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Exhibition Review

"In Our Own Words: Portraits of Brooklyn's Vietnam Veterans." Brooklyn Historical Society. Brooklyn, N.Y. http://brooklynhistory.org. Temporary exhibition, Dec. 14, 2007–Dec. 14, 2010. 700 sq. ft. Sady Sullivan, oral history program coordinator; Kate Fermoile, vice president for exhibits and education; Andrea Del Valle, director of education; Amy DeSalvo, education coordinator; Alison Cornyn, founder and director of Picture Projects; Philip F. Napoli, co-curator.

The Brooklyn Historical Society is nestled in Cosby Show brownstone Brooklyn, in a landmarked red-brick, 1881 Queen Anne–style building that has recently undergone a prize-winning renovation. Its halls are filled with gilt-framed portraits of the great men of Brooklyn, and it was in part these portraits that inspired the exhibit designer and producer Alison Cornyn's innovative and strikingly successful vision for the presentation of oral history in museums.

"In Our Own Words: Portraits of Brooklyn's Vietnam Veterans" began in the third-floor hallway encircling the museum's grand central stairway and continued into a wood-paneled room. The exhibition revolved around the stories of sixteen Vietnam War veterans from Brooklyn. Visitors might read the short panel of introductory text, or they might immediately be drawn beyond it to one of the formally posed full-length photographic portraits of nine of the sixteen veterans. Each portrait was printed on canvas, framed in gold, and identified by an engraved brass panel. In front of each portrait was a round pad on the floor where the viewer could step onto two outlined footprints. With less than a second's delay, the pressure on the pad activated a speaker above and began a three- to five-minute audio excerpt of the subject's oral history. Visitors heard the voice while looking directly into the eyes of the narrator, an encounter that could be disquietingly intimate. The hypersonic speaker created a tightly focused column of sound that was audible only to the listener standing on the pad; to visitors moving through the exhibit, the recordings sounded like quiet, cocktail party murmuring.

Some of the selections from the interviews, conducted by Philip F. Napoli, an assistant professor of twentieth-century U.S. social and public history at Brooklyn College, plunged right into a story: "For me the day that John left was one of the most indelible days in my memory." Most began with an introduction situating the narrator in time, space, and culture: "My name is Edward Blanco; I live in Queens, New York, with my wife, Nancy. I was born in 1948 in Manhattan; that was two years after my mother arrived here from Puerto Rico." The core of each recording tended to be a vivid narrative—about, for example, witnessing a death, coming of age, or coming home—with a beginning, middle, and end. The interviewees interpreted, analyzed, and looked back on their experiences, speaking to their stories' meaning in the present.

The narrators were diverse in race, class, gender, politics, and experience. The veterans had helped shape the exhibition, since they were invited to the museum several times during the year the exhibit was developed to give their input into the evolving portrayals of their stories.

Accompanying each story was a display containing personal artifacts—five to ten photographs, medals, military paraphernalia, or letters—housed in a wooden, glass-topped box bolted to the wall next to the portrait. To reach the box and the removable binder on a shelf below it, the visitor had to stretch uncomfortably outside the column of sound or step off the pad, stopping the recording completely. It was clear that the

creators of this exhibit intended the visitor to listen to the narrators' voices without the buffer of a written text and to focus on audio before artifacts, inverting the more usual use of oral histories as supporting documents for objects displayed in museums.

Students visiting the exhibition "In Our Own Words" stand in front of full-length photographic portraits of Vietnam War veterans from Brooklyn, New York. The exhibition provided first-person accounts of the impact of the war on Brooklyn residents, using audio recordings of oral histories. Photo by Andrea Del Valle. Courtesy Andrea Del Valle.

The lack of a disembodied, authoritative introduction to the audio or any framing text alongside the portraits and the random placement of the stations combined to create a remarkably reticent curatorial voice. Visitor autonomy was prioritized throughout the exhibit, which, aside from the introductory panel at the head of the stairs, had no clear beginning, middle, or end. At a kiosk, two visitors at a time could sit with headphones and listen to excerpts of sixteen oral histories from Professor Napoli's full collection of over two hundred. The selection, totaling over four hours of audio, was accessed through an intuitive system where one could sort by individual names or by story categories, such as "growing up" or "in country."

The introductory panel quoted one veteran saying that "if you put ten veterans in a room, you get the story of twenty Vietnams." That is undoubtedly true, yet the Brooklyn Historical Society succeeded in bringing these disparate voices together without cacophony. The aesthetic unity and quiet elegance of the installation placed the narrators in conversation without allowing them to talk over each other. Kate Fermoile, the vice president for exhibits and education at the Brooklyn Historical Society, came to the society from the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and evidently brought with her the ability to integrate an exhibit into a space that is itself historical and alive, creating a juxtaposition that was synergistic and never jarring.

Despite the emphasis on unmediated voices, the creators of the exhibit took some steps to contextualize the stories. In the room where most of the portraits were located, there was one anonymous, silhouetted figure filled with statistics that placed these individuals' experiences in the broader frame of Vietnam veterans' history: 87 percent of soldiers were white, 2 percent were killed, and so on. The binder accompanying each portrait contained a brief biography of the narrator, a transcript of the interview excerpt featured in the exhibit,

and a glossary of honors and medals. Here a more intrusive curatorial role might have been helpful, as visitors without prior in-depth knowledge of the Vietnam War could have gained valuable context through, for example, explanatory footnotes in these transcripts.

A photography exhibit in a separate room on the second floor featured the work of three of the veterans interviewed for the exhibit, including images of the war and of the antiwar and veterans' rights movements. In that same space, visitors could browse a selection of books on the war, which were selected by the historians who served as advisers for the exhibit and ranged from The Vietnam War for Dummies by Ronald B. Frankum Jr. and Stephen F. Maxner (2002) to The Vietnam Wars by Marilyn B. Young (1991). Visitors could also leave comments on a computer or in a comment book. These comments—overwhelmingly positive—indicate that the creators of the exhibit succeeded in designing a nuanced presentation that allowed for multiple, contradictory interpretations. Visitors gave the exhibit rave reviews for its powerful antiwar message on one page and for its celebration of American military interventions overseas on the next.

Although the exhibit focused intently on recorded voices and used sophisticated equipment, the sound quality was disappointingly uneven. The voices tended to sound recorded, with audible hiss and occasional distortion, rather than immediately present. The interviews were initially conducted without funding and before the recent explosion in affordable high-quality recording equipment. Napoli originally intended them for his forthcoming book, New York's Vietnam, and for the archive, not specifically for such a high-tech exhibit. The sound issues here reinforce the point that radio producers and technologically savvy oral historians have been making to oral history programs for decades: Oral histories should always be recorded at broadcast quality to allow for the widest possible range of future uses. That said, the issues with sound quality were at most a minor distraction, and all of the recordings were clearly audible.

Overall, this groundbreaking exhibit set an example for public history by retaining historical rigor but sharing interpretive authority with the community and with the people who lived the history. When Deborah Schwartz became president of the Brooklyn Historical Society in 2005, she told the New York Times that she "hoped to use oral history projects, documentary techniques and technology to expand the society's range and forge connections with a broad swath of Brooklyn" (Michael Brick, "Metro Briefing: New York: Brooklyn: New Historical Society President," Nov. 16, 2005). This exhibit, produced partially through the efforts of a new full-time oral history program coordinator, brought that vision to life. With "In Our Own Words," the Brooklyn Historical Society announced itself as an institution that takes oral history seriously and that can engage thoughtfully with a unique and demanding primary source, successfully making connections between the museum and its borough and between past and present.

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