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The key activities illustrate the breadth of *Gene(sis)*-related programs:

**“The Permeable Membrane: A Dialogue on Art and Issues”** (March 23, 2002), **resented in cooperation with the Cornish College for the Arts.**

Choreographer/ dancer Liz Lerman and members of the Dance Exchange conducted a Critical Response Process workshop, a movement-based approach that engaged participants in a exploration of the layers of meaning and response to artist Eduardo Kac’s *Gene(sis)*.

**“Paradigms Lost and Found: The Implications of the Human Genome Project”** (April 5-7, 2002), **co-sponsored by the Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities.** This two-day symposium brought together *Gene(sis)* artists, scientists and scholars for presentations and panel discussions that explored the potential social and ethical impact of genetic research. Panels were interspersed with 30-40 minute “dialogue sessions” led by a professional dialogue facilitator. During the lunch break, audience members could take a 15-minute guided tour of the exhibition.

**Washington State Board of Health Genetics Task Force Public Meeting (April 12, 2002).** The day-long public hearing presented testimony from leading scientists, public health experts, and biotechnology representatives on three issues: Future Directions of Academic and Basic Research in Human Genetics; Future Directions of Genomics in Public Health Practice; and Private Ventures in Genomic Diagnostic and Treatment Technologies. The meeting also invited public comment on genetics-related privacy and/or discrimination issues. Meeting participants and task force members toured the *Gene(sis)* exhibition.

**Facilitated Book Group Readings (April 16 and May 9, 2002).** Through its network of more than 150 book groups, WCB explored two titles in association with *Gene(sis)*: *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and *Mendel’s Dwarf* by Simon Mawer.

***Gene(sis)*: A Bridge Between Art and Science in the Classroom (April 16, 2001)** This was an evening for educators to tour the *Gene(sis)* exhibition and discuss the use of the *Gene(sis)* teacher curriculum guide assembled by the Henry.

***Gene(sis)* Town Hall Meeting at Town Hall Seattle (May 4, 2002), co-sponsored by Town Hall Seattle.** The meeting featured presentations on the future of human genetic research by Lee Hartwell, 2001 Nobel Laureate, UW Genetics Professor and president of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research; and Leroy Hood, geneticist and director of Seattle’s Institute for Systems Biology. Presentations were followed by a discussion led by a professional dialogue facilitator.

**“Genetic Screenings” Film Series (April-May 2002), organized by the Pacific Film Archive at the University of California Berkeley.** This six-part series offered a cinematic survey of features, shorts and documentary films that have engaged the human genome either as focus or foil. The series also included the premiere at the

Seattle International Film Festival of *Teknolust* (2002), a cyber-comedy about a female scientist (Tilda Swinton) who clones three selves.

**Author Series: A Conversation on Bioethics and Public Policy (April 12 and May 24, 2002), co-sponsored by UW Forum at the Evans School and the University Book Store.** These events featured discussions with the authors on two new books on genomics: *Redesigning Humans: Choosing Our Children's Genes* by Dr. Gregory Stock, and *Mapping Human History: Discovering the Past Through Our Genes* by Steve Olson.

**DNA Precipitation Display (April-August, 2004), organized by the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center and the Sustainable Science Institute.** This interactive display, offered regularly throughout the exhibition's run in the Henry's Educational Studio, allowed visitors to participate in a demonstration of the precipitation of DNA.

**"Inquiry Through Writing" Classes (January – June 2002).** The Richard Hugo House offered three creative writing classes: "The Art of Science," in which writers examined the similarities of scientific and artistic processes; "Writing the Thing," which encouraged writers to focus on the "thingly" side of human nature, DNA; and "Sequence, Syntax, Language and Perception," in which writers explored the question, "Are we made up of genes or stories?" Spring classes included visits to the *Gene(sis)* exhibition.

**University of Washington Courses (spring quarter 2002), sponsored by the UW Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities.** Two cross-disciplinary, team-taught courses were offered to UW undergraduates and graduate students: "In Vivo: Traversing Scientific and Artistic Observations of Life Science"; and "Science, Technology and the Body."

#### ***Gene(sis) as a Laboratory for Dialogue***

The Henry's participation in *Animating Democracy* constituted the museum's first formal encounter with concepts of dialogue and civic dialogue practice in its work. Embracing the spirit of *Animating Democracy* as a laboratory, the Henry committed itself to learning and experimenting with selected arts-based dialogue concepts and practices. It adapted standard museum education methodologies, extending their capacity to engage people in dialogue within the gallery setting. For the Henry curators, the intent of civic dialogue The Henry also tried out dialogue methodologies that might be considered "unconventional" within the context of a visual arts museum. Henry director Richard Andrews notes that, through its participation in *Animating Democracy*, "the Henry grew and stretched beyond our institutional parameters and beyond our comfort zone. [The *Gene(sis)* project] opened the museum to exploration, play, dialogue and performance in ways that other projects have not made possible." As host to *Animating Democracy's* May 2002 Learning Exchange, the Henry provided fellow Lab participants with an opportunity to experience first-hand a number of dialogue approaches employed by the museum in the *Gene(sis)* project.

