

# **FIELD NOTES FROM CREATIVE EXCHANGE**

*Stories of artists with impact from  
communities across America*



[www.springboardexchange.org](http://www.springboardexchange.org)

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# INTRODUCTION

Creative Exchange was launched in March of 2014 in response to the question, “How do we support a movement around the power of local art and artists on a national scale?” This question came out of our work at Springboard for the Arts, where we are celebrating 25 years of working with artists and cross-sector partners to cultivate vibrant communities from our offices in Saint Paul and Fergus Falls, Minnesota. In those years, our staff of artists has created programs and collaborated on issues of professional development, health and legal resources, community programs that connect artists to patrons, and creative placemaking initiatives.

As we spoke about our work across the country, we would meet artists and organizers who were doing amazing work in their own communities. We met artists and organizations creating transformational projects, reimagining what their communities could look like and be, and collaborating inventively across diverse sectors. We also saw a desire for more points of inspiration, connection and partnership. Just like the Community Supported Agriculture and Buy Local movements have captured imaginations and built momentum over the past decades, a movement supporting the power of local artists could be similarly catalytic and powerful, and was already underway.

Creative Exchange supports this movement in three ways. First, we use the platform to find and share stories about artists with impact across the country, to share the narrative that artists – of all kinds, with disparate practices – can have a profound impact in our communities. Artists are storytellers, dreamers, problem-solvers with new perspectives, often working in unrecognized or marginalized ways, and by sharing their stories broadly, we develop a new narrative about the value of artists and the skills, power and creativity they bring to the table. We’ve published over 220 artist profiles and special features, and by sharing these stories broadly, we open up new avenues for connection, validation and inspiration.

The second way that Creative Exchange supports a movement of local arts is by sharing practical toolkits around artist-centered, community-engaged projects. These toolkits are for programs that range from pop-up museums, to creative uses for vacant spaces, to professional development and health resources for artists, but they all come out of proven, existing projects. The toolkits can be used for a direct replication of a project, or as an entry point into a conversation around the work of artists and how fruitful partnerships

can be structured. As the toolkits come out of projects that have already been put to the test on the ground, they say, “Look, this can be done, and here’s how.” Over the past 2 years, we have shared the 15 toolkits currently hosted on Creative Exchange over 1,000 times, seen replications across the country, and expanded the conversation around how artists can be integrated into community planning, urban design, and responses to civic disruption.

Finally, Creative Exchange acts as a hub for conversation. From the commentary that happens on the stories and via social media, to a platform for presentations and formal gatherings, to informal network-building and putting people in touch, all of our efforts have been designed to spark and continue conversation. People talking together, sharing what they know, how they have built their programs and projects, offering support and insight, all these things underscore that across broad geographies, disciplines and backgrounds, we are not alone in this work.

That is where this book comes in, at the intersection of conversation, inspiration and practical knowledge. This collection highlights a representative sample of stories published on Creative Exchange, and offers a snapshot of the diversity of ways that artists are already shaping our world. The book is organized by themes that have emerged in the stories we’ve shared – artists as catalysts for stronger communities, bringing people together to create new social bonds, reimagining what’s possible with our social and economic constructs, new contexts for classical forms, social change movements impacted by artists, nurturing new artists through innovative programming, creative business models shaping the new economy, and organizations opening up through integrating art and artists into their work.

We have an opportunity now, with the breadth of technological resources available, a changing economy, and a need for creative, visionary thinking, to share the value of artists and offer new models of partnership, collaboration and support. This is a collection of field notes for artists, planners, designers, creative placemakers, students, business people and elected officials to find inspiration, and to build the movement and power of local art.

*Laura Zabel*  
*Executive Director*  
*Springboard for the Arts*  
*March 2016*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

So many people are due thanks for the creation and launch of Creative Exchange. First and foremost, Creative Exchange would not exist without the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and their visionary support as part of the Knight Arts Challenge. Leaders at the Knight Foundation past and present deserve accolades – Dennis Scholl, Victoria Rodgers, Tatiana Hernandez, Nicole Chipi, Polly Talen, George Abbott, Marika Lynch and Michael Bolden all have shaped and supported Creative Exchange.

Creative Exchange also would not exist as the accessible web platform that it is without the team at Issue Media Group – Brian Boyle, Claire Nelson, Denise McGeen, Amy Elliott Bragg and Alissa Shelton. Also on the IMG team is our editor Nicole Rupersburg, whose clear, evocative writing is featured throughout this collection and whose research has continued to turn up more stories and points of inspiration. Rounding out the Creative Exchange team is Colleen Powers, whose contribution of articles and work for Creative Exchange on social media has made the platform richer.

Creative Exchange could not have grown further without support from key organizations. Judilee Reed and the Surdna Foundation are to thank for their support of the platform and of thriving communities across the United States. Helen Johnson and the Kresge Foundation have been invaluable in their support of Creative Exchange's coverage of urban creative placemaking projects. Gary Steuer and Gina Ferrari at the Bonfils Stanton Foundation supported a series of stories on the impact of artists in Denver, and the first Creative Exchange IdeaLab gathering in November 2015. Rebecca Saltman and Eric Peterson at Confluence Denver were also key to IdeaLab's success. Thanks to Patrick Kowalczyk, Mark McArthur, Scott Piro and Emily Florin at PKPR for connecting Creative Exchange to a broader audience.

Thanks also to all our partners who have contributed or shared content over the past two years. Jason Schupbach and Victoria Huttner at the National Endowment for the Arts graciously shared the Our Town case studies before they launched their own site, Damian Woetzel at the Aspen Institute Arts Program supported a series on the impact of artists in Detroit. Amelia Brown of Emergency Arts authored a series on the role of artists in resiliency and recovery. Roberto Bedoya and Laura Reese allowed us to re-publish stories on creative placemaking from the Tucson Pima Art Council's PLACE initiative. Jon Spayde authored a series on Artist Organizers. Erik Takeshita, Jun-Li

Wang, Michele Anderson, James Brown and Carlton Turner all contributed their thought leadership to featured stories.

Coupled with the stories that elevate the narrative of the power of artists, toolkits for artist-led, community-engaged projects are at the heart of Creative Exchange. A million thanks to our toolkit partners, including Nina Simon, Nora Grant and Sandino Gomez at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Neeraj Mehta and Jeff Corn at the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota, Hunter Franks, creator of the Neighborhood Postcard Project, Kevin van Lierop of Block Party in a Box, Ilana Lipsett of [freespace], Michael Orlove and Artplace for the Open Air Social Dance Series toolkit, Eleanore Wesslerle of Line Break Media and Matt Wells of Rogue Citizen for the People's Creative Toolkit, and Vu Le and Jake Hellenberg of World Dance Party in Seattle.

Our partners in the Leading Organizations pilot are people advancing the cause of the power of artists across the country, and we are so excited to be working with them to share stories and develop new toolkits. Thanks to Jonathan Harwell-Dye and Stephanie Fritz at the Macon Arts Alliance, Jen Cole, Rebecca Berrios and Caroline Vincent of MetroArts in Nashville, Christiane Leach and Tiffany Wilhelm at the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council, and Anjee Helstrup-Alvarez, Joey Reyes and Sharon Benitez at the Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana (MACLA) in San Jose.

The incredible staff of artists at Springboard for the Arts has been invaluable in their work creating new programs, toolkits, and content to share. Their dedication to artists and the possibility of catalytic, transformative change through the arts makes this work possible. The toolkits for Community Supported Art, Irrigate artist-led creative placemaking, Artists' Health Fair, Health Vouchers and Work of Art: Business Skills for Artists would not exist without the time and extraordinary talents of Andy Sturdevant, Jun-Li Wang, Peter Haakon Thompson, Nikki Hunt, Kathryn Murray, Noah Keesecker, Anna Metcalfe, Zaraawar Mistry, Molly Chase, Michele Anderson, Naomi Schliesman, Rebecca Davis and our Executive Director Laura Zabel.

Finally, to all the artists, you make the movement. Thank you.

*Carl Atiya Swanson  
Director of Movement Building  
Springboard for the Arts  
March 2016*

# **ARTISTS AS CATALYSTS**

*Sparking stronger communities  
through creative partnerships*

# Valuing Artists, In All Senses of the Word

Laura Zabel & Carl Atiya Swanson

Tuesday, March 10, 2015

You may have read that the rise of the creative entrepreneur is leading to the death of the artist. That's not our experience. We've had the pleasure of meeting and working with people in communities all across the United States, and there are artists everywhere. There are artists who call themselves artists, artists who haven't yet claimed that word, artists creating work in studios, artists who are making their blocks feel like home and artists who are taking on the most critical issues of our time. Artists are everywhere, in every community, on every street and their work is more relevant than ever.

We have been sharing these artists' stories from across the country on the Creative Exchange platform, a partnership with Issue Media Group and the Knight Foundation. We've been able to share the stories of people like Cincinnati theatermaker Joi Sears, whose Theater for Free People uses "...theatre to put the audience in the position to experience and invoke change in themselves and in the world." We shared the story of Nikiko



*Community Supported Art pick-up party. Photo credit: Sean Smuda*

Masumoto, a farmer and artist in California's Central Valley who says, "I believe in the magic of storytelling, not only for teller but also the listener. The possibility of public exchange is so rich for inspiring changes in behaviors and public policy shifts." These are stories of artists working at intersections, supporting, engaging and making change in communities across the country.

These stories share the work of artists, how they bring people together, adapt to their circumstances, "reflect the times," as Nina Simone put it. Through their projects, they build community and help people see possibility, which is a fundamental power of artists. That power of artists is a huge untapped resource, especially at a time when we have so many challenges facing our communities and we need new ways to connect and bridge our differences. Which is why we also share toolkits via Creative Exchange, so that if you want to spark some change and start something new, there is guidance and structure for you to work with and adapt. We want you to know you aren't alone.

