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BETWEEN TWO WORLDS
Incubating a New Approach to Community Engagement and Civic Responsibility in an Art Museum
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Introduction

In July 2014, Gretchen Jennings, a museum professional who has blogged for several years about the need for “empathetic museums,” addressed an issue on the American Alliance of Museum’s website that was getting a great deal of attention in the national press at the time: tens of thousands of undocumented, unaccompanied children were crossing the US border. Her blog opened with the provocative question, “What role, if any, should museums play in this national crisis?” It is a question, as Elaine Gurian and other museum critics have observed, that most museums are not accustomed to asking, much less addressing. As Jennings pointed out in her blog, “There is little in our traditional structures that lends itself to timely responses to current situations.” Indeed, she continued, “If we museums want to become more actively involved with our communities, especially in our fast-paced global society, we may have to develop a new process and timeline for being responsive.”

Jennings proposed two ways by which she thought museums might be most effective in responding to the particular plight of unaccompanied children crossing the border and the unmet needs of undocumented immigrants in our cities more generally. First, she suggested that museums could provide humanitarian assistance in collaboration with experienced agencies already working in the field. She further opined that museums might be a perfect place in the public sphere to foster discussion and dialogue in a safe and structured environment. During the summer of 2013, when the Museum of International Folk Art’s (MOIFA) Gallery of Conscience (GoC) team began to contemplate a multiyear exhibition project addressing immigrant and refugee issues, these two tactics were front and center on our minds:

- Creating a safe (or as one colleague named it, a “brave”) place for dialoguing across difference
- Working collaboratively with community-based service and arts organizations to provide multiple avenues for engagement, education, assistance, and empathy
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Using folk art as the starting point for both dialogue and engagement, our goal was to provide visitors and targeted community groups with the opportunity to relate to each other around the twin humanities concepts of “home” and “belonging.” We planned on doing this by using the words and works of local and international folk artists who span the migration continuum: those who have left their homes to begin anew in a new land, those who have been “left behind,” and those who welcome and/or are displaced by the newcomers in their midst.

Drawing on traditional and relatable forms of storytelling (including visual, verbal, and performing folk arts), we sought to provide a safe space for participants to address a wide range of issues affecting immigrants in this country that can be difficult to directly confront because of stigma, taboo, language barriers, stereotypes, or conflict. Not only would participants have an opportunity to engage directly with the words and works of master-level traditional artists who dare to speak out through their arts, they would also have a chance to share their own stories and personal experiences evoked by the art while being exposed to other points of view surrounding questions of home and belonging for newcomers and natives alike. Finally, we hoped to provide resources for participants to respond directly to needs they see in their own communities.

By the time the exhibition officially opened during the summer of 2014, the Gallery of Conscience was perfectly, if somewhat inadvertently, positioned to respond to what national headlines—and President Obama—were billing as an “urgent humanitarian crisis.” Several of the artworks in the exhibition uncannily mirrored the very current events that were being spotlighted in the national news, even though they had been created years (and sometimes decades) before. Two of the most evocative artworks at the time included a painting by Cuban artist Cenia Guttiérez Alfonso depicting an unaccompanied young girl crossing the Atlantic Ocean on her journey to a new land (photo 4.1) and a three-part sculpture by Peruvian American retablo maker Nicario Jiménez (provocatively titled Immigration: The American Dream), which provided a critical visual commentary on what he saw as the differing receptions by American authorities of refugees/immigrants arriving from three Hispanic countries: refugee assistance agencies for Cubans, detention centers for Haitians, and border police for Mexican families attempting to cross our borders. Putting the national “humanitarian crisis” within a global perspective was a painted wood sculpture by Mozambican folk artist Camuridino Mustafa Jetha depicting a group of “refugiados”—refugees from the decades-long civil war in his country—marching single file toward asylum with the barest necessities balanced on their heads (photo 4.2).

The artworks were divided into four main thematic sections based on input from community members and advisors. The four sections were titled “Deciding to Leave,” “Dangerous Journeys,” “Who Belongs?” and “Where Is My Home?” The theme of each section was reinforced by a first-person quote from a community member who had participated in a dialogue session about the topic. These quotes were printed in large type on computer paper and taped to the gallery walls above each section title:
"What is the story of those who don't make it?"

"You need to distinguish between feeling unwelcome and being unwelcome."

"There's the home that you have made and there's the home you come from—that's always your instinctive home—where you understand it without words."
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- "When I die, throw my ashes in the Rio Grande. The ashes will decide where I belong: Mexico or the United States."

And the participatory exercises set up throughout the gallery intentionally encouraged visitors, especially young visitors, to put themselves in newcomers’ shoes with prompts such as the following:

- "If you had to leave your home and could only bring what you could carry, what would it be?"
- "Describe a time when you felt that you didn’t belong. Use the Post-Its or tweet your response at: @galleryofconscience." (Photo 4.3)