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In exploring audience experience and response to the *Gene(sis)* artwork, the Henry brought to bear several interpretive approaches that were used in guided gallery talks for general audiences and educator-led visits for student groups. Building on the strength of the museum’s educational department, the Henry developed and documented in its *Gene(sis)* teacher curriculum guide a participatory viewing experience adapted from the Visual Thinking Strategy (VTS), a method of inquiry developed by the Museum of Modern Art. As the Henry’s education curator Tamara Moats explained at the Seattle Learning Exchange, VTS draws out viewer response through inquiry and explores information about an artwork meaningful to the viewer. Described by the Henry staff as an “interactive looking experience,” VTS initiates dialogue by posing simple questions that encourage viewers to bring their own personal associations, stories and interpretations to the work. This questioning strategy leads viewers in progressive steps to explore the complex and sometimes disturbing ideas embedded in the work. (See sidebar.)

### **VISUAL THINKING STRATEGY ADAPTED FOR DIALOGUE**

A questioning strategy for artist Catherine Chalmers’ *Transgenic Mice* (2002), excerpted from the Henry’s *Gene(sis)* teacher curriculum guide, offers a snapshot of how the Henry’s version of VTP guides the viewer(s) in a dialogue around the artwork, its interpretation and the ethical issues raised by the work. Chalmers documents the production of genetically engineered mice, a burgeoning industry fueled by recent genetic discoveries. Her photographs spotlight the “mouse ranch” industry, calling into question the ethics of animal research. Suggested discussion questions for this piece include:

#### **Art:**

- Describe what you see in these photographs. How many mice? What size? Texture? Shape? Color?
- Note the way in which the artist has framed the mice, and their size within the frame. How does this affect the portrayal of the mice?
- Note the manner in which they have been photographed (glossy paper, professionally lit). How does this style (glossy, blown-up, closely cropped, highly detailed) influence your response to the image?

#### **Interpretation:**

- Are these mouse portraits emotional or scientific? Why or Why not?
- What do you think is the artist’s intent by photographing these mice?
- Does she seem for or against animal experimentation? What clues does the artwork give you to support your opinion?

#### **Ethics:**

- How are these mice normal? Abnormal?
- Is it right to use animals in research to explore human illness and its treatments?
- If they are not used for research, what about the humans who might suffer and die because of lack of treatment?
- Let’s say insects or yeast were used for research. Would you feel differently?
- Is it any more ethical to experiment on one type of living creature than another?
- Where do we draw the line?
- As an artist, Chalmers also benefits indirectly from the research these mice undergo (she presumably makes money from her art, and gets notoriety). What are the issues she as an artist should be concerned about when working with such subject matter?

At the Seattle Learning Exchange, the Henry staff demonstrated its version of VTS for Lab participants. Selma Holo, museum studies scholar and Director of the University of California Fisher Gallery, describes how the Henry tour leaders' questioning strategy gradually led to the ethical and moral dilemmas at the heart of *Gene(sis)*:

This approach allowed visitors to verbalize their concerns generated by the most radical art and its attendant scientific ideas. The VTS method was handled flexibly and generously, in that the tour leaders explained the basic scientific concepts so that an informed conversation could begin. Simultaneously Socratic and teacherly, the Henry version of VTS elicited heartfelt and smart responses, and was able to handle both the nervousness and curiosity generated by the disturbing images on display. Questions about the ethics and morality of both artists and scientists who undertake work with this material began to emerge and a level of inquiry about the important issues raised by the curatorial thesis was encouraged.<sup>vi</sup>

In contrast to Holo's observations, some LE participants expressed concern that the Henry's version of the VTS method merely led participants to intended conclusions rather than creating a setting for a viewer's own discovery about the artwork. They suggested that this questioning strategy assumes there are "right answers" to which a viewer can be guided by asking the right questions.

