

TALKING BACK:

The Audience in Dialogue

“Talking Back: The Audience in Dialogue” presents a selection of materials culled from the New Museum’s archives that explores various ways in which artworks and projects have engaged the voice of the Museum’s audiences. Since the birth of the modern museum in the eighteenth century, all kinds of interpretative forms have been utilized to incite connections between viewer and artwork. Public programs, wall texts, object labels, extensive catalogues, audio guides, and other interactive tools often focus on guiding audiences through their engagement with particular artworks or entire artistic careers. Examining valences of “voice” within the Museum, this exhibition explores ventures that foreground the value of the viewer’s interpretation. The artworks and projects presented here ask: How has the Museum adapted in response to the voice of its audience, fulfilling more overtly its function as a public institution? How has the voice of the audience been imagined or solicited by artists and Museum staff? And how do the different—even conflicting—voices in and around institutions come together in discussion and debate to consider the concerns, desires, and values of democratic life? In some cases, such inquiries generate the very ground for artworks themselves, whereby the audience is not simply an interlocutor for the work, but a coproducer of it.

Works represented here include Laurie Parsons’s “Security and Admissions Project” (1992–93), in which all explanatory labels and text were removed from “The Spatial Drive,” an exhibition curated by Laura Trippi in 1992. Instead, information regarding the artworks on display was provided by the Museum’s security guards and other staff in discussion with the audience. Other projects include a “Resource Room” organized by artist, theorist, and educator Julie Ault and Susan Cahan, then Education Curator, in conjunction with the larger exhibition “Rhetorical Image” (1990–91), and “To live and die in a museum” (1991), which asked viewers to directly respond to the themes of death and dying explored in the exhibition “The Interrupted Life.”

Notably, these different projects were all conceived in collaboration with the Museum’s Department of Education, and each was constructed as a framing distinct from the exhibitions alongside which they were developed. By envisioning the art museum as a site of public assembly, discussion, and critical discourse—and its audiences as active participants in culture at large—these projects promoted dialogues with visitors, as well as among the Museum’s staff at every level, conferring a sense of meaning-making through voice and highlighting the open-ended nature of interpretation.

This archival presentation comes out of research that takes up questions around various registers of voice, providing an institution-specific context related to Jeanine Oleson’s exhibition “Hear, Here.” As Oleson reminds us through her work, “Culture is nothing without an audience that creates and archives with their attention and care.”

“Talking Back: The Audience in Dialogue” is organized by Johanna Burton, Keith Haring Director and Curator of Education and Public Engagement, and Tara Hart, Digital Archivist.

This presentation is made possible, in part, by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature, and from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.

Education and public programs are made possible by a generous grant from Goldman Sachs Gives at the recommendation of David B. Heller & Hermine Riegerl Heller.