Even the exhibition title, Between Two Worlds: Folk Artists Reflect on the Immigrant Experience, was the result of a crowd-sourced contest to pick the title that best reflected the questions of "Who Belongs?" and "Who Can Be an American?" These are the very questions that have always been at the heart of the immigration debate in our nation, and they were certainly the upmost questions in our minds during the immigration "crisis" of tens of thousands of unaccompanied children who were traveling from Central and South America and crossing the US-Mexico border when the exhibition opened in 2014.
The opening weeks of the _Between Two Worlds_ exhibition that summer saw a flurry of activities both within and outside the gallery walls. These activities included talks and demonstrations by exhibition artists; a workshop with an international peace camp for Palestinian, Israeli, and New Mexican young women; dialogues between local and international folk artists; walk-in visits from thousands of individuals and families from both inside and outside of the state; and hands-on art and activity tours for hundreds of Native, Hispanic, immigrant, and refugee children and families from social service and arts agencies across New Mexico. Some of the organizations that participated in the opening activities and whose contributions became part of the exhibition included Literacy Volunteers of Santa Fe, Refugee Well Being Project of Albuquerque, Name Pueblo, Moving Arts Española, Santa Fe School for the Arts, PBIJ Family Services of Albuquerque, New Mexico Asian Family Center, Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Northern New Mexico, and Northern NM Youth Works.

Although not intentionally programmed, the topic of most interest, discussion, and activity during these early weeks mirrored the topic most featured in the national news: the tens of thousands of women and children—most seeking asylum from conditions of life-threatening violence in their home countries—who had crossed the border into
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the United States and were being held (in many cases) in newly opened, privately run detention centers in both New Mexico and Texas. Both the design and framework of the Gallery of Conscience's *Between Two Worlds* exhibition seemed to have succeeded in providing a safe—and spontaneous—space for diverse visitors to dialogue about this controversial issue and a platform through which community agencies could effectively collaborate with the museum to offer programs and activities for affected families and individuals. Responses from visitors to the gallery were immediate and enthusiastic. Here are several samples of those visitor responses:

- “I think the topic of this exhibit is especially relevant now, with what’s going on now. Makes you think about what’s going on beyond the headlines. This is more personal. We can learn through individual stories. That is what is enjoyable about history—getting into the personal perspective, beyond the big picture.”

- “This exhibition is very relevant to what’s going on today, considering immigration law, etc. Yes, it’s a very important topic. We’re all immigrants in some way. It asks you to think differently about everything in the museum, not just this gallery. The show, in a very down to earth and practical way, bridges the intellectual and art appreciation with actual, real world experiences. There should be a place in every museum where you have to commit your own opinions. More museums should get a hold of people emotionally, not just intellectually.”

- “This is an excellent and timely exhibit. It brings awareness and helps people empathize by putting them in others’ shoes.”

- “Thank you for being here. Thanks for doing this. It makes sense for MOIFA to do this exhibit because Santa Fe is a place of convergence. It offers a nice opportunity to reflect on or participate in questions like what you would take with you (if you had to leave your home suddenly). I’d like to see the exhibit as a resource for immigrants, so if someone is an immigrant, s/he can take from it and build on it. It’s helpful to feel that you’re not alone.”

Through this exhibition project, we seemed to have captured that quality of “nimbleness” or “responsiveness” that museum professionals are beginning to recognize as necessary if their institutions are going to be able to effectively respond to timely issues as they arise, a quality one expert defines as “Agile. Sprightly. Light. Lively. Able to turn on a dime.” However, as these same museum professionals know, these tactics—however “sprightly” they might seem to the public—cannot be put in place overnight. Indeed, the “new process and timeline for being responsive” that Jennings alludes to is one that the Museum of International Folk Art had been slowly and conscientiously incubating for years. And, admittedly, this incubation came not without its share of bumps, hurdles, and hard knocks along the way.
Conceptualization

It began in 2010 with the inauguration of the Gallery of Conscience as a dedicated space within the Museum of International Folk Art to explore timely social justice and human rights issues through the words and works of international folk artists. In some ways, this seemed to be a natural extension of the original mission of the museum, which opened its doors in 1953 on Santa Fe's famed Museum Hill. Its founder, Florence Dibell Bartlett, was witness to two world wars and a firm believer in the idea that folk art—the everyday arts of the people—was the key to promoting cultural understanding worldwide. Her words have greeted visitors to the museum for over a half a century: “The art of the craftsmen is the bond between the peoples of the world.” In keeping with this tradition, MOIFA’s former director Dr. Marsha Bol inaugurated the new Gallery of Conscience in the summer of 2010 as a way to make those connections even stronger. “As the largest folk art museum in the world,” she noted, “we have a responsibility to use our resources to impact and strengthen our communities through the power of folk art to educate, illuminate, and connect people around powerful issues of conscience in our lives.”

Within its first three years, the Gallery of Conscience featured three guest-curated and professionally designed exhibitions, each of which focused on an issue of conscience explored through the words and works of traditional artists: women’s empowerment (2010), natural disaster (2011), and internment in times of war (2012). The inaugural exhibition "Empowering Women: Artisan Cooperatives that Transformed Communities" subsequently traveled to museums throughout the United States and to the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg. Its positive reception, both at home and on tour, attracted widespread publicity and support for the gallery, including a generous endowment from a local family that provided a financial base for future investments and innovations.