The fundamental principle at the heart of these stories and toolkits is that artists are valuable, contributing members of their communities. The value of artists can mean things like surprise, delight, emotional attachment, social cohesion, shared experience and connection to our common humanity. Artists are valuable because they create special, deep relationships with audiences, stakeholders, and communities that can transcend short-term transactions. It also can, and should, mean financial and economic value. If communities are going to realize the full potential of artists' power to contribute to positive change, then they need to sustain and support their artists.

Here are five ways to think about that value if you are an individual or organization who wants to work with artists:

*-Get Past "Exposure"* Instead of empty offers of "exposure," or expecting artists to work for free because they are passionate about their work, pay an artist to share their passion, build audience and sustain relationships.

*-Consider Quality* By considering artists as a part of the budget for your project, you'll be able to more clearly communicate expectations, likely get a better quality project, a deeper working relationship and a better understanding of how the creative process can support your goals or mission.



*-Don't Be Afraid To Ask* If you don't know how much to pay an artist for a project, just ask. Don't be afraid to ask an artist to tell you their rate – they won't expect you to know or guess at how much they usually charge. If you're an artist, consider your time and overhead costs, as well as supplies and materials when setting your rate.

*-Budget Transparently* When you're working with a limited budget, let artists know up front, because transparency builds trust. Artists are inventive, ingenious and resourceful – ask them to propose what they can provide within your budget.

*-Think Outside the Frame* To build in that budgeting capacity to pay artists, think differently about what artists can do. You probably don't (yet) have a special line item for artists, so find other places in your budget where an artist might be able to help – we've seen community organizations repurpose consulting, marketing, and evaluation budgets to work with artists and achieve better results than more traditional ways of thinking about those tasks.

Artists know the power of their own communities and can bring out its authentic voices in unique and effective ways. Sam White, who runs Shakespeare in Detroit, has this to say, "Art can't be an 'or,' it has to be an 'and,' and we need to keep art talent here. People aren't going to stay if they don't have those experiences. If we really want to have a healthy, thriving city, we need to have our artists..." Artists can only stay and create experiences if there are communities and organizations who recognize that value, and support it financially.

This is not to say that artists are a silver bullet or a quick fix to a community issue. Investment in the creativity of communities is an ongoing process, and it's one part of a whole set of things that contribute to the health of a community. But in good times and lean, art brings people together, sustains and connects them, and needs to be a part of the consideration. And since art comes from artists, we need to value our artists, in all senses of the word.

**More resources:**

[www.springboardforthearts.org](http://www.springboardforthearts.org)

# **Transforming the Kirkbride: Fergus Falls faces mental health issues & historic preservation with art**

Colleen Powers

Monday, September 07, 2015

In Fergus Falls, Minnesota, one structure dominates the landscape more than any other. Spanning the length of eight football fields, the 700,000-square foot building with its red-tiled, turreted towers is sometimes referred to locally as “the castle.” The Fergus Falls State Hospital, better known as the Kirkbride building because its construction followed Thomas Kirkbride’s model for the design of mental asylums in the late 1800s, was once the region’s largest employer, and remains a distinctive landmark despite closing as a mental health institution in 2005. But its future is uncertain.

It’s becoming more promising, though, thanks to the work of local organizations determined to make the former hospital a center of community activity. The annual Kirkbride Arts and History Weekend, which will celebrate its third year September 17-20, has encouraged new conversations about the building and new engagement with its campus. More and more Fergus Falls residents are aware of the Kirkbride’s history and invested in what it might become.

The push to recognize the building’s potential started 11 years ago, when the Friends of the Kirkbride formed after a city council meeting. City officials were discussing “selective demolition” of the building – leaving the main towers standing, but tearing down the rest.

“In my opinion, that was not acceptable,” says Laurie Mullen, chair of the Friends. Mullen was one of the founders who started talking after that city council meeting and decided to form a grassroots group to advocate for preservation.

“[The Kirkbride] was once a significant economic engine in Fergus Falls, and we have always believed it could be again,” Mullen says.

Part of the fight for preservation was educating people about the building itself. “There were Fergus residents who had never been up to the campus,” Mullen says. “The community tour we offered was an opportunity to see what

a wonderful jewel Fergus has.”

The Friends gained a new ally when Springboard for the Arts, based in St. Paul, opened an office in Fergus Falls in 2011. Springboard for the Arts – Lake Region, formed through a partnership with the Lake Region Arts Council, planned to bring Springboard’s artist resources to West Central Minnesota and to mobilize artists as rural community leaders.

The Friends of the Kirkbride reached out to Springboard shortly after the Fergus Falls office opened. They hoped that Springboard could help generate awareness of the Kirkbride through arts-based programming.

“There was a big need for the community to have more dynamic conversations about the future of the building, how it could be preserved; and the past of the building, having this complex history of mental health treatment for so long,” says Michele Anderson, Rural Program Director at Springboard – Lake Region.

The Kirkbride Arts and History Weekend was born of the desire to tell the stories of the building’s history, foster conversations about its future, and show off its potential as a community gathering space. The first weekend was celebrated in 2013.

“Festivals, art and history weekends, and celebrations work because they are clearly demarcated from everyday life. They highlight your time with joy, lifting spirits above the normal routine, adding color, drawing people loosely together, and perhaps most important, giving them something to talk about,” Mullen says.

In its second year, the Arts and History Weekend featured a lively education about the hospital’s past in “The Kirkbride Cycle,” a performance by PlaceBase Productions. PlaceBase creates site-specific theater in collaboration with communities around Minnesota. In Fergus Falls, they hosted story-sharing events to learn about the history of the Kirkbride and how residents perceived it, and then created a script based on those community conversations. In the “Kirkbride Cycle” performance during Arts and History Weekend, local actors staged scenes around the outside of the Kirkbride and lip-synced to pre-recorded dialogue; attendees watched the play by walking around the building’s perimeter.

After seeing “The Kirkbride Cycle,” some attendees said they wanted to

know more – not only about the building’s history, but also about the people who lived there as patients.

One person who heard the call for more was Lowell Carpenter, who played Thomas Kirkbride in “The Kirkbride Cycle” – the physician whose philosophies about mental health shaped the hospital’s design. Carpenter decided to write and produce a play further exploring the hospital’s history and its patients. He received funding from the Lake Region Arts Council, and the result is “Walking the Tightrope,” which will be performed at A Center for the Arts during this year’s Arts and History Weekend.

Carpenter had taught and directed theater at Fergus Falls’ high school since 1982, retiring shortly before participating in PlaceBase’s project. He had also previously created history-based plays with the Otter Tail County Historical Museum. For this new play, he and his collaborators dug into historical records, finding stories from sources like “The Weekly Pulse,” a newspaper written by the hospital staff.

Much of the play looks at conditions for patients over time. One section, “A Nation Shamed,” portrays a 1946 Life magazine exposé of the abysmal state of America’s mental hospitals. As institutions around the country worked to correct the problems Life had found, the Fergus Falls State Hospital was one that managed to improve successfully. Fergus Falls’ “Total Push” program, mentioned in a later follow-up to the Life article, was able to rehabilitate several individuals who had been thought of as hopeless.

The play includes lighthearted as well as serious moments, Carpenter says. One story found in historical records told of the beauty parlor at Fergus Falls, the first one in any state hospital in Minnesota. Another writer took on creating a beauty parlor scene, based on news clippings of the time, that could bring some levity into the play.

“We have five or six lines that we know were said by people involved in the beauty parlor’s creation. We built a scene around those lines for authenticity,” Carpenter says. One of those quotes came from a patient at the time: She said, “Whoever came up with this idea ought to be sent to heaven.”

One of the most compelling sources was a diary kept by a teenage boy who lived at the facility in 1962, which he then donated to the county historical museum in 2010. His writing about his experiences at the hospital and with mental illness became a major focal point, Carpenter says – and gave the

play its name. “Walking the Tightrope” comes from the young man’s feeling that he was “walking a tightrope over the Grand Canyon of depression.”

Despite the diary’s dark truths, Carpenter sees the story as having a happy ending – in fact, the diarist himself will be part of the talkback session after one of the play’s performances.

That former patient isn’t the only celebrated visitor to this year’s Arts and History Weekend. Fergus Falls will also welcome Robert Kirkbride, a descendant of Thomas Kirkbride and an architectural design scholar with the Parsons School of Constructed Environments. He has become involved in trying to preserve Kirkbride buildings around the country. On Friday evening of the Arts and History Weekend, he will give a lecture as part of an idea exchange about the future of the Kirkbride building.

This year’s Arts and History Weekend will also showcase the work of the Hinge Artists in Residence. The Hinge Arts program started in 2014 with its first call for artists, and the initial residencies began in early 2015. Artists in residence can stay on the grounds of the hospital, in newly converted apartments that were formerly a nurses’ dormitory, for 2 to 12 weeks.

Artists from Hinge will present installations and displays on the Kirkbride campus during the weekend, and Hinge artist Timothy C. Takach will lead a community sing on Friday night of the festival. The weekend will also include a Hinge presentation away from the Kirkbride campus: “Healings, Integrations, Illuminations: The Aesthetics of Process,” presented by Haley Honeman and Karla Hernando Flores in the storefront of 202 West Lincoln Avenue.

While other pieces of the Arts and History Weekend have focused on the Kirkbride building itself, “Healings, Integrations, Illuminations” speaks to living with mental illness. “We’re investigating what it means to heal and what it means to transform and integrate change into your life,” Honeman says.

Honeman and Hernando Flores worked with local organizations to host workshops, encouraging people to create art around transformation. Their project has been on view in a pop-up gallery in the storefront, but the Arts and History Weekend will feature an immersive theater experience there: Participants will be able to enter the gallery between 12 and 2 p.m. on Saturday of the weekend and experience the performance piece.

