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Collaboration and Communication

Outside the Frame: Assessing Partnerships between Arts and Historical Organizations

CATHY STANTON

Using as a case study a 2003 exhibit created jointly by the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) and Historic New England/Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, this article investigates collaborations between contemporary art museums and historical institutions, focusing on the place these organizations occupy in the culture-based “new economies” of many postindustrial places. While cautioning against the ways in which such projects can cast history in a purely aesthetic light while contributing to the socioeconomic inequities that characterize postindustrial economies, the article also argues that arts/history partnerships offer opportunities to create innovative critical statements and to reach new and diverse audiences.

DURING 1999, the year the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) opened in the small town of North Adams, visitors to the museum could experience a “sound art” installation in a dead-end alley between two former factory buildings in the museum complex. Bare bulbs inside one of the buildings illuminated metal shop chairs and long benches covered with

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rows of glass capacitors manufactured at the site. Outside, the alley reverberated with sounds. Over a ground of clanking machinery, unseen people told stories about what it was like to work at the Sprague Electric Company, which occupied the 28-building complex until 1985. A man talked about how good the company was to him when his family needed medical help, while a woman's uninflected voice recited the names of employee after employee and the departments they worked in. A fragment of a group discussion raised questions about the new art museum itself: Would it be just another outside entity poised to make use of the town before disappearing as the Sprague Company did? A note of ambivalence about the complicated heritage of an obsolete industrial past and a changing postindustrial present ran through the collage of sound.

The installation, *Visitations*, by Wesleyan University-based artist Ron Kuivila, was one of several site-specific sound art pieces commissioned by the museum, and the one that commented most directly on the transition from what some observers have called a mill-based to a mind-based economy,¹ or, in more general terms, from manufacturing to service or information. MASS MoCA itself is a result of—and a participant in—that transition. A site explicitly devoted to producing and displaying cultural products primarily for the consumption of well-off visitors from New York, Boston, and elsewhere, it was envisioned as an engine of economic revitalization for North Adams. After weathering widespread skepticism about whether anyone would come to this remote corner of the state to look at contemporary art, the museum has been carrying out its mission with considerable success, attracting about 100,000 visitors a year and helping to create a new sense of identity for postindustrial North Adams. Like the spectacular Bilbao Guggenheim building that has turned a depressed and obscure Basque city into an international destination or any number of other arts-based development projects designed largely to rejuvenate deindustrialized areas, MASS MoCA represents an acknowledgement that to be competitive, old-economy places must find ways to appeal to the knowledge workers and cultural tourists who form the moneyed classes of the new economy.

What does this have to do with public history? First, of course, there is the fact that putting museums in empty industrial buildings and using cultural projects to help revitalize deindustrialized places are very familiar techniques for public historians. Public history projects exist in many deindustrialized areas, where their supporters have argued that they offer considerable social and economic benefits.² They can be a way to save, restore, and use historic structures and landscapes. They are also a means of celebrating particular lo-

1. See, for example, Barry Bluestone and Mary Huff Stevenson, *The Boston Renaissance: Race, Space, and Economic Change in an American Metropolis* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000), 12–13.

2. A handful of industrial history museums existed in the U.S. before the 1970s, for example, the Hagley Museum in Delaware (1957) and the Slater Mill in Rhode Island (1956); see Jacqueline A. Hinsley, "Three decades of growth at the Hagley Museum" *The Popular Perception of Industrial History*, ed. Robert Weible and Francis R. Walsh, pp. 21–38 (Lanham, MD:



The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) is located in a twenty-eight-building industrial complex occupied by the Sprague Electric Company until 1985. “Tree Logic,” a 1999 installation by Natalie Jeremijenko outside the main entrance, has become something of a symbol for the art museum and the town of North Adams. Jeremijenko’s upside-down trees pose questions about the relationship of nature and culture and about North Adams’s attempt to reinvent itself in a postindustrial economy. (Photo courtesy of MASS MoCA)

American Association for State and Local History, 1989). However, such sites became much more common in the U.S. and elsewhere in response to accelerating deindustrialization in the 1960s

cal cultures and histories, and of attracting investors, businesses, and workers from the more prosperous niches of the new economy. However, some critics have noted that there are also social dangers inherent in these redevelopment strategies.³ The trend toward gentrification and cultural tourism in former industrial places runs the risk of exacerbating the ongoing split between haves and have-nots that is characteristic of “postindustrial” economies, particularly in the U.S.⁴ And a tendency to see historical materials and landscapes in aesthetic or recreational terms may detach them from many of their political and social contexts and rob them of much of their potential to speak to us about issues that matter in the present.⁵ Thus far there has been little extended study of the social effects of such redevelopments in areas where they have been tried; now that more and more arts institutions seem to be

and later decades. North Adams was host to one of eight “heritage state parks” created in distressed industrial towns in Massachusetts in the 1970s. In 1978, another of those communities, Lowell, became the site of a national historical park devoted to industrial, labor, and immigrant history, which is still widely emulated as a model for heritage-based revitalization strategies. Subsequent developments in the industrial heritage field have included the creation of large-scale heritage areas in deindustrialized areas of New England and Pennsylvania (see the National Alliance of Heritage Areas website, www.nationalheritageareas.com for further information on these projects). Such strategies have also been widely used in former manufacturing centers in Britain and elsewhere.

