic processes or in particular ways of encountering art.

A strong case can be made that *go_HOME* works within a tradition of creative practice that is inherently dialogic. Such a creative practice is grounded in the work of German artist Joseph Beuys who conceived an expanded definition of art that functions as *social sculpture*, that is, art created through an interdisciplinary and participatory process in which thought, speech and discussion are core materials. Practitioners of social sculpture seek to bring the experience of artists into contact with nonart situations, applying sculptural principles to social situations.[13] An

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[11] Website (www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/intro-commdev.php).

[12] Ibid.

[13] David Levi Strauss, "Coming to the Point at Three Rivers," *Between Dog & Wolf*, Autonomedia, Brooklyn, NY, 1999. pp. 104–121.

examination of the artwork created for the project reveals evidence of the intent of the *go-HOME* participants to construct their lives in New York as an artwork. From the costuming to the proposed translation of traditional domesticity into an aesthetic statement to the highly performative nature of the four dinners, Dakic and Sterle established a living work of art that was to be experienced by a community of participants rather than observed by passive, disengaged viewers. The aesthetic constructions were intended to illuminate the issues of exile and displacement and to generate a structured discourse that drew simultaneously upon sophisticated critical theory and the personal experiences of the participants. Like Beuys' social sculpture, the artists insisted upon a seamless art/life continuum that by its very nature functions as dialogue.

There is another element to the definition of arts-based civic dialogue outlined in the *INROADS* article.

> ADI's focus on "civic dialogue" is inspired by…a loosely defined and growing civic movement in the United States, the proponents of which observe that democracy, in its current form in the U.S., does not inspire participation by its citizens.[14]

Animating Democracy's interest in testing the efficacy of arts and humanities as a stimulus for civic dialogue was inspired by models of citizen participation that appear to resonate well in the United States. One of the assumptions of these models is a definition of civic dialogue that attempts to construct a context of multipartiality. ADI authors draw on this concept from family therapy to signify

> . . . working on behalf of everyone in the room. It means not taking sides, but being on *everyone's* side, in terms of a constructive and equitable or just resolution or dialogue. To achieve multipartiality, one must metaphorically "step up" to the metalevel of dialogue. That is, that level (perhaps an aerial view) from which one can see the shared and common interests of the participants.[15]

As a further area of inquiry, it is interesting to explore whether the idea of broad participation by equally valid and diverse perspectives would be seen as legitimate by those in other parts of the world, who value democracy but who define it oppositionally to the oppressive, even genocidal, regimes, which they have struggled to resist.

Russell J. Dalton of the Center for the Study of Democracy at the University of California, Irvine, contends that the political upheavals of the late twentieth century have created an extraordinary opportunity to explore the process of democratization and in particular the responses by divergent cultures to the promise and the reality of a democratic society. Professor Dalton offers compelling evidence of an expansionist wave of democratization

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[14]Website www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/intro-commdev.php
The discourse on civic engagement has been energized by the publication of Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, which contends that there has been a decline in community-oriented, civic organizations in the United States and that this has led to a weakening of democratic involvement. Some scholars have recognized Putnam's conservative bias (in particular his causality arguments which state that women in the workforce and the subsequent weakening of the family have contributed to the decline in civic engagement and the weakening of democracy) and have challenged his unwillingness to recognize participation in progressive, change-oriented political movements as civic engagement (see Foley, M.W., and B. Edwards (1996). "The Paradox of Civil Society" *Journal of Democracy* 7(3): 38-52.). Historical analysis also reveals flaws in the argument that the presence of strong civic associations are indicative and predictive of tendencies toward strong democracy. In particular, in the period between 1920 and 1930, Germany experienced a flourishing period of civic engagement, replete with examples of associational behavior. Professor Sheri Berman of Princeton contends that the Weimar government was unable to respond to the demands placed on them by the many citizen organizations, leading the latter to shift their allegiance to nationalist, populist groups and eventually to the Nazi Party. Berman, S. (1997). "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics.*

[15] Ibid. Patricia Romney, dialogue specialist and clinical/organizational psychologist, introduced the concept of multipartiality into the ADI discourse.

movements throughout the world since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, while at the same time, describing the situation where established democracies like the United States and Western Europe have experienced challenges to fundamental democratic institutions.16 Emerging and established democracies are seen as having developed divergent points of view on how to engage their citizens, particularly those populations who have survived the perils of dismantling Communist regimes.

> …citizens in formerly Communist states seem to harbor some doubts about developing the institutions of representative democracy as practiced in the West…[and they] are disillusioned by the competitive style of electoral politics practiced in the West…Thus one sees many East Europeans longing for alternative models of democratic participation, although the precise form remains unclear.17

There is one area in particular where the *go_HOME* Project can be seen as generating new thinking about models of dialogue. In their thoughtful analysis of the role of art in civic dialogue, ADI staff conclude that

> Given the demands on cultural organizations to do this work effectively, some may wonder when to take up civic issues and if they, as cultural organizations, are best suited to lead. For Animating Democracy, the range of participating cultural groups—from community-based organizations to large institutions—suggests that any cultural organization with authentic intent and careful planning can contribute vitally to civic discourse.18

The authors include several cogent examples of projects designed by participating organizations that illustrated the diversity of discipline, aesthetic intent, and dialogic point of view that enabled the Initiative to carry out its research on the many legitimate approaches to and forms of arts-based civic dialogue. The *go_HOME* project was organized around a set of core principles and values that positions the artist, rather than the institution as central in the project design and implementation. This point of view often placed *go_HOME* slightly outside the norm of Animating Democracy participants, who tended to represent producing and presenting organizations that were responsible to multiple constituencies and audiences.