The art, Honeman says, “centers around questions you have when your heart and mind are hurting.” The show includes origami cranes, alluding to the Japanese legend that folding one thousand paper cranes will lead to a wish being granted. Visitors to the gallery can fold their own paper cranes and add them to the collection. Workshop participants also created stop-motion videos using magazine cutouts and recording their stories, and made collages using the same cutout images. On Chinese lanterns and glass bottles, participants wrote wisdom they wanted to share with others; those lanterns and bottles now hang in the gallery space.

“It’s a population that I relate to and I’m interested in working with,” Honeman says of people who have been diagnosed with mental illness. She wanted to “create space in the community honoring that group of people, and to create community dialogue about wellness.”

“It’s a very charged subject – it’s almost something you’re not supposed to talk about,” Honeman says. “There’s a lot of structural change that needs to happen.”

Honeman grew up in Fergus Falls, and decided to live at home for her Hinge residency. A theater artist who is interested in creating performance in classrooms and community spaces, Honeman is pursuing her master’s in Theatre for Youth from Arizona State University – and her project in Fergus Falls will serve as her graduate thesis.

Talking about mental illness and striving for better treatment should be part of the future of the Kirkbride building, Honeman says. “What’s been so nice about it being in transition is that the community has been able to gather there,” she says. “I hope that whatever happens there, that it ties to maintaining something for people living with diagnosis today.”

That’s a vision shared by the Arts and History Weekend’s organizers. “Since Fergus Falls was one of few places in the state of Minnesota that was home to a mental illness hospital, I believe it gives us the responsibility to talk about mental health, the stigma behind mental illness, and how people with disabilities of all types are treated,” says Michele Anderson of Springboard for the Arts – Lake Region.

The Arts and History Weekend will also make time for reflection on the darkest parts of the hospital’s history. The State Hospital Cemetery contains hundreds of unmarked graves. The final day of the Arts and History Weekend

will feature a ceremony of remembrance, including family members speaking about those who died at the State Hospital.

As for the future of the Kirkbride building and its grounds, that remains undecided. The city of Fergus Falls recently cut ties with a developer with whom they had been working. However, both Springboard and the Friends of the Kirkbride are optimistic – the city’s leaders have committed to preservation, and are using current development funds for smaller-scale updates to the building. And events like the Arts and History Weekend have been successful in showing the artistic and community potential of a space like the Kirkbride.

“I think the community as a whole has really embraced art as a way to get out and interact with each other,” Anderson says. “It’s a really exciting time to be here, and I think it will influence the future of the building. People are really proud of where they live, and four years ago, they didn’t necessarily see how great this community is.”

**More resources:**

<http://www.imaginefergusfalls.com>

<http://placebaseproductions.com/>

# **"Look, these people are making art here": How Community Supported Art thrives in Lincoln, Nebraska**

Colleen Powers

Thursday, August 20, 2015

Since the 1980s, Community Supported Agriculture programs have allowed participants to buy shares and receive deliveries of fresh produce from local farms. Now, a similar model is spreading across the country, supporting another group of community makers: artists.

Community Supported Art originated in St. Paul, Minnesota in 2010, launched by MNArtists.org and Springboard for the Arts. Just as agricultural CSA programs connect people with area farmers and food grown near their homes, Community Supported Art allows people to support artists where they live. The idea is that giving artists paid work and fostering relationships between artists and patrons can fuel a stronger arts community.

Springboard for the Arts quickly recognized the value of the model beyond St. Paul, and created a toolkit to help other Community Supported Art programs get started. The concept and the toolkit's resources are flexible enough to be adopted by any urban or rural community. More than 50 programs have been launched since 2011 in the U.S. and Canada, and 24 programs have had a season in 2015 or have one planned for 2016.

One of those programs is in Lincoln, Nebraska, which launched its CSA in 2013; its third season of art will be released to shareholders on September 27. The Lincoln Arts Council discovered the CSA toolkit while searching for a project they could collaborate on with a local bank, Union Bank and Trust.

The bank offered to exclusively sponsor a new arts project, says Lori McAlister, the arts council's Development Director. When the council chose Community Supported Art, the bank made a three-year commitment to sponsoring the program.

"We're a very agriculturally based state and community anyway, so the idea of doing something based on Community Supported Agriculture was exciting to us," McAlister says.



Union Bank's sponsorship allowed Lincoln to slightly tweak the model: Though Community Supported Art is designed to be financially self-sufficient program, the bank's support lets the Lincoln Arts Council pay a higher commission to artists. Of the toolkit, McAlister says, "I appreciate that they give you a lot of leeway to tailor-make it to your situation and to your community."

With that leeway comes one-on-one guidance as organizations navigate the process. Though the kit is free, it's not just a download link: As with all toolkits offered on Creative Exchange, requesting a kit means corresponding directly with Springboard for the Arts. For CSA, that includes an email from Andy Sturdevant, Springboard's Artist Resources Director.

"It's important that the kit is emailed with a personal message, as opposed to just downloaded. That makes for a more personal connection," Sturdevant explains. "It's easier for the person requesting the toolkit to feel comfortable asking follow-up questions, since they've been personally introduced."

That personal contact has been helpful for the Lincoln Arts Council not only to ask for specific information, but also to brainstorm solutions to problems that arise over time.

One of those challenges has been offering a variety of artistic mediums and themes in each share. McAlister remembers, "We had a lot of visual artists submitting proposals for photos, paintings, sketches — really beautiful work, but it was all flat."

To solve the issue, the arts council has worked to include non-visual art each season. This year's pieces include a tribute to Nebraska's Plains tribes recorded by jazz duo Jackie Allen and Hans Sturm; a CD of songs accompanied by original images from visual artist and musician Wendy Jane Bantam; and a project called MARS MAPS by artist Sara Kovanda, which includes prints of the maps and thumb drives containing "an original score of Martian Music, thus enhancing the experience with otherworldly sound."

Including performing arts in the lineup has helped the council organize more events for artists and shareholders to come together. In the past, McAlister says, many shareholders missed the one-time delivery event, when they were supposed to pick up their boxes of art.

This year, artists were asked to host shareholder-exclusive open houses at

their studios, letting visitors see where and how they make their work. At this season's first open house in May, photographer Michael Forsberg opened his studio, and Jackie Allen and Hans Sturm performed a selection from the music they composed.

Besides introducing shareholders to artists, the council has learned the value of bringing the artists together in person. That idea grew out of the need to support artists as they take on the major work of not only creating an original piece, but reproducing it up to 50 times — one for each share. For newer artists, the council realized, that task can be daunting.

To solve the problem, they organized an artist get-together after the lineup was announced. It gave the artists a chance to get to know each other and share what they were creating.

"Having that meeting kind of pushes you to make a decision, and having something to show to the other artists was a good thing," says printmaker and art professor Karen Kunc, one of this season's artists. "I think we were all excited and inspired by hearing about everyone else's ambitions. We all made work that's above and beyond."

As a longtime professional artist, Kunc is one of the more established artists in this year's share. It's been valuable for the program to include a variety of artists, from those who are known in Lincoln and beyond to those trying to gain local recognition.

"One of the things we've really found to be a strength is to have some emerging, lesser-known artists," McAlister says. "It's equally important, we've found, to have one or two lead artists or celebrity artists, whose names give a little extra marketing boost to the shares."

Lincoln's first CSA season got that boost when former U.S. poet laureate Ted Kooser offered to contribute a poem. As a Lincoln area resident, Kooser was instantly recognizable to potential shareholders. He not only waived his artist commission, but was also the first to purchase a share that first season.

"Ted was a huge boost to introducing the program to the community," McAlister says.

Big names like Kooser have drawn attention to Lincoln's program, but discovery of the new is also integral to CSA.

That's been the delight of the program for Anne Woita, a shareholder all three years of Lincoln's program so far. Woita is an accountant and serves on the board of an arts nonprofit. As an arts appreciator who doesn't make art herself, she enjoys the exposure that CSA provides.

"I'm an accountant; my world is very black and white, so any time I can experience art, it's like a shot in the arm," Woita says. "I'm not a visual artist at all, I don't think I could even do a stick man, but I've really grown to appreciate the art more, and the people who create the art that make our lives that much richer."

Such arts enthusiasts are essential for CSA and the arts community, Karen Kunc says: "I think we always need to cultivate people who appreciate and want to live with the art that these artists are making."

Woita says that the CSA model instantly captured her attention. "It gives wonderful exposure to those artists," she says. "It also gives them a paycheck, which is really important, because no one wants to have starving artists in Lincoln."

Exposure was what drew Kelly Rush, another of this year's lineup, to the program. Rush is a producer at Nebraska Public Television and has been a clay and ceramics artist for about 25 years. She knew her work would qualify for the Nebraska-centric program because it evokes farming and rural life: Her signature items are ceramic oil cans.

Because she doesn't often show or promote her work, CSA has been an opportunity for Rush to get her name out to the public. "A lot of artists have the talent and motivation to create art, but it's hard to put on the business hat or marketing hat to get our work out there," she says.

"That is the Lincoln Arts Council's objective with this project," she continues, "to get local artists that aren't necessarily out there producing and selling at galleries in the area — to introduce these artists to the community and say, 'Look, these people are making art here.'"

As the arts council reaches the end of the initial three-year plan, they are considering moving forward with a more sustainable biennial program. This year, they reduced the number of shares available for sale from 50 to 35.

“The program is designed to be a living entity,” McAlister says. “It’s meant to be changing and growing, it’s meant to be static, it’s not meant to last forever.”

Springboard for the Arts’ Andy Sturdevant echoes that sentiment, saying that CSA can work “as a cool, one-off program that introduces a lot of artists, art lovers and organizations to one another. Some of my favorite CSA programs nationally only did one or two seasons. But the relationships formed in the CSA program can lead to other cool programs or partnerships.”