Another interpretive approach to *Gene(sis)* artwork was offered by "The Permeable Membrane: A Dialogue on Art and Issues." This workshop, conducted by dancer/choreographer Liz Lerman and several of her company's dancers, incorporated elements of the Critical Response Process (CRP), a multi-step format for conducting conversations about art that Lerman originally developed as a way for an artist to engage in dialogue with a group of responders about a work-in-progress. Lerman led workshop participants in a movement-based dialogue exploring meaning and response to Eduardo Kac's *Gene(sis)* installation. Workshop participants experienced elements of CRP combined with techniques that "tap the body's capacity for holding memory and gauging intellectual and emotional reactions." As the Henry notes in its final report to Animating Democracy, this type of movement-based inquiry rarely, if ever, occurs within an art museum setting.

At the Seattle Learning Exchange, Lerman adapted elements of "The Permeable Membrane" to conduct a gallery dialogue around Kac's installation for LE participants. In her description of Lerman's gallery dialogue, Selma Holo suggests that the physicality of the process helped individual participants unlock deeper emotional responses to the work. As Holo describes it, Lerman's choreography of each participant's emotional response—in the physical form of an individual's gesture—transformed the very private experience of viewing the artwork into a public communal one:

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... [B]ased on participants' experience of Kac's installation, Lerman asked "What was meaningful to you?" Individuals spoke, then, recalling movement and gestures from certain participants' responses, Lerman engaged the group in performing those gestures together, eventually creating an entire movement phrase to music. Harvesting gestures from individual experiences simultaneously created a deeply personal and collective

experience in an arts space where collective experience is not the norm. For some, acting out the "angst and tension" that Kac's piece provoked relieved these feelings, making it possible to talk more easily about the issues. For others, the gestures enhanced listening and gave deeper meaning to words.<sup>vii</sup>

For *Gene(sis)*-related activities that took place outside the gallery, the Henry adapted conventional formats and techniques to spur discussion around the themes raised by the *Gene(sis)* artwork. In designing the project's public events, such as the symposium and town hall meeting, the Henry placed special emphasis on creating "space" for public dialogue sessions within the program format. The Henry also secured the services of Heather Andersen, a professional dialogue facilitator to lead these sessions and train museum staff and community partners in dialogue facilitation. For example, the "Paradigms Lost and Found" symposium interspersed panel discussions with 30-40 minute "dialogue sessions" led by professional dialogue facilitator. In structuring the dialogue sessions, a key consideration was how to break out of the standard "Q & A" format and create an environment that encouraged all members to voice their ideas and concerns. In its final report to *Animating Democracy*, the Henry staff explained the thinking behind the symposium's dialogue sessions:

An important aspect of the symposium was to provide opportunities for the audience to dialogue with both the presenters and one another. The structure for these dialogues was carefully thought out in order to avoid the standard question and answer format. Rather, we facilitated the dialogues so that people would feel comfortable addressing one another as well as the presenter. One way this was achieved was to bring the presenter(s) down from the stage and into the audience. This arrangement stressed the idea that everyone's point of view was equal and all were welcome to share. We also engaged a professional dialogue facilitator for the program and also had her train museum staff on dialogue facilitation so that the format these sessions took was clear and that all could come, listen and be heard.

In structuring the off-site *Gene(sis)* dialogue activities, the Henry also made a deliberate effort to link these programs to the artwork whenever possible by referencing the work and/or building gallery tours into the format, such as the 15-minute guided tours during the lunch break at "Paradigms Lost and Found." The symposium utilized the genome theme as the foundation for a broad exploration of topics in which artists and scientists had mutual interest. Panels combined scientists and artists who shared perspectives on the ethics, politics, and social implications of genome research, and the relationship between arts and science. The discussion occasionally referenced the artworks and noted the way that the art both illustrated and challenged genome research and biogenetics. With the exception of artist Eduardo Kac's presentation, specific works were not viewed or specifically discussed in panel sessions. The audience for the event was small, but people fully participated in the discussion.

The Henry also arranged exhibit tours for writers participating in the Hugo House's "Inquiry Through Writing" classes. As part of the Genetics Task Force Public Meeting, members of the task force, representatives from the biotech industry and others testifying at the meeting toured the exhibition as part of the day's agenda—a rare example of injecting contemporary art into a public policy setting.

To articulate dialogue goals during the planning for *Gene(sis)* and later gauge audience experience and response to the *Gene(sis)* exhibition and related public programs, the Henry—in consultation

with Animating Democracy’s evaluation consultant—developed a detailed logic model that outlined the project’s activities, correlating each key activity to desired immediate and long-term outcomes and impacts. The Henry also devised several evaluation tools, such as an exhibition survey/summations questionnaire, and adapted an audience/participant questionnaire developed by Animating Democracy’s evaluation coaches.