Sandra Sterle and Danica Dakic met when they were fellows in the ArtsLink program, which supports artists residencies in the United States and in central and Eastern Europe, Russia, and Eurasia. The artists came to New York with a clear understanding, based on their prior experiences, that CEC is not a presenting or producing organization but rather a facilitator of the artistic and civic vision of its participating artists. As such, even before the events of September 11, Fritzie Brown and Katherine Carl were committed to allowing the art and dialogue to evolve as an artists' project. CEC's notion of its constituency is grounded in the idea that in projects such as *go_HOME*, the artist is the central stakeholder who must be supported and encouraged to continue to express her creativity, without censorship or interference.

As such, when events erupted causing the need to adapt the project, CEC stepped back and allowed the artists to make the decisions. The project was designed to be experimental and fluid, where artists constructed an aesthetic and dialogic vision and where the organization was poised, wherever possible, to clear away the brush to allow that vision to evolve and respond. The outcomes in New York were often chaotic, somewhat narrow in terms of the immediate impact, and reflective of a commitment to a high level of intellectual/academic exchange that did

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16 Russell J. Dalton, *Democracy and its Citizens: Patterns of Political Change*, website: http://democ.uci.edu/democ.
17 Ibid.
18 Website www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/intro-commdev.php

not resonate well with more accessible models of community engagement. Nevertheless, the project outcomes were consistent both with the environment within which Sterle and Dakic were attempting to create their complex conflation of art and life and politics and with their original intent.

Animating Democracy's question as to whether a cultural organization should take a leadership role in creating arts-based civic dialogue resonated with CEC's retrospective analysis of its participation in the project. For example, despite Sterle and Dakic's best efforts to construct the dialogues to address multiple points of view and Animating Democracy's often stated commitment to multipartiality, the Eastern Europeans who participated viewed the U.S. presence—New York based and CEC sponsored—with suspicion and mistrust. As the CEC final report notes

> There exists a basic mistrust of U.S. influence in Southeastern Europe, and there are assumptions by many that U.S. organizations only engage in international activity to further their own agendas. Many, particularly in Serbia where reminders of the 1999 U.S. bombings are clearly visible, claim complete ownership of discussions on the subject of displacement or identity…Even though the artistic initiative and leadership of *go_HOME* came from the artists themselves, the organizational identity propelling the project was ArtsLink. The fact that ArtsLink is a U.S. organization caused some difficulties among the European audiences involved.[19]

The report goes on to state that the technical difficulties encountered during the dialogues added to the sense of suspicion and mistrust, leading to an interpretation among the European participants that CEC, as a U.S.=based organization, may have exerted its influence to exclude their points of view or even to censor their participation. These difficulties led CEC to affirm its long-standing belief that the artist voice must be central and visible in the dialogic opportunities that may arise from international projects.

Ultimately it was learned that it might not be appropriate for a U.S.-based organization to lead an international arts project . . . it is critical that the role of the organization is made clear and that the autonomy of the artists involved be made evident.[20]

CONCLUSIONS

In their introduction to a series of essays entitled *Creating Spaces of Freedom*, Els van der Plas, Malu Halasa, and Marlous Willensen describe

> . . . nuances in the complex concept of freedom in the context of the cultural spaces that have been discovered by writers and artists that also offer a refuge for other seekers of freedom without immediately putting them in danger.[21]

Such actions by a society's creative community are not without risk.

> . . . artists have been forced to leave their restrictive environments and move to cities beyond the reach of their oppressors. They move to 'external cultural capitals' . . .

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[19] CEC Final Report, *go_HOME* project (undated).

[20] Ibid.

[21] Els van der Plas, Malu Halasa, Marlous Willemsen, Á Delerium that Rises from a World of Mud, *Creating Spaces of Freedom*, Prince Claus Fund, The Netherlands, 2002. pp. 8-13.

> where they attempt to continue to exert influence on the situation in their country of birth, until they go home.[22]

These words capture the intentionality of the artists who designed the *go_HOME* project. They are exiles, displaced from their homes by global events that appear to be beyond the influence of any individual intervention. Yet, artists continue to find ways to participate in the process of protecting and sustaining democratic impulses. The efforts of the *go_HOME* artists may at times have seemed at odds with some aspects of Animating Democracy, which by its own admission was inspired by civically engaged cultural work filtered through a U.S.=focused lens.

The challenge is to assure that these incompatibilities are not viewed as ruptures in ADI's attempts to create a broadly applicable research based model that would define the boundaries of arts-based civic dialogue. The *go_HOME* project certainly extends those boundaries to include questions of the role of international/global issues in a clearly U.S.-based program, the expansion of traditional dialogue theory to virtual settings, and the role of artist-centered projects within a civic dialogue setting.

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As project liaison for the go_HOME project, the author extends her thanks to the go_HOME participants for their hospitality, their commitment to intellectual exchange, and their unwavering courage in the face of daunting circumstances.

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[22] Ibid, p.14.