“The way we have interpreted the goals [of the program] is that it’s really about building that relationship,” McAlister says. “Community Supported Agriculture is about getting to know the people who grow your food. We interpret it as being equally important to know the people who create your art.”

**More resources:**

[http://artscene.org/what\\_we\\_do/csart/](http://artscene.org/what_we_do/csart/)

# **How artists helped keep 33 businesses in a Cleveland neighborhood open through construction chaos**

Colleen Powers

Tuesday, June 02, 2015

Cleveland's Northeast Shores Community Development Corporation knew they needed to brace their neighborhood for upheaval. They had been awarded \$5.5 million for a streetscape project in the Collinwood neighborhood near Lake Erie, but were worried the improvement would come at a price for local business owners.

"It's pretty typical in Cleveland that a streetscape project results in business loss," says Brian Friedman, Northeast Shores' executive director. "People decide not to come thanks to the orange barrels."

So they sought inspiration from Irrigate, a creative placemaking project in Saint Paul, MN, which confronted a similar dilemma. Irrigate launched in 2011 in response to the Twin Cities' disruptive construction of a new light rail line, which was threatening local businesses and community activity. Hoping to create new opportunities for connection in the community in the midst of the construction chaos, Springboard for the Arts, Twin Cities Local Initiatives Support Corporation, and the City of Saint Paul partnered for the project. Over three years of ongoing construction, Irrigate trained artists as community organizers, facilitated partnerships between artists and business owners, and supported small-scale art projects in the construction zone.

These art projects drew new media attention to the construction area, and resulted in stories that were about the surprise and delight of the art. Businesses found new ways of attracting customers, community members found new opportunities to share their stories and artists connected with new audiences. The narrative surrounding Irrigate in the affected area was overwhelmingly positive, a sea change from the wave of bad press that came with the difficulties of being in the construction zone.

Northeast Shores' existing peer relationship with Springboard for the Arts, through Irrigate funder ArtPlace, alerted them to the project's success. Though the streetscape on Collinwood's Waterloo Road was much smaller than the light rail line that prompted Irrigate, Northeast Shores saw the

potential to replicate the model in Cleveland.

Artist-led community development made perfect sense for Northeast Shores. They were already promoting the area as Waterloo Arts & Entertainment District, working to attract artists and creative businesses to abundant vacant commercial space.

Northeast Shores decided to mimic Irrigate's model of encouraging artists to work with local merchants, helping them find creative ways to attract business throughout the construction. In November 2013, the organization launched the Rising Vibrancy Program, a series of grants for partnerships between Waterloo business owners and artists. The project received funding from the Kresge Foundation and from Cuyahoga Arts and Culture, a grantmaker funded by Cuyahoga County's cigarette tax.

Irrigate became not just an influence for Rising Vibrancy, but a direct guide: Springboard for the Arts' Jun-Li Wang and Laura Zabel visited Cleveland to help kick off the project and share their advice from Irrigate. Wang also helped write the Rising Vibrancy grant application.

Rising Vibrancy instantly excited local artists and merchants, Northeast Shores' Friedman says — to an almost overwhelming degree. The program allowed people to apply for monthly grants, awarded on a first-come, first-served basis. That last part created some chaos.

"We were a little distressed by the number of merchants who were literally waiting for us to open so they could shove paper at us seconds apart from each other, to make sure they could be included," Friedman says. "We didn't think it was a good community-building moment for us to have merchants sitting in front of our office at 5 o'clock in the morning, arguing with each other about who got there first."

Once they moved to a postage-based application system, though, the program went on smoothly. Over the next 10 months, \$118,000 was granted to 33 merchants and 255 artists, resulting in 52 community art projects — all in one half-mile stretch of Waterloo Road.

In one of the projects, hosted by Satellite Gallery, 32 artists from throughout the Cleveland area created original artwork on pieces of plywood and then assembled them into a cube to be displayed as public art. Participants said they valued the chance to contribute to a collective project, and to socialize

with artists outside their usual circles.

One project centered on B & B Upholstery, a longstanding local business that didn't see how their daytime clientele fit in with the arts and entertainment activity. That changed when a Rising Vibrancy grant fueled collaborations with Waterloo area artists: metal sculptor Jerry Schmidt, fashion artist Krista Tomorrowitz, and Azure Stained Glass Center contributed to an art opening in the storefront. Newly convinced of the ability of arts programming to attract new business, B & B's owner hosted a second arts event during the construction — this time without additional Rising Vibrancy funding.

Another project that extended beyond the initial grant was "LOCKS of Love, From Waterloo." Artist Ali Lukacsy's sculpture for Mac's Lock Shop became a permanent fixture of the neighborhood when another business owner offered outdoor space for its ongoing display.

The original collaboration between Lukacsy and the locksmith began when she needed to get her own home's locks changed. The owners told her they were interested in the arts, but were worried about being left out of the neighborhood's arts-centered development. Lukacsy had the idea for a metal sculpture used as a participatory "locks of love" display, with people personalizing locks and attaching them to the sculpture's frame. The project could repurpose materials Mac's had on hand: a stash of tiny luggage locks that had been made obsolete by TSA restrictions.

An event at Mac's in March 2014 invited visitors to stamp their names or other messages on the locks, hammering small letters onto them. They could then hook those locks onto the 3 foot-by-3 foot sculpture. By May, the piece was installed on a fence in the nearby lot, part of a larger locks of love display connected with the Waterloo Sculpture Garden. A new addition to the piece came from an unexpected fan of the project: Make Love Locks, a Brooklyn business that custom-engraves locks to commemorate special occasions for its customers. They engraved and donated locks spelling out the piece's title, "LOCKS of Love, From Waterloo," to be attached to the fence. Now it's public art that people can access around the clock, Lukacsy says.

"LOCKS of Love" was just one of three Rising Vibrancy projects Lukacsy worked on. Another grant paired her with the owner of a storefront that had sat vacant for years. In a previous collaboration at nearby Euclid Beach Park, artists had "yarn bombed" one of the beach's piers, weaving together knitted panels around it. When the pier was torn down, the panels were salvaged,

and Lukacsy was able to show them in the vacant Waterloo storefront. The art show attracted visitors, and soon afterward, the building owner was approached to turn the space into an ice cream parlor.

“People had never paid attention to the building,” Lukacsy says, “and then bringing them in for the gallery show showed them the potential.”

Her third grant funded a project that had already been in the works when the program began. Phone Gallery transformed one of Collinwood’s empty, gutted pay phone booths into “Cleveland’s Smallest Gallery.” Lukacsy, artist Ivana Medukic, and local handyman Doug Holmes refurbished the structure and installed electric lighting. They curate new Phone Gallery shows regularly; Lukacsy says the tininess of the space is ideal for students and newer artists who may not have enough work to show at a typical gallery.

Lukacsy’s merchant partner for the Rising Vibrancy grant was Russ’ Auto Care, the business to which Phone Gallery is attached. The owners have been supportive of the project, Lukacsy says, lending electricity to power it and letting the gallery’s stewards paint the surrounding brick. And they get excited about the art: “When new artists install work there, the business owners come out and interact and feel like part of the project, too,” Lukacsy says.

But like Mac’s Lock Shop, Russ’ “never gets dragged into the arts and entertainment district because they don’t see themselves as part of that mold,” she says.

For Lukacsy, that’s at the heart of what the Rising Vibrancy program made possible in the Waterloo District. It’s been important, she says, not to push out the longtime businesses that don’t seem to fit the art-focused branding.

“What every street, every community needs to keep in mind is that diversity is key,” she says. “If you have an oversaturation of art galleries and arts businesses, you need other businesses around to keep the street active 24/7, not just when there are special events like art walks. There are these businesses that keep the street active and sustain other businesses there.”

Working with merchants who didn’t have an arts background wasn’t always easy, Lukacsy remembers. “They didn’t necessarily understand how the art project would generate business and help them sustain their business during the year,” she says. “It required me to sort of be a salesperson for the arts at



large and what we could do together.”

But the effort was worth it, she adds: “There might be some friction, but if it’s a project you think will be good for the neighborhood, stick to it and in the end you’ll see the results are good for everyone.”

Unlikely blends of art and business development are familiar territory for Northeast Shores — they started working in the arts relatively recently themselves. The organization has existed since 1994, but not until about 2008 did they develop an “obsession with what arts can do to help the community,” Friedman says.

“At the core, we are a community development corporation that stumbled into the arts,” he says.

Projects like Rising Vibrancy continue to demonstrate how much the arts can do, even in small-scale, fairly low-cost collaborations. Of the 52 projects, 47 of them plan to continue even without ongoing funding. Every merchant who participated in the program made it through the construction without having to close up shop. And even a relatively modest \$2,270 per project has changed the look and character of the street and increased visits to the Waterloo Arts & Entertainment District.

**More resources:**

<http://welcometocollinwood.com/>

# **Photography & Participation: How Photovoice Engages and Rebuilds Communities**

Amelia Brown

Thursday, May 21, 2015

What is the role of photography in community engagement? How can increased engagement lead to effective community rebuilding and development? Photovoice, a participatory research process, provides opportunities for community members to tell their own stories through photography. This approach can serve as a bridge between underrepresented, marginalized, or disaster-impacted communities to share information with policy makers and other leaders. Artists are in a unique position to creatively connect the needs of a community to those who have the resources to meet those needs.

## **Art & Advocacy**

“There’s nothing more radical than beauty,” states Dr. Mary Ann Burris. From 1991 to 1992, Burris worked as a Program Officer for Women’s Health with the Ford Foundation. She was assigned to assess rural women’s needs in Yunan Province, China and was looking for a way to meet her mandate to identify and address the needs of the women in a way that was beautiful, creative, and did not harm the community. It was there that she and her project partner Caroline C. Wang developed Photovoice, a participatory research process.