## EMERGENT QUESTIONS AND OUTCOMES

Taken as a whole, the *Gene(sis)* project is a remarkable example of an art museum heralding a timely civic issue of profound social and ethical consequences for its community and marshalling its considerable resources to bring that issue to the forefront of public attention. The project had the cumulative effect of heightening awareness and understanding among Seattle area

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residents about the promise and potential hazards that the Human Genome Project holds for our daily lives. By virtue of its three-city tour, the *Gene(sis)* project has also contributed to the national conversation about genomics and genetic exploration. If the meaning of human genome, as geneticist Dr. Eric Lander suggests, will ultimately be determined in the arena of art and culture, then the thought-provoking metaphors and images emanating from the *Gene(sis)* project may well form the basis for our understanding of these scientific findings and shape our social and ethical choices in the years ahead.

### **What Degree of Mediation Between the Artist and Viewer is Appropriate? What Constitutes Civic Dialogue?**

The *Gene(sis)* project stretched the Henry to consider ways to engage audiences in civic dialogue and, in doing so, raised key questions about arts-based dialogue concepts and practices. For the Henry curators, the intent of civic dialogue often appeared to be at odds with their goal of allowing the artwork “speak for itself,” at times creating tension regarding whether the dialogue was driving the art. That tension manifested itself in the Henry’s approach to the interpretation of the *Gene(sis)* artwork, which stressed the museum’s curatorial/educational viewpoint that the work be presented in an unobtrusive, neutral way in order to encourage unmediated dialogue between the artist and viewer. The Henry staff saw this approach as a way of empowering audiences to draw their own conclusions about the provocative issues raised by the artists.

The Henry’s approach stood in stark contrast to other museum-based Lab projects that presented artwork dealing with difficult and controversial subject matter. At the other end of the spectrum was the Jewish Museum’s approach to its presentation of *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, which maximized contextualization of the artwork for audiences. In doing so, Jewish Museum staff posited a different curatorial/educational perspective: that an abundance of contextual materials would promote, rather than inhibit, dialogue among viewers. These divergent approaches raise a central question about arts-based dialogue practice relevant to all Lab participants: What degree of mediation is appropriate to ensure that the art—particularly challenging conceptual art—will effectively stimulate civic dialogue? While Lab participants were divided on this question, the consensus seemed to be that, particularly with regard to artwork that has the potential to be controversial and/or polarizing, too much information rather than too little would better serve the goal of promoting dialogue and mitigating the potential for misunderstanding.

### What Constitutes Civic Dialogue?

Deliberations about the appropriate level of mediation led Seattle participants to ponder the larger question of how art functions as “dialogue” between artist and viewer. Does the “interchange of ideas” between the artist and viewer through an artwork constitute civic dialogue? In this respect, the Henry’s explorations of viewer experience and response to the *Gene(sis)* artwork shed a light on the “dialogue with self” that is inherent in experiencing art and grappling with the ideas the artwork evokes. While dialogue is generally defined as an exchange of ideas and opinions two or more persons, does it necessarily need to be a collective experience? And what is the place of “dialogue with self” in relation to civic dialogue? As the Henry staff put forth through the *Gene(sis)* project, “dialogue with self” may well be part of the continuum toward civic dialogue.

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### Artistic and Dialogic Outcomes

In view of the *Gene(sis)* project’s primary artistic intent—to organize a major touring exhibition that would elucidate and provoke dialogue about new developments in human genome research—it was highly successful on many levels. The exhibition was of high artistic merit and critically well-received. It generated significant local and national media attention, with coverage in major newspapers as well as in leading cultural and scientific journals and magazines. *Gene(sis)* was even the subject of a feature article in the *The New York Times Arts and Leisure* section on May 26, 2002.

*Gene(sis)* was also successful in its intent to serve as an entry point for lay audiences into highly technical materials with potentially profound social implications. Its four themes—SEQUENCE, BOUNDARY, SPECIMAN, and SUBJECT—provided the viewer with a useful framework for understanding and exploring the artwork in relation to the scientific findings to which the artist was responding. While audiences may have found some pieces less accessible than others, and a

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few decidedly disturbing, all the artwork provoked viewers to consider genomic research. As one viewer commented, “Whether this exhibit touches your ‘spooky’ nerve, or your aesthetic sensibility or your logician’s cortex, there is bound to be a piece here that provokes you.”

In terms of dialogic outcomes, the *Gene(sis)* project was particularly effective in its engagement of a large portion of the Seattle community in considering the significance of human genome research as an important topic of public conversation. Judging by attendance at the *Gene(sis)* premiere—1,200 people attended the opening, and the symposium on the opening weekend was sold out—the project captured the interest of local residents and, through the exhibition and public programs, provided a civic “space” for further learning and dialogue about these issues.