While the GoC’s first three exhibitions were certainly more socially relevant and inclusive, the top-down method of curation, design, artist selection, and programmatic development was not. Both artists and community members made it clear that they wanted more. What they asked for in particular was our institutional help in creating a forum for continuing to dialogue about challenging social issues, engaging underserved and at-risk communities in more meaningful ways, and extending the conversation to explore and advocate in order to impact these issues in our own “backyard.” There seemed to be something, ironically enough, about the polished and professional nature of the finished exhibitions that prevented audiences, artists, and community members from engaging as spontaneously, deeply, or personally as they would have liked. So in the fall of 2012, MOIFA took the next leap to transform the gallery into what it hoped would be an even more effective and inviting platform for genuine community engagement and collaboration. What the staff discovered was that in order to invite and welcome that kind of community consciousness, it had to do more than just alter the nature of the topics it addressed. As an institutional space, it had to really embody the kind of honest, engaged, collaborative, and nimble environment that it hoped to promote. This is where the idea of “incubation” really began.
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Creating a Museum Incubator for Social Change

Museum consultant Kathleen McLean describes a museum incubator as “a controlled environment in which exhibition professionals can experiment with nimble processes and responsive ideas, and practice creating exhibitions and programs in new ways.”9 She recognizes that there are as many motivations for such a process as there are museums willing to try it out. Just a few of the many reasons that institutions have made the decision to incubate new processes include their perceived need to increase visitor engagement, attract new kinds of audiences, convey ideas in a more effective manner, or increase community investment. While motivations differ widely, so too do the means and methods for experimenting with innovative techniques. Sometimes such experiments are nothing more than a day-long workshop or a summer program in the basement of a museum. In other cases, as with the Gallery of Conscience, the museum is able to dedicate an entire gallery or wing for ongoing installations and activities that incubate new techniques of design or engagement.

Whatever form the incubation takes or whatever its underlying motivation, a museum incubator usually starts with some sort of rapid prototyping process that is tailored to the specific museum, situation, and participants. Prototyping allows for the institution to experiment with new ideas, keeping those that work and tossing out or modifying those that don’t. This is done in a way that is relatively low risk, low cost, and low maintenance. Prototypes, according to McLean, are “ideas and activities with physicality—elements with which people can interact and which can be immediately altered to improve their effect. And it is the combination of physicality, interaction, and iteration,” she emphasizes, “that is most valuable in informing museum incubator ideas and designs.”10 For the Gallery of Conscience, the motivation to incubate an entirely new design process was to create a “medium” that fundamentally mirrored the “message.”

Like social justice work itself, we wanted a process that was responsive, responsible, collaborative, engaged, equitable, impactful, and ethically motivated.

For such a conceptual overhaul to be successful and embraced, we knew the audience and local communities needed to gain a sense of ownership through active involvement, not passive lectures. Everyone has something to offer. If we wanted to tap that collaborative vein, we had to clean our own house by shaking up the traditional museum decision-making structure. So we began by throwing out the more conventional curator/designer/educator model of exhibition expertise in favor of a team approach that was fundamentally collaborative, improvisational, and flexible. After three years of working with MOIFA as a guest curator and strategic planning consultant, I was charged with assembling such a team to lead a totally new kind of prototyping process based on visitor, artist, and community input and exchange. The six-member team ultimately consisted of three MOIFA staff members, including an educator, curator, and preparator, and two additional part-time consultants and myself as GoC director. Kathy McLean came on board as our prototyping guru consultant and veteran folklorist Laura Marcus Green was hired as our community engagement coordinator for the GoC. The revolutionary structure of our approach involved a collaborative
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protocol with all six team members writing labels, designing spaces, engaging visitors, creating programs, evaluating responses, and adjusting for increased clarity and depth of response after each iteration.

Like a jazz song, we began with a single social justice thread of an idea then used a few artworks to effectively explore the “melody.” That first incubation year, the topic in the Gallery of Conscience was HIV/AIDS and our goal was to explore the many ways in which traditional artists and local communities use storytelling and material arts to educate, advocate, and increase awareness about HIV/AIDS both on a local and on an international scale. That year, on World AIDS Day, over a dozen works of art started the conversation. These artworks included pieces like

- a tower of six hundred beaded dolls representing the children orphaned by AIDS in one South African village,
- an AIDS Memorial Quilt block commemorating eight New Mexicans who died at the height of the pandemic in the United States, and
- a carved wooden sculpture of an AIDS protest march in Mozambique’s capital.

Improvisation can bring out many emotions; in this case, it captured and conveyed grief, resilience, activism, and hope. People of all ages across the community responded to the call, adding miniature protest signs, memorials to loved ones, radio pieces about their own life stories, and squares later sewn into a community quilt. The year-long project provided the community with an opportunity to discuss a subject too often hidden by silence, stigma, and misinformation. The exhibition, which went through four separate iterations and changes, was neither finished nor polished; rather it was a kind of “call and response” lab in which visitors, artists, and targeted community members could come together to riff off of the initial artworks, dialogue about issues, share their thoughts, and contribute to an ongoing, iterative experience that was community created.

We experimented with a number of techniques designed to encourage visitors to feel part of an ongoing process and able to engage easily, immediately, and meaningfully. We taped computer-generated label text directly on the wall and used existing cases, furniture, and leftover paint colors from a previous exhibit. We displayed photographs of the artwork if we didn’t own the “real thing” or when we weren’t sure if the real thing would be effective in engaging our audiences. And we hired a young blackboard graphic designer from Trader Joe’s to literally hand-write the exhibition title and section headings in chalk directly on the gallery walls. The opening label outside the exhibition’s doors invited visitors to come in, share their thoughts, try their hands, and leave their opinions, stating: “THIS IS AN EXPERIMENT. EVERYTHING HERE IS A WORK IN PROGRESS.”