Burris and Wang decided to give the women cameras as a way to communicate about their lives, needs, and desires. Each month they would collect the film, print it, and bring it back to the group to conduct conversations around the photos. After a series of discussions, the photos were gathered into a collection for a presentation by the women to leadership officials including the Ministries of Education, Health, and the Women’s Federation. One woman shared a photograph of a nine-year-old girl staying home from school to take care of her younger brother. Burris recalls the Minister of Education asserting that the county in which the photo was taken had a recorded 98% attendance in school. The women responded by informing him that the village is notified prior to the visit from the Ministry of Education and they send their children to school to be counted. Additional photos showed a rat floating in a water source that led to the closing of a factory that was polluting the water in the area.

Burris reflects that when the women had the photographs, “there was such a huge powerful differential that they were completely disarming, they just told the truth.” The women advocated for change in their communities because they shared irrefutable stories and evidence from their lives. The process of sharing photographs and stories served as a bridge between the lives of the women and the lives of those creating and implementing policies that impacted their community. “Caroline and I called that ‘Photovoice’ because it was really about the voices. It was really, in that instance, about the stories that those women had to tell about their lives, about their work lives, about their health, about their families,” Burris recalls.

Since its initial development by Burris and Wang, Photovoice has spread as a practice and concept, with many different organizations adapting it for use. A resource for organizations working with Photovoice is the Community Tool Box, a public service of the University of Kansas. Christina M. Holt, Associate Director for Community Tool Box Services, oversees community assessment and evaluation resources such as *Implementing Photovoice in Your Community*. “We really believe that the most effective and powerful community assessments are those that don’t just draw upon numbers and data, which certainly tell part of the story but don’t tell the story necessarily in a way that connects with hearts,” Holt explains about the value of Photovoice. “You have images and a more personal way to tell the story that can move people to action. This is a method, in addition to powerful quotes from individuals, to help personalize the experiences that people face in the community.”

## **Resourceful & Responsive Rebuilding**

Personalizing the experiences of community members is why Minneapolis-based nonprofit youth advocacy and mentoring organization EDIT turned to Photovoice. The organization has worked with disaster-impacted communities as part of their youth programming in service learning, leadership, and the arts. In the fall of 2011, Executive Director Ben Cooney met with a group of 16 youth to determine a community issue important to them. Many of the youth were from North Minneapolis and had experienced the trauma of the May 22, 2011 tornado, which left an estimated \$80 million of damage across 3,700 properties. Quoted in the Minneapolis Star Tribune, Director of Housing and Fire Inspections for the City of Minneapolis Thomas Deegan said, “Given the geographic impact, this is the worst we have seen in a natural disaster in the city in the last generation.”

The youth in the EDIT program shared their experience of community collaboration in the aftermath of the tornado, when there was an initial surge of volunteers and help. They noted, though, that as time passed the initial connections and support faded while rebuilding challenges persisted. The youth identified photography as a way to share both the progress and unmet needs of their community. Cooney explains, “Youth decided to focus on the tornado because it was prevalent in their lives. Youth decided to bring back volunteers. Youth decided to use photography.”

Cooney borrowed cameras from family and friends, taught the teens camera basics, and led a photojournalistic expedition throughout the neighborhood. Participants took and edited photos of destroyed houses, fallen trees, and a portion of the 8,500 feet of sidewalk that was damaged. They also interviewed community members, volunteers, and workers about what they were witnessing and what needs they saw in the community.

In January 2012, EDIT held a forum, fundraiser, and gallery exhibition displaying photos that captured both areas that had progressed and areas in need of improvement in North Minneapolis. The work drew media coverage, resources, and people back into the neighborhood. The exhibition was titled “Of Sadness and Hope,” encompassing the participant’s journey from initial sadness due to the ongoing need to rebuild to incorporating hope as they experienced people working to actively improve their neighborhood.

At the time EDIT executed the first project, Cooney had never heard of the Photovoice process. After discovering the process he realized the youth-led participatory photography approach had created a program incorporating Photovoice practices and principles, and they have since completed seven Photovoice projects. Cooney encourages would-be practitioners, saying, “The best advice I can give it is just do it, just start, just start taking pictures, even if you don’t know how to take a picture yet. It’s not waiting for all the resources to come to you, it’s making do with the resources you have.”

One evaluative measure EDIT utilizes to assess community impact is to ask youth before and after participation in their programs to reply to the statement “I am an artist.” Cooney shares that this is a “simple statement but being able to say that with confidence is an important statement piece. It not only shows the level of arts understanding...it also shows confidence and empowerment. It shows a level of self worth that they believe in themselves and they believe that what they’ve done is making an impact and telling a

story, which is what all art does.” Assessing all of EDIT’s programs after participation, 100% of participants considered themselves artists, compared to only 29% before participation with EDIT. They also stress the importance of arts accessibility as some participants have never held a camera and others have never had photography lessons.

In claiming the identity of “artist,” Cooney strives to help youth unlearn ingrained notions of identity. “When I was very young, I loved drawing, building, painting, and experimenting artistically. As I went through middle and high school, however, I ‘learned’ that I wasn’t an artist, so I stopped trying,” Cooney reveals. “It wasn’t until college when I joined a performing arts group that I fell back in love with art. I now practice art in as many forms as possible: photography, woodworking, mixed media, performance, spoken word, music, culinary arts. I am back to my early days of arts experimentation. One of my ultimate goals with EDIT is to teach youth that they are artists. I don’t want youth to get art trained out of them like it was to me.”

### **Strength in Sharing**

As Cooney utilizes Photovoice to encourage youth to step into roles as leaders, artists, and to share their gifts with their communities, Burris observes, “I find this everywhere I’ve worked in the world: once people understand that they are safe to share, it’s amazing what happens.” Burris does caution that those working with healing, recovery, and rebuilding art forms need to be cautious in their approach with communities. Burris stresses, “You don’t want to be voyeur on somebody’s pain; that doesn’t help them. You don’t want to be in a situation where you are asking somebody about their trauma or losing their home in any way that isn’t nourishing for them because it makes it worse. It’s a very dangerous tool if it’s not used sensitively. You have to understand the power of that kind of expression so you hold it tenderly and you make sure it’s in a safe environment.”

Within safe environments, sharing is key to utilizing art in community development. Sharing and discussing photographs provides opportunity for “listening into speech,” for people to exercise their voices, and create connections among community members. Photovoice can serve as vehicle to create from what has been destroyed; focus on what has been neglected; and fuse communities that are disjointed. Burris reiterates, “It’s just all to say that art has that kind of power to give voice, to help heal, to create

community. You're resilient if you're a team. You're resilient if you're connected."

**More resources:**

<https://photovoice.org/>

<http://ctb.ku.edu/en>

<http://www.edittheworld.org/>

# How public art builds safer, stronger neighborhoods

Anna Clark

Tuesday, September 16, 2014

Asked to conjure up an image of “outdoor art,” most people will picture an oversize abstract sculpture sitting on the lawn of an institutional building. But in Detroit, art that is integrated with the city’s buildings, lots, alleys, homes, and streetscapes is an integral part of the community — a vigorous, and even essential, part of daily life.

Art that merges with the landscape brings human presence, safety, and physical activity into the city’s spaces. This kind of art triggers more than one sense: it is something you move in, touch, and, in some cases, even eat. In Detroit, a spread-out city of single-family homes that is difficult to traverse and pockmarked by vacancy, these artistic interventions are an uncommonly powerful nexus of community life. They create welcoming traffic, as well as opportunities for neighbors to interact and work together. And rather than being a temporary show, in the style of a traveling exhibition or ephemeral installation, this is art for the long-term. It is for a city with a future.

This is unfolding in a residential neighborhood north of Hamtramck, sometimes called Banglatown for its large Bangladeshi population. Here, the Power House Productions community is nesting.

Gina Reichert and Mitch Cope are Detroit artists who bought a home here in 2002 in what was once a corner store. Over the ensuing years, the foreclosure crisis hit hard and put the community in a precarious spot. “The neighborhood could go either way,” Reichert said.

The couple began to purchase vacant homes in the area at auction, and they have since built them into a multi-faceted artistic community. The one dubbed the “Play House” has become a community performing arts center. The “Sound House” began as a recording project and continues as a public recording studio. The “Squash House” is being converted into a venue for play and gardening, with a venue designed specifically for squash, racquetball, and other games. The “Skate House” will merge with the Ride It Skate Park to create an indoor/outdoor skating facility. The original “Power House” produces its own electricity from solar and wind power, while modeling the broader power of self-reliance and problem solving. And the

“Yellow House” is where visiting artists and residents can stay and work. Reichert and Cope still live in the same home, now with their young daughter.

Artists buying houses for creative ends is not a new story, and Detroit in particular has a long legacy of public and place-based art: nothing bothers Reichert more than erasing what’s come before. But Power House does have a unique texture to it. Unlike The Heidelberg Project, the famed found-art installation on a residential street that began in 1986, Power House is not about creating spectacle. Instead, Reichert said, “It is about integrating in the cultural fabric of the neighborhood here.” Both Heidelberg and Power House hinge on the fundamental resourcefulness of artists using what they have on hand to create a new public narrative – and a new way of life.

### **Welcoming neighbors and strangers**

In many ways, the project’s current renovation, the “Jar House,” is about being a good neighbor and citizen. The Jar House will be the public front door of Power House Productions, providing space for community information and a starting point for visitors. Power House has attracted widespread notice, and outside guests frequently come for tours of the neighborhood. The Jar House could be the space where the tour ends, where guests are invited to settle in, ask questions, and discuss what they’ve seen.