3. For stringent analyses of arts-based redevelopment, see Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) and Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982). For a similar critique of a history-based project, see M. Christine Boyer, “Cities for Sale: Merchandising History at South Street Seaport” in *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).

4. Scholars disagree about precisely what constitutes a “postindustrial” society. Although the term is by no means unproblematic, I find it useful shorthand for the emerging social, economic, and political formations now being seen in many Western places whose economies are no longer directly driven by industrial production. These formations include the growth of new service-based economic sectors and social classes, the escalating mobility of capital, and more unequal distribution of wealth. For discussion of these developments, see Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982) and John Urry, “Is Britain the first ‘post-industrial’ society?” in *Consuming Places* (London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 112–25). On the growing inequalities of postindustrial America, see Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, John Schmitt, *The State of Working America 2000–2001* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press/Economic Policy Institute, 2001), 11.

Within such developments, information and culture are increasingly drawn into the orbit of the marketplace, either as commodities themselves or (as at MASS MoCA and similar sites) in ways that are called on to support new service-oriented economies. Frederic Jameson offered an early and influential analysis of this development in his article, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 144 (1984): 53–92. Stephen V. Ward provides a historical overview of this trend in *Selling Places: The Marketing and Promotion of Towns and Cities 1850–2000* (New York: Routledge, 1998), particularly pp. 186–235. Dean MacCannell’s important work is helpful in showing how tourism—now the world’s largest single industry—both reflects and helps to create the kinds of societies that can be labeled “postindustrial.” “The hope for a ‘postindustrial’ society,” MacCannell writes, “is, in fact, only a touristic way of looking at work,” *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999 (1976)], 65).

5. In addition to the critics noted above, the aestheticization of historical landscapes has been addressed insightfully by, among others, John Brinckerhoff Jackson, “The Necessity for Ruins”

climbing on the same bandwagon, it is worthwhile for public historians, who have been engaged in these kinds of projects for a generation now, to consider that question, as this essay attempts to do.

It is doubly worthwhile because public history and art institutions seem increasingly to be forming partnerships to collaborate on projects. Such alliances offer exciting expressive and intellectual possibilities, some of which I will discuss below. More than that, however, they appear to be a way for public history sites to capitalize on the considerable energy and momentum—and hence the large audiences and media visibility—being generated within the art world at present. Art museums are news, whether it is the competition among cities for the next dramatic “trophy building,” the attempted franchising of the Guggenheim brand name (which some have dubbed “McGuggenheiming”), or yet another multi-million dollar renovation to an existing museum or old factory building. In many places, this energy is felt at a grassroots level as well, with open studio tours, artists loft developments, and designated arts districts emerging across the landscape. In Lowell, Massachusetts, arts-based development was a growing phenomenon during the two years when I was conducting ethnographic research on public history there. One cultural activist in Lowell described to me how the arts boom fits within a city that has already devoted substantial attention to cultural and historical preservation and interpretation: “It’s like [artists] are the new immigrants, you know. And they’re bringing a kind of immigrant energy and entrepreneurialism. . . . Because they’re not just sort of coming here and feeding off the trees. They’re doing stuff, and starting enterprises and organizing.” In many ways, this explosion among arts organizations parallels the proliferation of public history sites and projects in the 1970s, when funding was more plentiful and the public history field itself was in a period of growth and discovery. In changed times and with a more mature sense of their place in a professional field (however difficult to define that field continues to be), it appears that some public history organizations are seeking to ally themselves with the dynamism of the present-day arts world, and to broaden their own horizons and audiences in the process.

Such collaborations are a relatively new notion, but they build on the work of “interventionist,” “activist,” or “situationist” artists who have long sought to jolt viewers by confounding their expectations about what art is and how and where it is displayed.⁶ Many recent productions by interventionist artists working in museums treat museum facts and artifacts as “readymades” or “found objects” that can be manipulated to create new meanings or reveal hidden ones. Andy Warhol experimented with this notion in 1970 when he moved some of the Rhode Island School of Design’s stored art objects directly into

in *The Necessity for Ruins and Other Topics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980) 89–102; David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

6. Marcel Duchamp was the first to take this approach with his 1917 work “Fountain,” consisting of a signed, upturned urinal.