We would be doing a disservice if we didn’t admit that the results of this first incubated exhibition were both exhilarating and exasperating. Challenges arose in
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defining exactly what we meant by "community involvement" and what we meant by "art," workflow expectations and responsibilities among team members were hard to manage, and we were challenged to effectively convey to patrons and visitors (all of whom were accustomed to experiencing highly polished and professionally designed exhibitions) the value of a work in progress. Docents wrote letters of protest, curators held closed-door meetings with the museum director, designers threatened to quit, collaborators called it a "downer," guards got nervous, funders lobbied complaints, and longtime patrons spread the word that this prototype was "the ugliest exhibit MOIFA has ever done!" Yet responses from first-time visitors, community workshop participants, and featured folk artists told a different tale. Here are some examples of what they had to say:

- "I saw myself here for the first time. Thank you for that . . ."
- "I love that the Gallery is always changing, and is changed by the people who have responded . . ."
- "This is a brave thing to do . . ."
- "Look what I did!"
- "This is a beautiful exhibit—accessible in ways museums haven't felt before."

The incubated project showed that success for the gallery space would have to be defined in new terms; it would need to be based more on reaching new audiences than on pleasing old patrons and on starting conversations rather than on finishing polished products.

Dialogue as Capacity Building for Social Change

When the Gallery of Conscience team settled on immigration as the topic for its second prototyped exhibition, dialogue was both the spark and the fuel that drove the entire process—from concept, to content, to design, to engagement, to action, and back again. Dialogue was not only the primary means through which we invited diverse communities into the museum to engage with each other around relevant issues sparked by the artists' words and works; it was also the primary means through which we engaged community members to collaborate on designing the exhibition experience, selecting the most impactful art, shaping the themes, developing the programs, and organizing for community action.

It all began in the summer of 2013 when we held our first round of dialogues with invited immigrants, refugees, and immigrant descendants from our local communities in New Mexico, Japanese, Nigerian, Tibetan, Mexican, Salvadoran, Korean, Cameroonian, Brazilian, Hispanic, and Indian community members gathered in the gallery, each bringing their own stories, perspectives, and opinions to bear on a wide range of issues surrounding the migrant experience. They discussed everything from racial profiling
of newcomers to what it takes to feel welcomed (or unwelcomed) in a new land. The prototyping process we had incubated throughout the previous year assured us that we didn’t need fancy bells and whistles to get the conversation started. Indeed, for that first dialogue, we had nothing more than a few color photos of handmade baskets, sculptures, paintings, weavings, culinary dishes, and embroideries made by traditional immigrant artists from throughout the United States. The actual pieces of art wouldn’t be installed for months.

The dialogue process itself was one that we had developed through our membership in a special program of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, which drew together twenty-seven museums and historic sites from around the country that were focused on immigration issues in their exhibits and programming. We already knew that immigration brings up strong feelings in the public sphere, both personally and politically, and that we had to introduce the topic with sensitivity and care. For example, ask people what they think of when they hear the words “The American Dream” and they can probably tell you personal stories or spout strong opinions, any of which could be slanted positively or negatively. This holds true whether they immigrated themselves, their families immigrated generations earlier, or they were already here when newcomers arrived. In order to create a safe space to allow for these potentially charged conversations, we knew that we needed to start slow, build trust, share commonalities, and graciously explore our differences. Creating a kind of “arc” of experience, the dialogue process was designed to draw participants in as strangers and move us, a few hours later, to understand ourselves as “neighbors.” The process opened with introductions and icebreakers, moved to personal stories, escalated to issue-driven discussions, and wound down to sharing lessons learned and calls for action. It is this kind of experience that we hoped, over time, could build capacity within our community for increased understanding, tolerance, and equity. In an article on the power of folk arts to catalyze social change, folklorist Betsy Peterson stressed the importance of dialogue for this kind of social equity work in a civic democracy. She said:

We may not normally consider dialogue and conversation as capacity building, but they are essential building blocks for cultural capacity building, the kind that builds a sense of confidence, the kind that enables the individual to recognize him- or herself in the collective struggles of others, the kind that can ground true social change.12

After an initial icebreaker designed for participants to get to know one another around the universal concept of “home,” we dug more deeply into the charged nature of home within the context of immigration through an examination of the artworks themselves. With the photos of artworks spread out on a table in front of them, participants were asked to select a piece that represented “home” to them; then they were asked to work in pairs to share their impressions and reflect on the many ways in which the idea (or reality) of home can be nurtured, challenged, or threatened when we move away or when others move in. Some participants, especially newcomers of color, were moved by
the artwork to share stories of being treated with fear or suspicion upon their arrival in the United States, others reflected on a neighbor's gift of kindness or other ways in which they had been welcomed upon their arrival, and all newcomers shared nostalgic memories of home evoked by the images of traditional foods or artifacts from their native lands.