But as Reichert said, the Jar House is “also a way for people in the neighborhood to come through with their questions, ideas, and concerns.” To date, that has happened casually, when neighbors happen to run into Reichert and Cope on the street. It’s worked well enough for a while, but it’s important to create a clear and distinct space to welcome those neighbors and allow them to become invested in Power House projects. The organization hopes that it will be able to hire an administrative assistant to be a regular face at the Jar House.

Power House’s relationship with its neighbors opens up a tricky issue that place-based art creates: How do you balance the public and private, especially in a residential neighborhood?

“We get people who want to do bus tours,” Reichert said. “Do we say no [because it will disrupt the residents]? How do we say yes to their interest, but maybe do [a tour] in a different way?”



At the same time, Reichert wonders if she is more concerned than she needs to be about privacy: “I’m always a little bit surprised when [the residents] want to talk to, well, strangers.” Many seem to take pride in the interest their neighborhood has generated. Their sociability doesn’t make privacy irrelevant, however: Folks may be open to talking to visitors, but may not want a picture of their house on display. They may not mind tours, but want a heads up before a big one comes through. Maybe they’d even like to be a part of the tour in some way; there is a big food culture in the community, especially around gardening, and residents may want to sell concessions to the guests.

These are the conversations that Power House must navigate as it evolves. And they are not happening behind closed doors.

“We’re figuring these things out in a public way,” Reichert said. Power House is helping to build a sustainable artistic presence in the neighborhood, but these conversations can stitch together the community fabric among residents, too.

There is something inherently democratic about this sort of art.

“We want to show what arts and culture can do,” Reichert said.

### **Building safer community spaces**

Part of what it can do is make the community safer. In Detroit, city services are starved for resources. For years, failed street lighting has left communities in the dark. While private organizations and businesses have helped fill the gap in downtown and Midtown, residential neighborhoods are often left to wait it out. At the same time, vacancy causes a number of problems for residents: falling property values, dangerous physical conditions as structures deteriorate, and a susceptibility to crime.

When Reichert is asked to think of how Power House helps to interrupt this pattern, the first thing she thinks of is human presence.

“All our properties were vacant, bottom-of-the-barrel pieces of real estate that nobody wanted,” she said. By changing the physical spaces — painting the building, cutting the grass — residents “can see something other than that there, and that someone’s paying attention.”

Those physical spaces also create a stimulus for talking to neighbors, and spaces for neighbors to talk with one another.

“What art can do is start conversations,” Reichert said. She compared it to a typical model of construction, where there is scaffolding or tape — distancing elements between the site and the community members. Artists, on the other hand, tend to be more purposefully open to engaging with their neighbors.

“It’s entry-level safety, but it’s true,” Reichert said. Bringing a human presence into the neighborhood’s empty spaces mean more eyes and more lights, which mean more visibility, which means more public safety.

As artists, the Power House team is interested in looking at unusual ways of managing safety challenges. “How do you have fun and be playful with these things you have to deal with every day?” Reichert asked. Her team likes to use colors and patterns — “something other than boarding up a house.” With Design 99 — her effort with Cope to explore new connections between art and architecture — she experimented with three-dimensional board-ups on vacant homes. “We were trying to do something more spectacular and confusing and delightful,” she said. While the 3-D board-ups are effective, they are impractical. “Functional, but absurd,” as Reichert put it. “They are not the most efficient way to do it, but at some point, you don’t want to be efficient.”

### **A sustainable, catalytic model**

While its work began independently, Power House has been fueled by support from local and national foundations, as well as the public sector. (The city of Hamtramck was a recent municipal partner for a funded project.) But Power House does not mean to rely on grants and philanthropy for the long term. Reichert views it as “seed money” or a start-up investment. In the future, the organization would like to sustain its overhead with its own programming revenue — freeing the project to set its own schedule and priorities based on what’s best for the community, rather than the interests of a third party. When Power House phases out of its construction and renovation period, it will amplify its focus on performance and community engagement.

This means it will be a catalyst for other like-minded place-based artistic ventures. In fact, Power House already has a strong partnership with the Hinterlands, an ensemble co-founded in 2009 by Richard Newman and Liza

Bielby. They live in the neighborhood and participated in the development of the Play House performance space. Now, the Hinterlands is responsible for its programming. It's a mutually beneficial partnership: the artistic community grows with the presence of the theatre arts, which is beyond the scope of Reichert and Cope's practice, and the Hinterlands team becomes a responsible member of the community: shoveling the snow, unlocking the Play House door for other tenants.

The essentially social nature of these projects is echoed in how other place-based artistic projects engage residents in their very making. The Alley Project facilitates youth/adult partnerships in Southwest Detroit, collaboratively creating a gallery out of a garage-turned-studio, two lots of common art space, and a walking gallery that stretches through the alley of one city block. Through this project (by Youth Nation), members of the community, especially young people, experiment and play with invigorating forms of street art that are both head-turning and legal.

In Calimera Park, in the city's Osborn neighborhood, The Edible Hut is a gathering place for the community under a living edible roof, teeming with sage, thyme, lavender, and oregano. The gazebo-like structure was built collaboratively by artists, designers, residents, and teachers and students from the local neighborhood high school. And it is not a pilot venture: it is meant to be a lasting catalyst for the community, a space for performance, learning, and recreation.

And in Brightmoor, the Talking Fence and Illuminated Garage (projects by Design 99) depended on collaborations with local youth to collect and share stories from the neighborhood. Its benches create a common space designed to encourage the sort of informal storytelling that makes a community out of a neighborhood, and brings civility to a city.

**More resources:**

<http://www.powerhouseproductions.org/>

<http://www.visitdesign99.com/>

<http://thehinterlandsensemble.org/>

<http://www.ediblehutdetroit.com/>

# **BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER**

*Creating new social bonds through art*

# **Bryce McCloud wants all of Nashville to be neighbors**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, October 06, 2015

There is a tab for "Art Projects" on the Isle of Printing website where all of their various public art endeavors are listed. One is called the "Mr. Rogers' Sharing is Caring Project." The project consists of Mr. Rogers T-shirts and prints emblazoned with his visage and the words "Hello Neighbor" in bold lettering.

Is it a joke? Fashionable – or ironic – nostalgia? A fabricated sense of neighborliness driven by commercial interests?

The answer to all of those questions is no. The reverence of Mr. Rogers is achingly sincere, an earnest desire for a little more kindness, a little more generosity, a little more neighborliness in the world. As noted in the description: "If the art on a shirt tells a story about the person wearing it, we hope everyone in the world will soon be wearing a Mr. Rogers shirt. He is one of our heroes here at IOP..."

The purpose of the T-shirt and prints is for people to purchase one – either a print or T – and get a print to give to someone else. "We'd like to think generosity is contagious and that it can someday trounce greed. And of course, whether you purchase a shirt/print or not, we hope that you can help us spread his message of kindness in your own world – by being kind."

This mentality – this yearning for kindness, to make the world a little bit better with everything they do – permeates every aspect of Isle of Printing. It is a commercial letterpress studio and print shop located in Nashville's "Pie Town" neighborhood, a neighborhood so christened by Bryce McCloud, founder and "Acting Print Meister" of Isle of Printing, and also "mayor of Pie Town."

It's a better nickname than "Triangle of Sin," anyway, which was how the triangle- (or pie-) shaped neighborhood was known until recent years. Previously considered to be a "challenged" area – a euphemism for low occupancy and high crime and poverty and blight and homelessness and all of the other negative associations of a struggling city – Pie Town is now a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood with urban wineries and microbreweries and

mixed-use luxury condos.

And McCloud has been there for the whole transformation.

He has been running the letterpress shop for 17 years. After going away to school, McCloud moved back to Nashville and made a "conscious decision" to stay. "I just felt that Nashville needed people to stick around and make that sort of community happen here," he says. "I thought I could make a bigger difference here rather than going to be a bigger spot where people were making it happen."

He remembers when he first moved back to Nashville there wasn't a building for artists to have studio spaces. He started looking around and found a lot of vacant warehouse space downtown. "Historically there had been a lot of commercial printing in Nashville, but a lot had moved out so they were all vacant buildings. The neighborhood was kind of like a spot where most folks wouldn't go, which is what I needed because I needed a lot of space for cheap rent."

But beyond the practicality of getting a lot of space for not a lot of money, McCloud says he really wanted to be in the city and he really wanted to be in a community again. "I felt that this was one I could help in some ways," he says. "Nashville is in this crazy boom right now and my neighborhood [is experiencing that change]. The character has changed completely since I moved in. It was more of a supply place during the day and manufacturing at night. There were folks like me and folks who didn't have a home, and that was it."

The neighborhood earned its old nickname – the Triangle of Sin – for the swingers clubs on each end of the street and the liquor store on the top of the hill. "It was eye-opening for a kid from the 'burbs with the different kinds of humanity represented here. But folks from all different walks of life have a common thread – we're all trying to find the same pursuit of happiness, no matter what we're doing."

Letterpress printing wasn't a whim for him. His uncle was a historian of industrial technology, and McCloud inherited all of his old technology when he died at a young age. So he decided to start a letterpress studio.

It may be a trendy thing now, but 17 years ago people sneered at him, not even knowing what letterpress was and helpfully reminding him that

computers exist.

"It's been kind of interesting over the last few years," he reflects. "All these sort of blue collar, hands-on jobs were dying out over 1980s and '90s. That knowledge was starting to die off, knowledge that had been passed on from master to apprentice. The technology had moved on for commercial printing, and the huge history of printmaking that was going on that had been going on for 500 years sort of stopped cold. I wanted to keep it going on a personal level because of my family history but also on a community level. I was always interested in public art and figuring out ways to make real fine art relevant to more people. Printmaking was a natural fit for that because it's a medium that's really democratic. It's a craft that's passed from person to person."