the galleries of Houston's Menil Gallery, playing with the creation (or lack) of context and meaning. Hans Haacke outraged patrician art patrons in New York in the 1970s with works like *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Board of Trustees* (1974). Displaying lists of the interlocking corporate and philanthropic boards of directors on which the Guggenheim's trustees served, Haacke showed their connections with controversial political issues—for example, the Kennecott Copper Corporation's involvement in destabilizing Salvador Allende's socialist democracy in Chile. Perhaps the best-known recent example of an interventionist work in an American historical museum is *Mining the Museum*, a 1992 exhibit by Fred Wilson at the Maryland Historical Society. Wilson, an artist who had already created several installations questioning museums' power to contextualize and legitimate some kinds of knowledge while masking others, focused on the relationship of people of color to the museum, showing how the objects in museum collections and the conventions of display and connoisseurship reinforced a Eurocentric view of history and culture. *Mining the Museum* was one of many similar projects by artists working in American museums in the 1980s and 1990s. Ron Kuivila's *Visitations* at MASS MoCA was firmly grounded in this tradition, as it sought to reanimate the obsolete and abandoned space of the Sprague factory with sounds and voices from its own industrial past. In Boston, the Institute for Contemporary Art has sponsored temporary site-specific public art installations under its *Vita Brevis* program, including pieces at several sites on the city's well-known Freedom Trail.⁷

So far, most of what has been written about such works, like much of the literature on culture-based redevelopment efforts, has been from the perspective of visual artists and art museums rather than historical sites and museums. In the remainder of this essay, I will attempt to remedy this imbalance to some extent by investigating art/history collaborations from the perspective of the public historical organization. What are the promises and pitfalls of such projects, and what can public historians do to fulfill the former and avoid the latter? What do historical institutions bring to these partnerships, and what do they get out of them? To what extent is the presentation of history served or challenged in this kind of undertaking? What kinds of audiences do these art works reach, and does that extend the existing audience for public historians' work? As a starting-point for examining these questions,

7. Other examples include performance artist Andrea Fraser's deft parodies of museum docents in short films like *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989), and group shows like *Places with a Past* at Charleston's Spoleto Festival (1991), *Museum as Muse* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (1999), and *Departures* at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles (2000). For discussion of these and other similar works, see Lisa G. Corrin, "Installing History" in Patricia M. Burham and Lucretia H. Giese, *Redefining American History Painting* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 120–36; Laura Steward Heon, "Yankee Remix" exhibit catalog (North Adams: MASS MoCA, 2003), 20–29; Rosalyn Deutsche, "Property Values: Hans Haacke, Real Estate, and the Museum" in *Evictions*, 159–92; Sarah J. Purcell, "Commemoration, Public Art, and the Changing Meaning of the Bunker Hill Monument" in *The Public Historian* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 55–71.

I will focus on a recent exhibit at MASS MoCA, entitled *Yankee Remix*, produced in partnership with Historic New England (formerly the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, or SPNEA).

Yankee Remix

Yankee Remix: Artists Take on New England was on exhibit at MASS MoCA from summer 2003 through spring 2004. The exhibit featured new work by nine interventionist artists who used materials from Historic New England/SPNEA's collections storage to create pieces commenting on New England history. The idea originated with Historic New England/SPNEA, a venerable and in many ways unique institution which had been looking for ways to raise its public profile and open its vast holdings to a broader audience. Founded in 1910 by members of Boston's "Brahmin" elite, the organization owns thirty-five historic houses throughout New England as well as 120,000 artifacts and half a million photographs warehoused north of Boston. Like many traditional historical organizations, it has been attempting to reshape itself in response to the changing economic and cultural conditions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century; in June 2004 it implemented a name change as part of its broader effort to "re-brand" and re-position itself in the cultural marketplace. Its task is made more complicated by the dispersed nature of its holdings and the legacy of its first collectors and patrons. These founders left the organization handsomely endowed, but their concern about preserving "traditional" American values in the face of an increasingly polyglot society also prompted them to focus on a very conservative vision of colonial and early American heritage. Historic New England/SPNEA's houses and artifacts, as a result, are associated primarily with elite white males, a fact that has posed a challenge as the organization works to reach more diverse audiences and remain socially relevant.⁸

Historic New England/SPNEA's Director of Exhibitions, Ken Turino, was familiar with interventionist works like Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* and Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Bunker Hill Monument Projection* (1998), which turned an iconic monument into a hard-hitting statement about class and violence. Turino proposed a collaboration with MASS MoCA, an idea that found immediate favor with Historic New England/SPNEA's exhibitions committee and president. The next step was to approach Laura Steward Heon, curator

8. Similar concerns prompted the Maryland Historical Society to participate in *Mining the Museum*. "How," the society's director wondered, "is it possible to make Chippendale relevant to kids in the projects?" (Corrin, "Installing History," 132). For a history of Historic New England/SPNEA's early years, see James M. Lindgren, *Preserving Historic New England: Preservation, Progressivism, and the Remaking of Memory* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). *Windows on the Past: Four Centuries of New England Homes* by Jane Nylander with Diane Viera (Boston: Bulfinch Press/Little, Brown, 2000) is an illustrated overview of the organization's thirty-five house museums.