In focusing on two or three of the more "political" artworks offering visual and/or verbal commentaries on the immigrant experience, we next guided participants to contemplate how people's conceptions of home might be different if they had been forced to leave in a hurry—perhaps under threat of death or persecution, forced to vacate their ancestral lands to accommodate more "powerful" newcomers, or forced into detention centers, jails, or hostile settings as a result of the migration process. "From this kaleidoscope of perspectives," noted our community engagement coordinator and dialogue facilitator Laura Marcus Green, "emerged two core themes, helping us to narrow our exhibit focus on the enormous and complicated topic of immigration: the struggle to belong in a place where you may or may not feel welcome, and the experience of living between two or more cultures." While the artworks sparked the initial feelings and memories, there was nothing particularly unique about them in and of themselves. Rather, what was emphasized in these sessions was the role of the museum as a place where cultural hierarchies could be "revisioned" and where counter-narratives to hate and intolerance could be offered.13

Based on these early dialogues, the Gallery of Conscience team crafted an initial iteration of the new exhibition with a title reflecting the unfinished nature of the process and the invitation for audience responses: Works in Progress: Folk Artists Reflect on the Immigrant Experience. As with the HIV/AIDS prototype, we opened with a limited number of artworks (sometimes in the form of enlarged photos) displayed on the walls and in makeshift cases, computer-printed label texts and community quotes, two or three mockups of participatory exercises, and an invitation for visitors to explore, participate, comment, reflect, and contribute their thoughts, stories, and voices. Artworks included such pieces as a refugee's embroidered story cloth illustrating the Hmong people's forced exodus from Laos at the end of the Vietnam War, an ex-voto painted as a thank you to Santo Niño de Atocha for the miracle of a mother and her baby surviving a stroke while crossing the US-Mexico border, a Lakota Sioux beaded cradle created to convey a contemporary social statement about immigration with the words "The Border Crossed Us" beaded across the cradle's top, and an embroidered scene depicting a young Holocaust survivor's first view of the Statue of Liberty from the ship that carried her family to freedom in the United States.

Within the first month of the exhibition's soft opening, we held another set of dialogues in the Gallery of Conscience. This time, we had the benefit of an actual physical exhibition as the catalyst for the conversation. We invited refugee and immigrant community members as well as artists, advocates, activists, and social service providers from within a one-hundred-mile radius. In addition to the immediate impact on the participants themselves and the concrete input we received from them about exhibition design and content, something extraordinary began to happen as relationships were formed, ideas were exchanged, and creative energies were ignited.
Again, the trick was to be nimble enough to recognize what was happening and respond "on a dime."

Our community engagement coordinator Laura Marcus Green was that first responder, drawing on her exquisite skills as an ethnographer and interviewer to follow those creative threads back into the communities and see what treasures emerged. Peterson has described this kind of fieldwork as an "engaged awareness," a practice of careful listening and observation through which the multiple "narratives embedded in daily life" can offer up insights, experiences, and artworks often hidden to the more public eye.¹⁴

One of those threads ultimately led to a series of new art pieces for the exhibition that had either been created, donated, or recommended by participants in one of our dialogue programs. These artworks included a weaving and a youth-generated film from the Ramah Navajo Weavers Association in western New Mexico, highlighting the displacement of this community by European colonists; a papel picado (paper cutting) piece of Our Lady of Guadalupe, in tribute to Mexican workers who perished during the 9/11 attacks and went unrecognized due to their undocumented immigration status; a poem by a sixteen-year-old Mexican American high school student, who reflects on the trauma and struggles of her parents' immigration journey and the discrimination they faced in a new home; a Nigerian Yoruba indigo adire (cassava-resist dye technique) cloth whose symbols connect its maker to his home country; and a secular Tibetan Thangka painting, depicting a Tibetan man deciding whether to stay in his homeland or flee for safety. This last piece was created in direct response to the artist's participation in the dialogue, where he felt the impact of "political" art pieces for the first time. Although the participant/artist had never before expressed his feelings about the Tibetan exodus through his art, he resolved to create a new piece for the exhibition that reflected the political situation in his homeland and his own feelings as someone caught between two worlds.

The second thread Marcus Green followed led out into the community, where she connected to the exciting work of a number of relevant arts and service organizations and began to explore with them ways in which we might collaborate on programs, projects, performances, and events both within and outside the gallery walls. Navigating these burgeoning relationships required its own kind of nimbleness and its own layer of commitment to the social justice foundation of our incubated Gallery of Conscience experience. Fortunately for us, this was a commitment that was both understood and generously supported by state and government arts and humanities organizations including New Mexico Arts, New Mexico Humanities Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts, which all funded different aspects of these civic engagement endeavors.

The Moral Imperative of the Inclusive Museum

As many cultural critics have noted, the demographic shifts in major cosmopolitan cities caused by widespread migration to the United States have put museums at a new
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crossroads.\textsuperscript{15} While our institutions may not have been historically set up to respond quickly or nimbly to the changing needs of these new communities, some would argue that we have nothing less than a moral imperative to do just that. Reflecting on Gretchen Jennings's question with which I began this article, "What role, if any, should museums play in this national immigration crisis?" I find myself drawn to those colleagues who point out that museums—because they are seemingly removed from the manifest political centers of conflict and contestation—are in fact supremely positioned to respond to the increasing nativist reactions against immigrants in our public sphere and have a responsibility to do so. As folklorist and immigrant rights activist William Westerman has written, "Museums have a leading role to play in becoming cultural centers where multiple narratives can be told, where people can find safe spaces for cultures to mix, and where xenophobia can be overcome."\textsuperscript{16} The challenge, he continues, "is how to become inclusive and relevant to the framework of civic democracy at a time when larger societies are grappling with strong exclusionist tendencies and fear."\textsuperscript{17} He has gone on to suggest four distinct yet interrelated ways in which museums might offer inclusivity as its own kind of capacity building and assistance:

It can refer to programmatic decisions that integrate community input into the museum's planning... The museum can include a diverse range of people among the desired audience; the staff can be diverse and include people from varied backgrounds, origins, perspectives and approaches; and the museum can reflect a society that is itself inclusive of everyone.\textsuperscript{18}

This range of "inclusions" is exactly what was being incubated in MOIFA's Gallery of Conscience throughout our \textit{Between Two Worlds} lab; it was a range that moved beyond the "visitor as consumer" model and toward a model that encompassed the full potential of community-based knowledge production, collaboration, and communication. In other words, the nimbleness toward which we were working was not motivated by a desire to increase the visitor experience alone; we were also, and even more importantly, striving to affect a deeper kind of inclusion of the visitor—and the community member—as a participant in shaping that experience and its intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional content.

The first and in some ways most formal way in which we strove to accomplish this goal was to create a Community Advisory Committee drawn from the dialogue participants we had hosted throughout the previous year. The committee, which consisted of eight to ten members, included immigrant and refugee artists, activists, service providers, and organizational leaders who worked closely with the Gallery of Conscience team throughout the \textit{Between Two Worlds} project to hone its conceptual focus, evaluate potential artworks and participatory exercises, and act as ambassadors in their communities to elicit stories, materials, and contacts. Their voices were literally displayed on the gallery walls, reflected in exhibition design and artifact changes, and featured in community showcases and ongoing community projects.
The second way in which we strove for inclusion beyond the gallery walls was to collaborate with our community partners on the development of strong educational programs, projects, and performances that took advantage of our physical gallery space and resources while also being rooted in community people, places, spaces, and agencies. In every case, our goal was to create a program or project that, from a social change perspective, drew immigrants, refugees, and other underserved community members meaningfully into the museum experience (often for the first time) while simultaneously building communicative competence and capacity within their own communities. None of these projects were one-time “museum outreach” affairs; in every case, the collaborations spanned weeks, months, or years and involved sustained, cumulative work. The projects strove to embody the kind of cultural engagement and participation that Peterson describes as place-based advocacy, “an act of naming, resistance, and critical affirmation for communities whose cultural values, languages, and art forms find little support or recognition from mainstream systems.”

A sampling of these community projects includes:

- A multiyear collaboration with Creativity for Peace, a Santa Fe–based nonprofit that holds a three-week summer peace camp and year-round leadership program for Palestinian, Jewish Israeli, and local New Mexican young women—During the summer of 2014, the GoC and Creativity for Peace collaborated in offering the girls an indigo-batik workshop. This workshop was led by Yoruba immigrant and master Between Two Worlds artist Gusali Adyemo; it resulted in a series of quilt blocks depicting their individual artistic responses to the themes of home, belonging, and living between two worlds. One quilt block depicted Shabbat candles; another depicted a girl’s memory of the olive tree from her grandmother’s home with whom she no longer lived (photo 4.4). The next summer, 2015, a new group of girls came together with Between Two Worlds immigrant artist Catalina Delgado Trunk to learn the Mexican tradition of papel picado (cut paper). Using this tradition, the girls depicted symbols of home, peace, and reconciliation.

- ESL program partnerships engaged immigrant students around the four exhibition themes—Two local ESL programs—Literacy Volunteers of Santa Fe and Santa Fe Community College—drew on the Between Two Worlds exhibition as the catalyst for conversation, vocabulary building, and cultural resource sharing. Classes brought their immigrant students to the museum (many for the first time) and then led dialogues in the gallery. Afterward, the leaders continued these experiences within their classrooms with a number of hands-on activities related to the four exhibition themes.

- A collaboration with a number of local arts, immigrant, and refugee service centers throughout New Mexico—This collaboration resulted in organized activities
Photo 4.4. Three-way community collaboration between Gallery of Conscience, Creativity for Peace, and immigrant artist Gasali Adeyemo, in conjunction with the Between Two Worlds exhibition project. Young New Mexican woman hangs her indigo-dyed quilt square depicting her symbol of “home” to dry at the end of a workshop led by Nigerian Yoruba adire cloth maker Gasali Adeyemo. Participants included young women from Palestine, Israel, and New Mexico.

Courtesy of Museum of International Folk Art Archives [Exhibitions Collection, Between Two Worlds Series AR.00004.139]. Photo by Laura Marcus Green, 2015.
and programming around the *Between Two Worlds* themes both in their centers and at the museum. After the first year of museum-based activities, the GoC team created a “folk arts and activity guide” for the agencies to use with their clients throughout the year. As one agency director noted, “This visit to the museum and the *Between Two Worlds* exhibition was the highlight of the entire year for my clients who felt so moved and honored to see their own situations—and their own stories—taken so seriously and meaningfully in such a major museum.”

- **A series of radio segments featuring the voices of exhibit artists and area youth around issues of home and belonging**—These interviews were conducted and produced by local area youth and interwoven with their own personal reflections of the exhibition themes. The audio segments were the result of a several-month collaboration between the Gallery of Conscience and two local arts and service organizations for area youth: Youth Media Project, a Santa Fe–based organization teaching the craft of digital storytelling and the art of listening for a socially responsible world, and ¡YouthWorks!, an organization that creates opportunities for disconnected youth and families in northern New Mexico in order to increase feelings of engagement and value as members of their communities.