McCloud has the knowledge of a historian and the soul of a storyteller.

"Printmaking liberated people's minds when that tech came on the scene back in Gutenberg's day" – Johannes Gutenberg, the man who introduced the printing press and mechanical movable type to Europe, kick-starting the Printing Revolution, one of the most important events of the modern period. "Printing was a commodity of the rich; you had to be rich to [own] a book. Knowledge itself was held hostage. Printmaking was a very democratic way to share knowledge and public art. That's where Isle came out of."

The democratization of printmaking in its earliest history is reflected in the democratization of portrait-making in Isle of Printing's Our Town project.

Our Town asks, what does a city look like? Not the buildings, not the streets, but the people – all of the people, of all different ages and ethnicities, professions and personal backgrounds, skills and abilities, cultures and classes, all melded together, each given equal presence, every voice heard at equal volume – what does that look like?

The seeds of Our Town were planted when McCloud was asked to do a residency as an art instructor at the homeless shelter that butted up against his shop, Room In The Inn. The shelter has residencies and an art studio as well as places where people can come in to wash their clothes, repair bikes, get coffee, and "be treated like normal people."

Prior to this residency, he says, he had interacted with people in the neighborhood on a completely different level, both good and bad. "I found

people breaking into my car and had to chase people off, but I also developed really cool relationships with other homeless folks who become my friends. I thought I knew what homelessness looked like because I had been immersed in it [in this neighborhood], but teaching this class I realized homelessness is not a definition of who a person is. Some people I would see in the city that I never would have thought were homeless – the stereotypical schizophrenic/manic. [These were] people who had had a run of bad luck and no support structure; people who were lawyers, artists."

He thought portraiture would be an interesting way for people to get to know each other. "Words and pictures have a truth to them, but art is a separate language that sometimes we discount because it's a little more formless. The arts – visual art, dance, music – allows us to get at ideas that maybe you can't make clear any other way. I'm on a lifelong mission to get people to embrace that and make use of this language a lot of us have but haven't used since we were 11 or 12 years old, whenever you stopped drawing pictures."

A self-portrait allows people to show themselves in the way they want to appear to other people – what they hope you see rather than what you see from the outside.

"What you see on the surface might not touch at all on who this person is beneath that," McCloud says.

In an effort to further democratize the process – to focus not on drawing skills but on ways in which people choose to represent themselves – McCloud decided to bring in stamp pads in different shapes and textures for people to use to make their self-portraits instead of using pens and pencils.

"To use these tools they had to concentrate and be 100% present," he says. "Just for a few minutes they were for sure with us and working out, 'How do I make what's in my head happen here?' The goal of that is to get people to look carefully and be careful observers, so it put everybody on a level playing field – suddenly a novice and a professional are at the same level trying to figure out how to use these tools."

He told his students at Room In The Inn, "If you take this seriously I'm going to try to figure out a way to make what you're doing count and make people hear your voice."



Upon reflection, he jokes, "At the time I had no idea what that meant, but I knew that I meant it!"

McCloud was able to make multiple prints of several of the pieces his students created, and had the idea of giving them away to other people – any people, just regular people out on the street – in Nashville...in exchange for creating a self-portrait of their own.

"I think one of the worst parts of being homeless is that people don't take you seriously and your voice is marginalized," he says. "Because we had multiples of [the prints] I could go out into Nashville [and tell people], 'Imagine this is a conversation, but instead of words we're using our own self-portraits to get to know each other.' I was going up to people and saying, 'If you look at our art and make one yourself in response to these, you'll get to take an original piece of art home.'"

This was how Our Town began in 2013. One of the goals was to get the people of Nashville to get to know each other through art and self-portraits.

"We really just want to get people to be more active observers. When people start to see stereotypes they're not actually looking at the world carefully and seeing its nuances. It was important to me to really keep people's eyes open, that prosperity is not just for one person – it needs to be for everybody. It's not as simple as sweeping things that are [undesirable] under the rug and pushing those people out now that the property is valuable."

The first phase of Our Town brought them to over 50 different locations in Nashville, experiencing both the highs and the lows of the city. They went to places that are difficult for people to go, or difficult for the people in those places to leave. Places like the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution's Death Row.

"They're Nashvillians, whether people want them to be or not. They're a part of our city. It was a really powerful experience to talk to people who had been in isolation 24 hours a day and ask them, 'Hey, what do you want to share about yourself as a Nashvillian?'"

On the opposite end of the social spectrum, Our Town also paid a visit to Third Man Records – better known in relation to its founder, Detroit native and Nashville resident Jack White. "We really had a pretty wide range of people in society. After Death Row we went to a police precinct and some of

the portraits we had to trade to police officers were guys who were on Death Row. When you look at the art, you don't know the person's story. You just see what they're giving you."

From the thousands of portraits they collected, Isle of Printing made 120 letterpress prints and traded them around. "We put artwork in the hands of thousands of people in Nashville. It's been an interesting public art project in a sense that traditional public art is a statue or an installation or something else you have to go to see it. We were intentionally going to places where they could not come to us and have no experience of fine art, and giving them a piece of fine art – telling them 'Here, it's yours, do with it what you want.' It's a different model of dissemination. This project lives on in the hearts and minds and houses of all the people we've interacted with."

This year they moved into the second phase of the project, focusing more on the creative process with unrehearsed portrait-making performances. In the future, McCloud would like to take Our Town to other cities.

Most of Isle of Printing's public art projects prior to Our Town had been self-funded, but the Metro Nashville Arts Commission was eager to support this project, allowing McCloud to focus on it almost full-time for the last two years.

For McCloud, Isle of Printing is a means of continuing the five-century legacy of a craft – as well as the academic legacy of his family – but also a means for him and his co-conspirators to share public art with the people of Nashville.

"We made a conscious decision that we are really focused on getting public art in Nashville and beyond," he explains. "We still continue to do commercial work, but our partners in the commercial work know that they're our backers for these bigger things that aren't necessarily money makers, but we think are really important for bringing art to the community."

He pauses on that last word. "When you say 'community art' you get a lot of groans and eye rolling. It has a bad connotation in a lot of circles, but we can elevate community art to a level that would be at a gallery or a museum, and that can happen out in the real world with people who aren't necessarily around fine art and find use in it and find meaning in their lives. We're trying to be a bridge for that."

McCloud's goal, he says, is to make fine art as popular as NFL football.

"It has a place in everyone's lives and it doesn't need to be for just one small group of people. It's a huge part of what makes a city livable and interesting and a place that people want to be. Art and music, those are things that bring people together from all walks of life to become friends and community members together, and can be used as a common language for folks that don't really have one otherwise."

In other words, the question McCloud is ultimately asking is: "Won't you be my neighbor?"

**More resources:**

<http://www.isleofprinting.com/>

# **PearlDamour sees the way home in the stars over Milton, America**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, September 15, 2015

The North Star is how travelers have found their way home for thousands of years. Located on the handle of the Little Dipper, the most recognizable constellation in the sky, the North Star points true north where maps and even compasses can fail, getting travelers home safely.

It is this concept of home, and finding home by looking up to the sky, that was the jumping off point for PearlDamour's MILTON project.

PearlDamour is Katie Pearl and Lisa D'Amour, working in conjunction with theatre director and community organizer Ashley Sparks on MILTON.

Milton is a man's name. It is the surname of the famous 17<sup>th</sup>-century poet and polemicist John Milton, of Paradise Lost fame; the given name of TV's golden era "Uncle Miltie," Milton Berle; and that of famous toymaker Milton Bradley. It's a common, basic name; one that doesn't really give a person much pause. It's so common, in fact, that one of the most common city names in the country is Milton. Which is why PearlDamour chose it to be the focus of their ongoing project.

"We literally just Googled the most common names for cities," says Pearl. "Milton caught our attention because it seemed to have narrative possibilities."

PearlDamour started in Austin in 1997, when D'Amour was attending grad school as a playwriting fellow at Michener Center for Writers and Pearl was in town with a college friend's theatre company. Pearl had just come from a big adventure in Wales focused on site-specific theatre and says she was "really on fire" about site specificity. Her friends told her she needed to meet D'Amour, and eventually they did meet and made their first piece together: a slow-evolving system of tableaux that cycled through 14 hours, designed to be seen by cars as they drove by this one particular patch of land.

From there the two continued to collaborate, but it would still be a few years before they gave themselves a name: PearlDamour.

Pearl says that in the 17 years they have been working together, they have almost never lived in the same city. Currently D'Amour is living in New Orleans and Pearl in Brooklyn, though they have, at different times, bounced between Austin, Minneapolis, New York, and New Orleans, and those were also always the types of areas they focused on in their work – big cosmopolitan cities, each with their own uniquely urban identity.

MILTON is a conscious departure from that.

"One of our initial impulses was to do something small and it ended up doing biggest project ever," Pearl laughs. "We were really feeling all of our work was being made for and seen by a very specific audience who was like ourselves: living in major cities, [with similar beliefs and experiences]."

The idea for MILTON came up during the last election cycle, when candidates and supporters alike would accuse everyone who dared to disagree with them as being "un-American."

"We thought, you know what, we barely even know what that word means because our experience is limited to [that of the] urban, educated, [financially stable young city dwellers]. We wanted this project to force us to break out of our bubble."

The MILTON project seeks to answer the question, does an "American community" really exist? And what does that mean to people?

To approach those questions, PearlDamour needed to structure the project in a way that would provide cohesiveness, and the idea of highlighting towns with the same name came about.

Once they selected Milton as their American town name, they then had to choose which Miltons to work with. They ended up with five Miltons total: Massachusetts, North Carolina, Louisiana, Oregon and Wisconsin. Drawing lines between the cities on a map of the United States, they created their own "Milton constellation."