Visitors at the Yankee Remix exhibit examine “Dragon Boat” by Huang Yong Ping. Huang’s installation combined the Asian motif of the dragon boat with artifacts from the collections of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, including old traveling trunks, canes, and crutches that hinted at the many barriers to surmounting East/West differences. (Photo by Cathy Stanton, used by permission)

at MASS MoCA. It turned out that Heon had never heard of SPNEA—a fact that seemed to underscore the institution’s desire to heighten public awareness of its existence. But she was intrigued by the proposal and accepted the invitation to visit Historic New England/SPNEA’s cavernous storage warehouse. “She was just floored,” Turino reports. With the two organizations signed on to the project, Heon began to approach artists who had previously done work with readymade objects, historical materials, and related techniques. In her essay in the *Yankee Remix* catalog, Heon admits that although she had told her collaborators to expect the artists to make unexpected uses of their raw material, she herself “began to preconceive an exhibition of nine Fred Wilsonesque installations that drew heavily on Yankee domestic life,” reflecting and critiquing the domestic ethos of Historic New England/SPNEA’s house museums and collections.⁹ After a series of initial exploratory visits and a one-week residency for each artist in the collections storage, however, what emerged were nine pieces that commented very broadly on colonialism, cultural contact, race, gender, representation, and memory. This variety was no doubt partly a result of Heon’s decision to recruit a very diverse

9. Heon, “Yankee Remix,” 23–24.



A MASS MoCA guide invites gallery visitors to consider the many possible meanings of the ordinary objects depicted on postcards in Zoe Leonard's "For Which It Stands." Leonard photographed objects from the SPNEA collections as a way of highlighting the processes by which some objects become detached from their original contexts, re-valued, and circulated. (Photo by Cathy Stanton, used by permission)

group of artists. Only one—Boston architect Frano Violich, whose multi-media work focused on the creation of a public persona for Boston Massacre victim Crispus Attucks—was based in New England. The others hailed from France, Germany, New York, Los Angeles, and Columbus, Ohio, and included artists of Asian, African-American, and European backgrounds. Their pieces ranged from the monumental to the intimate. Huang Yong Ping's *Dragon Boat* was an enormous construction filled with old traveling trunks and "rowed" by canes and crutches that hinted at the many barriers to surmounting East/West differences. At the other end of the scale, Annette Messenger drew on everyday objects and fairytale imagery to suggest the uncanniness of many of the stories and memories hidden within familiar household landscapes. In *Once Upon a Time . . . Four Stories*, Messenger created four unsettling domestic tableaux in which rats, wolves, and other creatures prowled among early American artifacts such as cradles and farm tools. Some of the pieces used moving images. In Ann Hamilton's hypnotic *across*, written letters and photographs of ships and *cartes de visite* were projected from a lighthouse-like structure, whereas filmmaker Lorna Simpson (*Corridor*) questioned ideals of beauty and the artistic gaze by placing a young black woman into two of Historic New England/SPNEA's historic house settings. Two of the works commented directly on the pursuit of collection, preservation, and display themselves. Mar-

tin Kersels' *Sleeper's Dream*, a giant boot filled with sprouting vegetation and decomposing objects, took a playful look at the unending "war on entropy" fought by all historic preservationists. Zoe Leonard's *For Which it Stands* consisted simply of a rack filled with postcards of photographed objects from the Historic New England/SPNEA collections. By inviting viewers to consider the processes by which some objects become detached from their original contexts, re-valued, and circulated, Leonard opened the museum's own practices to inspection and reflection, following closely in the footsteps of previous artists who have "mined" museums for raw material.

Aestheticizing the past

Yankee Remix showed what art/history collaborations can do very well; it also illustrated some of the drawbacks of which public historians should be wary in this kind of project. First and foremost among the advantages of such partnerships, the exhibit demonstrated artists' ability to produce striking, memorable images with the power to provoke viewers into thinking in new ways about the past and how we know about it. This kind of critical thinking is a frequently stated goal of public historians, who typically try to encourage their audiences to move beyond the search for a single, authoritative past and toward an understanding of historical inquiry as a fluid, participatory endeavor. As a way of assessing whether visitors to *Yankee Remix* were in fact moving in that direction, I conducted short interviews with people in the MASS MoCA gallery in the summer of 2003.¹⁰ These interviews showed that to a noticeable degree, viewers were very engaged by the processes of history as represented by the pieces in the show. Many people commented favorably on the liveliness of this approach to history. As one woman put it, "It's old, but there's new stuff happening." This interest in "new stuff happening" is itself a recognition that history and historical interpretation do not stand still, but are constantly in process and open to many different perspectives. One visitor acknowledged being unsettled by the removal of Historic New England/SPNEA's artifacts from the context of the historical record, but most others seemed comfortable with and intrigued by the technique (or even, in the case of the most habitual contemporary museum-goers, already a trifle jaded about it). Most of the people I spoke with said they were at least somewhat interested in history, but several mentioned that they found ordinary historical sites and house museums too staid ("ponderous," in one visitor's term) to allow for