In design and implementation, the public programs, like the exhibition itself, offered the community multiple entry points into the topic of human genome research. The variety of programming—facilitated book readings, author talks, film screenings, academic gatherings and creative writing courses, as well as the symposium and public meetings—appealed to diverse audiences, such as academics, students, writers, policy makers and the general public. The Henry’s conscious integration of structured dialogue elements in selected programs provided the

opportunity for dialogue among participants. Through the Genetics Task Force public meeting the Henry also attempted to link art to public deliberations shaping policymaking around genetic research.

Another significant outcome was the number of valuable products developed in conjunction with the *Gene(sis)* project. The Henry's educational staff developed an exemplary 65-page curriculum guide with appendices for use by teachers in the classroom and in conjunction with school visits to the exhibition. This interdisciplinary guide—with 19 slides containing background information on *Gene(sis)* artists and artwork, discussion questions, a glossary and a bibliography—prepares teachers to tackle the subject of art and genomics. The guide was made available to public school teachers in the Puget Sound region and to a consortium of member museums of the American Association of Museums.

In lieu of a printed catalogue, the Henry created an accessible, well-designed CD-ROM exhibition catalogue that enables the user to view the *Gene(sis)* artwork in a three-dimensional, interactive manner. In addition to artists' biographies, critical essays and information resources, the CD-ROM also includes video clips of performances by the Critical Art Ensemble and artists interviews. The *Gene(sis)* website, designed as an online companion to the exhibition and multilayered resource center, is available on the Internet. It is being used regularly as a valuable

record of the exhibition and its themes, as well as a resource for current issues, such as the investigation of CAE artist Steve Kurtz's artistic practices and use of biological materials. As *Gene(sis)* travels from museum to museum, the website has been tailored to each host's configuration and local needs and concerns. A toolbox was created to document the extensive programs and provide background on the artists and artworks, as well as the wall texts. It also served to assist tour site organizers in developing their own arts-based civic dialogue programs.

Given the project's ambitious size and scope, there were inevitably a number of missed opportunities. While the Henry and the *Gene(sis)* working group conceptualized a compelling framework for the public programs component—"Paradigms Lost and Found," "Designer Bodies," "Bioethics and Public Policy," "Public Conceptions and "Misperceptions about Human Genomics" and "The Concept of Aesthetic Elegance in Art and Science"—these five "Public Programs Issues" were not explicitly linked to the actual programming, nor were they explored with the depth and rigor that might have been possible. Another opportunity not fully explored was the dialogue that occurred between the artists and scientists who collaborated on the three works commissioned by the

Henry for the exhibition. In view of the Henry's artistic interest in exploring the intersection of fine art and hard science, documenting the dialogue between artists and scientists may well have illuminated these junctures in new ways and shed light on the dialogic process by which the artwork was created. Finally, while the Henry invested significant resources in the development of a logic model and evaluative tools to measure audience response, no one has analyzed the data. If evaluated in some meaningful way, the data could indicate which dialogue formats were successful, the ways in which audiences interacted with and responded to the exhibit and public programs, and the impact that project activities had on public awareness and understanding of the issues *Gene(sis)* raised.

Overall, the *Gene(sis)* project heightened public awareness about human genome research and, through the scope of its community-wide public programming, offered multiple ways for the



No-Die. Maira Kalman 2000.  
Paper coffee cup  
Photo Credit: Robert Glasgow

Seattle community to engage in these issues. Because of national media attention and the U.S. tour, the exhibition's impact continues to ripple through communities beyond Puget Sound. The *Gene(sis)* project also underscores the role that contemporary art can play in drawing public attention to human genome research as a civic issue in a uniquely compelling way, and in contributing to a richer and broader understanding and discussion of the complex ideas surrounding biogenetics.

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<sup>i</sup> *Seattle Magazine*, April 2002

<sup>ii</sup> Robin Held, *Generating Gene(sis): A Contemporary Art Exhibition for the "Genomic Age,"* p. 5

<sup>iii</sup> *Seattle Magazine*, April 2002

<sup>iv</sup> Robin Held, *Generating Gene(sis): A Contemporary Art Exhibition for the "Genomic Age,"* p. 2

<sup>v</sup> Henry Art Gallery application to *Animating Democracy*, 2000. Unless otherwise noted, quotes are drawn from the Henry reports and supplemental materials to *Animating Democracy*.

<sup>vi</sup> Selma Holo, *Conducting Civic Dialogue: A Challenging Role for Museums*, p. 4

<sup>vii</sup> Selma Holo, *Conducting Civic Dialogue: A Challenging Role for Museums*, p. 4