- **A spoken word poetry residency**—This residency was led by Albuquerque poet laureate Hakim Bellamy and held in collaboration with the same ¡YouthWorks! participants and Youth Media Project staff members from the previously mentioned project.

The ever-changing Gallery of Conscience exhibition served as both seed and soil for these endeavors, prompting dialogue, engagement, and action on the front end and nurturing the growth, maturation, and flowering of exquisite finished community arts pieces throughout the lab period. In the spring of 2015, the Gallery of Conscience featured five of these projects in a special community arts showcase that included live performances of poetry readings, multimedia art pieces, slide presentations of class projects, discussions around the Creativity for Peace quilt project, sample delicacies from immigrant chefs, and a bead-making workshop that was developed by a local artist in response to the recent detention of asylum-seeking women and children in nearby Artesia, New Mexico. Local arts and service organizations with whom we had partnered also promoted their own organizations at information booths during the event.

In July 2015, when the *Between Two Worlds* exhibition had its second major reopening, the fruits of these projects—poetry books, youth-produced radio segments, the Creativity for Peace quilt, artist statements, and artist conversation pieces—were prominently displayed on the gallery walls, at listening stations, and at dialogue tables throughout the exhibition space. And a dozen participating artists and immigrant chefs were on hand to share their stories and reflect on their journeys. These pieces were not auxiliary
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outputs of the main exhibition; they were the main exhibition. Peterson recognizes the power of folk arts to catalyze such engagements as those noted earlier:

Folk and traditional arts can also create space for dialogue that enables full and authentic engagement with others. Examples highlight how folk arts organizations and their programs, through dialogue, foster intergenerational connection and understanding; broker conversation, opportunity, and access to resources; and link history to contemporary issues toward deeper understanding.20

Immigration Conversations

I would like to conclude with a final look at one of the “inclusive” projects we initiated through the Between Two Worlds exhibition. Called the Artist Conversation Project, it seemed to encapsulate both the exhilarations and exasperations of responding nimbly yet meaningfully to contemporary immigrant issues within a museum setting. In the summer of 2014, we held a private workshop for eight participating artists on the day after the first Between Two Worlds official opening. Because several of these artists were coming from halfway around the world, we were all meeting together for the first time. Of these eight, two were master-level folk artists whose pieces we had purchased at the International Folk Art Market/Santa Fe the year before, four were artists whose works came into the gallery as a result of their associations with one of our dialogue programs, and two were master-level artists whose topically related work had either recently come to our attention or into our museum collection. The eight artists embodied in their life stories and in their works a range of personal and political points on the immigration spectrum. This spectrum ranged from those who had migrated themselves (either by choice or by force), those who remained behind, and those whose lands and culture were disrupted when Europeans first migrated to this continent centuries earlier. There were six male and two female artists. They included artists from Mozambique and Cuba, immigrants from Mexico and Nigeria, a refugee from Tibet, an eleventh-generation Hispanic artist from New Mexico, and two Native Americans (from the Navajo and Lakota tribes). Discussions ranged from the very personal to the political and covered such topics as the racial profiling of newly arriving Latinos to the United States and newly arriving Mozambicans in South Africa, redefining identity in the face of migrations, living between two worlds, and questions of who belongs in a country and who gets to decide who belongs.

Toward the end of our workshop, we invited the eight participants to join together in pairs in order to continue their conversations with each other through letters or journals, via Skype calls, or by art exchanges throughout the year. The idea was that these conversations would continue in the spirit of ongoing dialogue and exchange that we were hoping to foster through this project. The fruits of their exchanges, like all of the projects we had initiated throughout this period, would make their ways into the new iteration of the Between Two Worlds exhibition. The artists would be invited back at the time of the second iteration’s opening, after this year of collaboration. Sculptors were paired with sculptors, painters were paired with painters, and fiber artists were paired with fiber
artists. Upon leaving the workshop, the Gallery of Conscience team was excited to have planted this seed for our ongoing incubation period.

Six months later, we discovered that not one of the artists had taken even an initial step toward contacting his or her partner artist. Language, time, and distance were mentioned as obvious barriers. However, the barrier that most surprised us resulted from our decision to pair the artists together in what they ultimately considered a forced or false display of curatorial control. Here are some of their responses:

- "I am still stuck in my own thoughts about these issues and not clear how to talk about them with a partner or share them."
- "I can't figure out how to reconcile working on one collaborative piece with a partner when we have such different experiences, styles, and approaches."
- "It's hard to think about translating my thoughts into another person's medium or be in tune with another artist to create a single piece together."

Their responses indicated their frustrations with a project idea that felt both creatively restrictive and unnecessarily controlled by the GoC's "curatorial" team. This is an example of one of the pitfalls of experimental projects that McLean refers to as "a prototype killer." She has written that "it's difficult, if not impossible, to do authentic prototyping if those in charge want to limit the ideas or control the outcomes." Yet the beauty of the prototyping experience, she goes on to remind us, is that "failure" does not have to be the end of an inquiry. In many cases, "failure" is the generative beginning of something brand new and even more meaningful. It is one's openness to discovery that is essential "and the flexibility to be able to follow strange paths that might open up along the way." The key, she wisely intones, is to keep talking. To McLean, "Conversation is the most essential of human interactions. It nourishes the exchange of ideas and, with reciprocity and mutual respect, creates new knowledge and insights. And conversation, I submit, is arguably the most powerful form of participation in which a museum can engage."