10. With permission from MASS MoCA, I conducted twenty five- to ten-minute interviews with individuals or groups of *Yankee Remix* visitors (a total of thirty-two people). I chose respondents more or less at random, attempting to speak with a range of visitors who included some who seemed typical of the museum's audience and some who did not. My list of questions focused on visitors' motivations in attending the art museum; what they liked and did not like about *Yankee Remix*; their familiarity with and interest in history in general; and their opinions of the general value of collaborations between arts and historical institutions.

this kind of dynamic reinterpretation. If organizations like Historic New England/SPNEA do want to encourage a livelier sense of engagement with the materials of history, partnering with artists seems to be an effective way to go about it.

A second, more strategic benefit of such partnerships is that historical institutions can use them to become much more visible to new audiences. MASS MoCA, for example, is a player in the newsworthy world of contemporary art and art museums, and a part of the well-traveled cultural circuit in the Berkshire region of western Massachusetts. As such, it is on the radar for many reviewers and patrons who—like MASS MoCA’s curator Laura Heon—may never have heard of Historic New England or the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. As Turino put it in an interview with me, “It’s getting us tremendous, tremendous exposure. It’s getting our name out there . . . I think that we’ve already determined that it’s succeeded, in terms of the profile, the exposure that we’re getting. And I know some of it’s going to continue. I know that we’ll still get press. . . . These are all things that are very, very positive for us.”

When I interviewed Heon in 1999, shortly after the museum opened, she spoke bluntly about MASS MoCA’s mission and intended market. “We are a catalyst for economic development, first and foremost,” she told me. “To fulfill that mission we need to bring in lots of rich New Yorkers. We’re very up front about that.”¹¹ The New-England-centered Historic New England/SPNEA is not specifically courting the same demographic, but Ken Turino, who co-curated the *Yankee Remix* exhibit with Heon, acknowledged that he hopes that having heard about his institution at MASS MoCA, those same New Yorkers might be encouraged to seek out one of the organization’s properties if they happen to be in the Boston area. For Historic New England/SPNEA, though, the partnership offers much more than visitorship *per se*. It heightens visibility as the organization works to reposition itself in the regional and national cultural landscape. Historic New England/SPNEA is recognizing what elite arts institutions like MASS MoCA and postindustrial towns and cities like North Adams already know: that in a crowded and competitive cultural economy, name recognition—branding—is a crucial tool that can be leveraged in many financial and political ways.

Striking visual images, a lively sense of engagement with the materials of the past, access to new audiences, and heightened visibility are all reasons why historical institutions may find it worthwhile to collaborate with arts organizations. Each of these potential benefits, however, is worth considering more carefully. Although it is heartening to see audiences in art museums engaging with the idea of historical knowledge as an ongoing and multivocal process, to what extent are they really thinking about anything beyond the movement of images and signs on the surface? Many of the visitors I spoke with seemed

11. Telephone interview with the author, November 1999.

intrigued by the process but distant from the kinds of sharply political or contextual questions that some of the pieces in *Yankee Remix* had the potential to raise. Several of my respondents seemed to be judging the art purely on its aesthetic merits, while others seemed drawn to one work or another entirely by its appearance. For example, many people singled out Rina Banerjee's *Contagious Spaces, Preserving Pinkeye* as one of the more successful pieces in the show, apparently largely because they enjoyed the bright pink plastic wrap with which Banerjee had wrapped her room-sized model of the Taj Mahal. (Ironically, one of Banerjee's intentions was to reflect back the distorting vision of the Western gaze, which has historically romanticized and exoticized places like India.) And the most frequently mentioned favorite was Messenger's fairytale-inspired piece, which dealt with individual and domestic memories and fantasies rather than more collective or political histories. Judging by the guided tours I observed on my three visits to the exhibit, the museum's tour guides, too, were clearly unversed in the historical details of the pieces, and sometimes played fast and loose with basic historical facts while taking great care to emphasize artistic concepts or techniques. In its rearrangement of historical symbols and signifiers, *Yankee Remix* is a distinctly postmodern exhibit, and it was clear from my interviews that MASS MoCA's sophisticated viewers understood it as such.¹² The guides and visitors seemed drawn to the aesthetically pleasing and to the *idea* of doing history, but not particularly to the contexts or questions of history itself, something that may give public historians pause.

A related issue of concern for public history is precisely the sophistication—and the socioeconomic positioning—of the audience that is most often drawn to contemporary art productions. If the aestheticizing of historical materials and industrial places runs the risk of detaching these things from their real-life origins and implications, the search for up-market publicity and wider brand recognition similarly risks cutting public history off from audiences outside the more affluent areas of the new knowledge/service/culture economy. This raises a question for all arts/history collaborations: In what direction do these partnerships extend the potential audience for public history? This question becomes more urgent precisely because so many new art museums and arts-based developments are located in depressed or deindustrialized places like North Adams. Does a show like *Yankee Remix* speak to those beyond the

12. By "postmodern," I mean the cluster of characteristics that many critics have identified as typical of contemporary cultural productions in capitalist societies. These characteristics include a blurred relationship between representation and reality; a similar blurring among cultural genres such as art, history, music, advertising, and architecture; and an emphasis on surfaces, signs, and media, particularly increasingly ephemeral and disembodied media such as television and the Internet. In addition to Jameson, "Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," see John Dorst, *The Written Suburb: An American Site, an Ethnographic Dilemma* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 101–36 and John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Society* (London: Sage Publications, 1990), 82–93 for reasonably succinct discussions of postmodernism as it plays out in cultural forms, including those associated with cultural tourism and historic sites.

hip, knowing art crowd or the well-off cultural tourists making the rounds of art and performance venues in the Berkshires? Or does it, by virtue of its location within an elite, new-economy institution like MASS MoCA, reinforce the separation between the high and low ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, a separation that continues to widen alarmingly as the postindustrial American economy develops?

At least rhetorically, MASS MoCA strives to create historical continuities between industrial and cultural production, as reflected in the text of one of its early brochures: “People working at Marshall Street [the Sprague Electric/MASS MoCA site] have produced cloth for Civil War uniforms and electronic components for radios and Gemini rockets. With the advent of MASS MoCA, the products have become contemporary art, performance, and as yet unclassified works: the emerging artistic, intellectual, and technological hybrids of the digital age. This trajectory of change on Marshall Street reflects the trend from objects to ideas—from the material to the immaterial—that has characterized the history of industry for the last two centuries.”¹³

Yet this apparent continuity masks the many *discontinuities* inherent in postindustrial places, even while it valorizes the labor and experiences of the people who once worked at the Sprague plant. This same valorization is apparent in the advertising language of The Porches Inn, an upscale new development next to MASS MoCA, which was one of the principal underwriters of the *Yankee Remix* show.¹⁴ The Porches, consisting of six renovated working-class houses, offers “fifty-plus rooms of retro-edgy, industrial granny chic ambiance” where leisure travelers can “surrender to tony comfort and attitude-free service while itinerant techies avail themselves of high-speed connections and bandwidth galore”—all of this amid interiors that “mix striking, colorful style with homage to the generations of mill workers’ families who lived here.”¹⁵ This is what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has called “the reciprocity of disappearance and exhibition”—the simultaneous aestheticizing or recontextualizing of materials while helping to consign them to the past by, for example, depicting as a “homage to mill workers’ families” an inn that no working-class person could afford to stay in.¹⁶ It is such acts of recontextualization and appropriation that many interventionist art works have made visible—but only to the elite audiences with the cultural capital to feel at home in the institutions in which those works are shown and the economic prosperity to partake of their offerings.

13. MASS MoCA, *From Mill to Museum*, 1999, panel 1.

14. The other major sponsor was Altria, currently undergoing a re-branding process of its own as it attempts to shed the negative connotations of its Philip Morris tobacco company identity.

15. <http://www.porches.com> (accessed 30 July 2003). A more recent advertisement promoted “Totally cool accommodations, inspired global cuisine, and the subversive art of the Interventionists . . . all packaged for your convenience this August by The Porches Inn” (e-mail advertisement, 2 August 2004).

16. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 56.

These exclusions are all the more glaring when it is the lives and experiences of non-elite people that are being transformed into the raw material for art. Such was the case with Ron Kuivila's *Visitations*. This sound art piece created a visual and aural collage from oral history interviews, Sprague Company radio shows, the noises of industrial machinery, taped audience discussions that followed a local play about the Sprague years, capacitors produced at the North Adams plant, commemorative pins given to long-time employees, and so on. The artist and an assistant spent several months gathering these materials, making many acquaintances and focusing on a number of key informants who devoted considerable time to the project. Yet when I interviewed two of those informants some months after *Visitations* was installed, neither had been aware that the piece was completed, and none of the local contributors had been invited to see and hear it. Curator Laura Heon stated that "people's voices and stories, in this case, are the content that's put into form by the artist," and the artist himself, when I asked him how he felt about the authority of his position in relation to his sources, told me, "To some extent, my role is like an industrialized nation that imports raw materials and processes them into some kind of 'added value.' That puts [me] in an uncomfortable position of 'exploiting' memories as material. This is an inescapable consequence of the nature of the project and the class positioning of MoCA and myself as the artist."¹⁷ But are such consequences—and the social separations that are reinforced by them—truly inescapable? I will conclude by questioning whether they are, and what public historians might do to escape them in future collaborations with arts organizations.