With this now in mind, we brought the team of artists back together (or at least those within a one-hundred-mile radius) to share a meal and to talk, listen, and learn more about what they had each been thinking since we had last met together six months earlier. What we discovered was that, while the artists had not physically been in contact each other, they were very much engaged with each other's stories, with the project, with their own exploration of the exhibition's themes and with what one of the artists noted as "the power of folk art as a medium of expression about important social issues." Here are a few of the reflections we heard from the artists:

- "I've been thinking about who I was, why I'm here and my sense of identity."
- "I was prompted by the exhibit and the conversations to write an artist's statement for myself—something I have not been able to do in over 50 years of working as an artist."

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- "I've been trying to figure out my own identity and my own story as a Native/Navajo living between two worlds here in New Mexico."
- "We've all been thinking about our sense of identity/sense of self. This has also prompted thoughts about the ways in which stereotypes about our culture are placed on us by others. I've been thinking a lot about where I belong in the midst of these stereotypes."

As one of the artists astutely summed up, "Maybe the collaboration is happening already in the ways that our conversation and our interaction with each other last July has stimulated our thoughts. Maybe what has happened is not in terms of a joint piece but in terms of the ways our thoughts have been stimulated." So we picked ourselves up, dusted off our "wounded" curatorial egos, and made our way in a new direction, with the artists themselves as our guides. Within the space of an hour, they hit upon a new course of action that felt right and true for all involved. The artists would each create a new artwork for the gallery based on our ongoing conversations, and they would each include a short statement about the ways in which these conversations, and the exhibition itself, had influenced or affected their processes and their pieces. The artworks would be on loan to the museum from the individual artists for the duration of the exhibition and they would be free to sell the pieces to interested buyers upon its close. We arranged a date, several months from that point, when the GoC would host the artists again to "unveil" their pieces to each other, allowing them to share their stories of how the works came to be and what surprised them and each other about the final results. The artists literally left the dinner arm in arm, chatting excitedly about their nascent ideas for their pieces.

When the eight new works were finally unveiled and installed for the second official opening of the Between Two Worlds exhibitions, two of the pieces specifically addressed the dangers and the heartbreaking of those who attempt to cross "illegally" into a neighboring country in search of a better life. One of the artists, Luis Tapia, was particularly influenced by the national headlines of undocumented women and children from the previous summer and the impact that our ongoing conversations about this issue had had on his artwork. He said:

I have been thinking a lot about the issue of unaccompanied children coming up from South and Central America, which was so much in the news when we met last July and over the last few months. This piece is part of that conversation about what's happening to people in South America who are coming here in search of a better life.

The piece is a painted wood sculpture depicting a thousand-spined desert cactus laden with some of the most intimate personal items discarded by the women, men, and children who have attempted to cross into this country on foot: a baby bottle, a bra and panties (representing all of the women who have been raped and killed on their journeys), a backpack, and a comb (photo 4.5). Next to the cactus is a partially unrolled
scroll with the names of men, women, and children who have "disappeared" along the way, never to be seen again; it is a seemingly endless list of thousands and thousands of names. The piece is called Camino de Sueños/Road of Dreams. The artist explained the significance of the title:

The road of dreams stands for all of the thousands of men, women and children who are dying on their road to their dreams. Like the rest of us, they are looking for happiness and a better life. The cactus has collected their dreams and is the place where their dreams ended.

For Luis, the point of his art is not to suggest answers to our most pressing humanitarian crises but rather to start a conversation:

I present issues to people. I don't have the answers but I do have the questions. I present to the public in hopes that they will open their minds to these issues. The government does not seem to be listening. So we have to go person to person to get the message out. And the way I do that is through my artwork. I don't have the answers; but I think my work is a way to start the conversation.
Indeed, it seems to me that this is the answer to Gretchen Jennings's question, "What role can museums play in this issue?" Museums can be the place to start the conversation, to name the experiences, to remember the disappeared, to affirm our shared humanity, and to give a call for action.

**Notes**

1. Suzanne Serif was the first guest curator and later founding director of the Gallery of Conscience at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe from its inception in 2010 through July 2017.
2. Center for the Future of Museums 2014. [AQ1]
3. Gurian 2006; McLean 2015; Simon 2010; Adair, Filene, and Koloski 2011. [AQ1]
6. Some parts of this chapter are excerpted from Seriff and Bol's 2017 article "Folk Art and Social Change: The Case of the Gallery of Conscience at the Museum of International Folk Art," in *Folklife and Museums: Selected Readings*, second edition. [AQ2]

7. Dr. Marsha C. Bol served as director of MOIFA from 2008 to 2015.

8. This exhibition was guest curated by Suzanne Seriff and featured ten artisan cooperatives from around the world that had won coveted positions in the 2010 International Folk Art Market, Santa Fe.


10. Ibid.


12. Peterson 2011: 10. [AQ3]


16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 159.

18. Ibid.

19. Peterson, "Folk and Traditional Arts and Social Change," 5.

20. Ibid.


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.