Conclusion

My critiques of *Yankee Remix* and similar projects are prompted by a central concern: that partnerships between contemporary art and public history run the risk of widening rather than overcoming the inequalities and exclusions characteristic of our developing postindustrial society, particularly in its cultural sector. This risk persists despite the democratizing intentions of the public historians and artists who participate in such projects. These participants know that their historical materials are connected with both past and present politics and very often with the lives of present-day people. Yet my exploration of *Yankee Remix* shows that when historical materials are placed in a fine-art context, those connections too easily tend to be masked by the distances in space, time, or socioeconomic class between viewers and viewed, or by an aestheticizing effect that shifts the focus from content to form. If public history is to be true to its democratizing principles—what Michael Frisch called its "capacity to redefine and redistribute intellectual authority, so that

17. Telephone interview with Laura Heon, November 1999. E-mail correspondence between Ron Kuivila and the author, November 1999.

this might be shared more broadly in historical research and communication rather than continuing to serve as an instrument of power and hierarchy”¹⁸—public historians should challenge Ron Kuivila’s too-ready assertion that this masking is an inescapable consequence of the nature of such projects and the class positioning of museums and other cultural institutions. I suggest below four forms that this challenge might take.

First, the risk that historical materials will be uncritically aestheticized is higher when art works made from them are installed in conventional fine-art settings—for example, in an art museum like MASS MoCA. Public art/history projects presented in less elite or formal settings have the potential to reach a much wider audience (as, indeed, many have done) and to counter the somewhat rarified atmosphere of the high-art world. Even with a project intended for traditional museum display, like *Yankee Remix*, public historians can seek ways to extend the lives of individual pieces in more innovative directions. Ken Turino described one intriguing proposal that might have made at least one of the *Yankee Remix* pieces more accessible and provocative: moving Martin Kersels’ *Sleeper’s Dream* to the front yard of Historic New England/SPNEA’s headquarters at the Harrison Gray Otis House in Boston once the MASS MoCA show closed. “It’s not meant to be outside, it’ll fall apart, but that’s what his piece is about,” Turino told me. Placing Kersels’ giant boot out in the elements, in view of the constant human and vehicle traffic along Boston’s busy Cambridge Street, might have provoked formal and informal discussion about the politics of preservation and decay, further opening up these topics to the kind of public dialogue that this kind of work was meant to inspire. This particular plan was not realized, but some pieces from the show did have a six-week showing in the Boston area in the summer of 2004 in The Gallery @ Green Street, an innovative and community-oriented gallery located in a subway station on Boston’s Orange Line. Pursuing such collaborations beyond traditional high-art venues can be a way to foster the kinds of public dialogues public historians hope to see, and to identify settings for art/history pieces that are as lively as the works of art themselves.

A second strategy is for public historians to make sure they take an active role in presenting the artworks to their various audiences. Because historians tend to be more attentive to historical questions and contexts than those whose primary allegiance is to the art world, historians’ voices need to be heard alongside artists’ statements and the interpretations of guides and docents in art museums. This is not to say that historians’ interpretations should necessarily dominate in this arena. Artists and artworks speak in their own languages, and I am not suggesting that those languages are only of value insofar as they can illuminate social or political conditions. That approach can do as much of a disservice to art as a too purely aesthetic approach can do to history; at its most extreme, it can lead to the kind of socialist realism that has historically

18. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), xx.



“Sleeper’s Dream” by Martin Kersels. Kersels’ giant boot was filled with sprouting vegetation and decomposing objects, a playful commentary on the unending battle against decay fought by all historic preservationists. (Photo by Cathy Stanton, used by permission)

produced some very bad works of art. But active participation by public historians in interacting with the publics for art/history collaborations can offer some balance between the two extremes, and can help to ensure that the critical potential of many of these collaborations is more fully realized.

Within the *Yankee Remix* exhibit, a large central hallway area was devoted to Historic New England/SPNEA, but it contained only informational and

promotional material (books, brochures, and a video loop) about the organization and its properties and collections. It might have been very illuminating to have included some materials related to the kinds of historical issues the artists explored in their pieces, and more interesting yet for Historic New England/SPNEA to have supplied an occasional interpreter (perhaps an intern) to offer some of the guided gallery tours of the exhibit. It could have been fascinating to see how the two quite different institutions approached the same works of art—to see, for example, whether a public history perspective might have teased out some of the harder-hitting intentions in a piece like Rina Banerjee's *Contagious Spaces, Preserving Pinkeye*. Banerjee was critiquing the exoticizing gaze of the nineteenth-century New England elites who traded and collected goods from the “mysterious” East (many of which found their way into the collections of Historic New England/SPNEA itself); hearing a guide talk in concrete terms about those original travelers and collectors might have prompted viewers to question their own unthinking enjoyment of Banerjee's gaudy, pink-wrapped Taj Majal.

Third, public historians could attempt to understand much more clearly what the social consequences of these collaborations actually are. For example, what were the social effects of Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Bunker Hill Monument Projection*, which projected images of local women—mothers of young men murdered in Charlestown's gang wars—onto the iconic monument? Sarah Purcell tells us in her analysis of the piece in this journal that Wodiczko's informants “understood that participation in his art project held the potential for healing because ‘they were aware how important [the Bunker Hill] monument is for justice.’” And Wodiczko himself has said, “I'm a historical artist, a little like Courbet when he said it's necessary to take history into account as long as it has something to do with the present.”¹⁹ But *what* precisely does it have to do with the present? What audiences did a piece like *Bunker Hill Monument Projection* reach? Did the women face any personal consequences for having spoken out on what was literally a monumental scale? Did the project create any new openings for community discussion about what had been a taboo subject? Purcell cogently analyzes the genesis of the art piece and the monument itself, but she never addresses these crucial questions. Those of us engaged in the now familiar area of “history and memory” studies should consistently undertake this kind of work as part of our research and should disseminate our findings along with the more customary analyses of the past lives of monuments, artifacts, images, and ideas. This requires a set of skills that historians do not generally have, since the discipline is focused on the past and on the evidence of documents, “texts” of all kinds, and material culture. (Even oral history, which deals in the experiences of living people, requires that those experiences be documented and collected before being studied.) To this end, public historians may find it useful to strengthen

19. Purcell, “Commemoration,” 59, 70.

their working relationships with social scientists and others who focus more on social relationships in the present. One such scholar, anthropologist James Clifford, has offered useful case studies of precisely this issue. Exploring interactions between a group of Tlingit elders and staff at the Portland (Oregon) Museum of Art, and between curators at London's Museum of Mankind and the Papua New Guineans who supplied artifacts for an exhibit there, Clifford argues that "when museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structure as a *collection* becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral *relationship*—a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull."²⁰ In cases like the Bunker Hill project, which touches on particularly raw nerves, an understanding of these exchanges is doubly important. But they should still be considered even in less volatile art works, such as Kuivila's *Visitations*. The more information public historians have about the social contexts in which these projects take place, the better they will be able to ensure that their own work helps, and does not hinder, the kind of critical thinking and democratization of knowledge that public historians ideally seek to support.

Of course, this leads to a much larger set of questions. Many of us are bound by disciplinary codes of ethics in gathering artifacts and oral histories, but do we have social obligations that go beyond those guidelines? Clifford has suggested that we should look at collection as an ongoing relationship of exchange, rather than a one-time, one-way transaction. "In relations of collecting," he writes, "money, objects, knowledge, and cultural value are exchanged and appropriated in continuing local/global circuits. How should the benefits of these relationships be shared? If collecting is conceived as exchanging, what ongoing constraints are imposed on exhibition practices?"²¹ This leads to the even broader question of what responsibilities museums, public history sites, and other cultural institutions have to the communities in which they are located. This issue becomes particularly important when these institutions are created specifically to give a boost to obsolete economies or when there are glaring socioeconomic disparities between those in the institution and those in the surrounding community—especially when the lives of community people are being "mined" as raw material for exhibitions and other types of display. These questions arise throughout the museum, arts, and public history fields, of course. But art/history partnerships can be a particularly useful way of approaching them because so many interventionist artworks already seek to ex-

20. James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 192. For Clifford's discussion of "museums as contact zones," see particularly chapters 5 through 8. Other social scientists have produced fine studies of public history sites as social worlds, including Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham, N.H.: Duke University Press, 1997), Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, and many of the pieces in the important collections *Exhibiting Cultures: The Politics and Poetics of Museum Display* (Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991) and *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine, eds., Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

21. Clifford, *Routes*, p. 171.

pose and critique the ways in which museums and collections contribute to the creation of hierarchies and unequal power relationships.

I have argued above that mere exposure is not enough as long as these artworks remain in conventional fine-art settings peopled by traditional fine-art audiences. My fourth and final suggestion is that public historians should take full advantage of the lively potential of contemporary art by using it as a way to initiate new and more lasting relationships within their communities, whether that means continuing the conversations started through projects like *Visitations* and *Bunker Hill Monument Projection* or using the dynamism of experimental artworks as a starting-point for forging relationships with new publics. One recent cultural production focused on MASS MoCA and North Adams suggests that this is eminently possible, under the right conditions. The film *Downside Up* (New Day Films, 2002) by North Adams native Nancy Kelly, chronicles the filmmaker's ambivalent relationship with what she knew as a dying deindustrialized place, and her curiosity about whether the art museum could actually turn the town's fortunes around. Her conclusion is ultimately hopeful. She sees many signs of renewed energy and prosperity, and she is even able, by repeatedly insisting that they come into the museum with her, to help her initially resistant blue-collar family reach a point where they feel comfortable with the art in MASS MoCA—including *Visitations*—and confident in stating their opinions of it. *Downside Up* shows that if there is enough social investment in the task of connecting with new and non-elite viewers, contemporary art works do have the potential to engage a very wide audience. If public historians are willing and able to make that kind of social investment when they embark on projects with arts organizations, they will move a long way toward realizing the considerable promise of arts/history collaborations.