"We were thinking about constellations a lot and how they kind of orient and guide us through the unknown," says Pearl. "The Milton constellation helps orient us towards the idea of what it means to be an American."

They shot 24 hours of film footage of the skies above each Milton, forming an

earth-bound constellation that would be incorporated into their live experimental performances through surrounding video. It might look like being inside a planetarium, or being outside at a backyard family barbecue, or a night out at the opera – the interpretation varies from place to place and performance to performance.

When they were choosing the Miltons they were looking for the towns to be as different as possible. The individual towns represent a wide range of demographic makeup and population size, from Milton, Massachusetts with 27,000 at the largest – a bedroom community of Boston, ranked among the top three places to live in the country by US News and World Report – to Milton, North Carolina with a population of only 164 people as of the 2013 census.

One of the most interesting things they have learned during the MILTON project so far, Pearl says, is how deeply systemic racism is in the United States and how each of these towns are dealing with those issues.

"One thing we heard again and again was, 'Things are changing; everything's changing.' Sometimes that means industry development, but more often it means new, different people coming in."

In Oregon's Milton, the Latino population is quickly creeping up to 50 percent of the population, and the town's Anglo leaders are working hard to figure out how to bridge the two populations, many of whom speak two separate languages.

In Milton, Massachusetts, there has been influx of Haitian, Eritrean, and Vietnamese immigrants and people of color colliding with the historically Anglo Saxon Irish Catholic "old money" of the community, and the town is trying to understand what its identity is now. "It's so incredibly diverse," Pearl states. "In those schools it's like being in the United Nations. [Our question became], how can the diversity that exists amongst the children continue into the adult population? Why is it primarily white families that go to [cultural] events?"

North Carolina's Milton has a deep history of being in the segregated South. Even now, black and white residents are friendly with each other but still socially separate. It was also once a hotbed for tobacco farming. That industry has since moved elsewhere and the town has been dwindling and dying ever since. For this Milton, PearlDamour looked at how they could raise

the visibility of Milton in the region to get people to come explore their main street, which is chock full of art, history, and great food.

The MILTON project involves multiple site visits and in-depth relationship building that will ultimately culminate in a collaborative, participatory performance that in some way addresses the community's sense of identity and of home at each of the Milton sites. "Our goal is that [the communities] are left with some tools to continue moving forward in the work they were able to do with us; that some bridges are built and serve as active invitations to bring people together, and that those bridges remain [after we leave]."

As artists coming into these communities, Pearl says, the impact PearlDamour has is that they are able to provide a space and structure for people to have conversations that have not occurred before because there just wasn't space or structure in existence before. "They'll see, 'Wow, we're all in the same room together and we all have different belief systems and points of view, and a lot of times we don't even want to be in the same room together, [but now we're here].' We see how our project can be situated within the work and dreams they already have, and provide space and context for them to loosen up and produce dialogue and action."

Each of the MILTON sites are at different stages of development. So far North Carolina is the only one that has been brought to completion. "We spent a significant amount of time leading up to show and doing the show, and the outro is how is the town going to move forward with the experience. They are now committed to two annual arts events as a result, and this year we were able to totally step back."

It has been about three and a half years since their first site visit, which was in Massachusetts. To build the kind of relationships and trust they need to build for this project to be a success, they need to visit each site regularly and hold workshops, in addition to writing grants to fund their efforts...a slow-moving process considering the time and financial investment involved in doing so in five different cities across the country. Oregon will be the next city to be completed with the show, supported by an NEA Our Town grant, scheduled for June 2016, and then Massachusetts will follow in the spring of 2017.

"Our hope is to bring all five to fruition," Pearl says. "That actually turns into a 10-year project."

And because this is an interconnected constellation, they do want there to be

some exchanges between the different Miltons as well.

At the beginning they would initiate person-to-person gift exchanges from people in one Milton to another. After doing the show in North Carolina, they saw that people from North Carolina might be able to offer people in Massachusetts solutions based on the experiences their own town has had, and vice versa. "They see, 'Oh, this city encountered the same thing and the way they dealt with it was to create an arts event. Oh, that's what we should do – we should make one of these public concerts a multi-cultural festival.'"

"We're witnessing how powerful that work is and how much change can really happen," says Pearl. "As theatre artists we're kind of educated to not be local; the wider your impact, the more important you are. This project is really teaching us how deeply the ripples can be felt in your own home space."

They also continue to keep their production standards as high as they would be in any other city that they work in, which has also impressed people (that they haven't dumbed it down). "We're dipping into places outside our own community that don't have access to high quality, adventurous, experimental theatre work, and that opens up a whole new possibility to young people where there wasn't before."

Perhaps an unexpected result for Pearl and D'Amour has been that, as they become more invested with such intensely focused energy on each of these five communities and really fall in love with the cities, they are even more acutely aware that these are not their home communities, giving them a new appreciation for these places they call "home" themselves. In its own way, the MILTON constellation has guided them home, too.

**More resources:**

<http://pearldamour.com/>

<http://www.skyovermilton.com/>



# **The Kelly Strayhorn Theater welcomes the community into their home**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, July 14, 2015

The Kelly Strayhorn Theater is a performing arts and cultural center in Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood. Named for two of Pittsburgh's most celebrated talents in the last century – dancer Gene Kelly and composer Billy Strayhorn – the historic theater itself is over 100 years old and the organization has been there and actively involved in the revitalization of East Liberty since 2000.

"It's a neighborhood that has been through a lot of changes and transitions," explains Janera Solomon, Executive Director of the Kelly Strayhorn Theater. "It has been on the list of revitalizing neighborhoods for the past 50 years, [through many] cycles and changes."

Kelly Strayhorn seeks to be the community hub, not just for the performing arts but also as a social gathering space for everyone in the community.

"[The building is] right at the heart of a major intersection," Solomon says. "It really symbolizes arts and culture in East Liberty. That's the platform that we approach our programming. Everything we do is from the understanding that lots of people in our neighborhood look to us; we are a landmark, not just an arts destination. The place itself means so much to the neighborhood it's really important that our programming connect to lots of people so that people in this community feel like Kelly Strayhorn is their theater."

The programming at Kelly Strayhorn covers a wide range of performing arts including dance, theater, music, and live art, as well as cultural and educational activities through the Alloy School, artSEEDS student matinees, and artist residency programs. The organization has two buildings out of which they run more than 300 days of programming each year – massive in scale by any theater standards.

"We are a community-based arts and cultural center where we try to engage diverse communities through different kinds of programming...all with the idea of getting our neighborhood engaged with the arts," says Solomon.

But what does "engagement" really mean? It is certainly a word that gets

thrown around a lot in the nonprofit world. But how does the concept of "community engagement" get translated to the real world community level?

"We see it as an ongoing relationship and exchange between us and the people who attend the programs in the neighborhood and the artists in the neighborhood," solomon explains. "It's really an ongoing exchange between us and the people who care about us. Because of that we don't think of 'engagement' as program-specific. All of the programs are designed with the intention of connecting with people in this community."

As she describes it, designing a community engagement program is a different thing than actually being a community engagement organization. "There are certain values that guide all of the things that we do," she states. "When we think about engagement, it's really in our DNA. That means we're constantly listening to our patrons, board members, partners, and businesses on the street. We're constantly listening to conversations about what's happening, what people's concerns are, what their needs are. Our goal is to be responsive to those needs, whether they are arts-related or not."

That sort of responsiveness also extends to their programming. If someone told them that they need to have more programming for young people in the neighborhood, they'll respond with, "Okay, what would you like to see?" or ""That sounds like a good idea, do you want to produce it?"

"We work with the people in our neighborhood so they become community producers. These are not people who do it for a living; these are people who have an idea and believe it's important to benefit the community and we support them in it. That's one of the many ways we interact."

Even their artist residencies are designed with more long-term relationship building in mind.

"When we invite artists to have residencies, we are looking to them to embody the values that the organization holds dear," solomon explains. "One of the things that is really important to us in the making of a work is that people in the community have the opportunity to participate in the making of that work. We look for artists who are interested in a process that brings people from outside the work into their work."

Kelly Strayhorn supports the artists multiple times beyond a specific project and, unlike most one-and-done residencies, they actually want the artist to

come back and participate again. "It takes about three times for people to say, 'Oh, I'm really interested in this artist and I like what they're doing.' My whole thing is to produce something magical and that generally doesn't happen on the first try. It's ongoing, persistent practice, doing things again and again with people, with feedback, with participation. That is important in growing a community that sees themselves as part of an ecosystem. It's magical because we're part of a process where we're all sharing and exchanging ideas to make this experience happen."

For solomon, "engagement" looks a lot like hospitality. "We welcome people, like welcoming someone into your home. Hospitality is a big thing in this organization. What do these artists need when they arrive in the building? What do the patrons need? It's a practical way of doing the kind of engagement I'm talking about."

She continues, "Engagement is more about, 'How will I make a connection to people who may not care anything about what I'm doing?' A lecture or demonstration will not do that. Those activities tend to attract the people who are already interested, already engaged. Engagement is about expanding the audience, expanding the number of people who care...and facilitating a relationship between enthusiasts and those who are not. That's where real engagement happens. That's how I measure the success of our engagement: how many people who thought they wouldn't care have become interested?"

**More resources:**

<http://kelly-strayhorn.org/>

# **PlaceBase Productions builds rural communities through participatory theatre**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, April 28, 2015

Ashley Hanson grew up spending much of her childhood in Aitkin, a small town of fewer than 2,000 people in northern Minnesota. Like many young people who grow up in small towns, she was dying to get out.

While studying theatre as an undergraduate, she realized that the traditional theatre "box" didn't fit her. After learning about alternative theatre methods like Theatre of the Oppressed, she found she really latched on to the concept of theatre as social practice. After that she went abroad to earn her Masters of Arts in Applied Theatre at the University of Manchester, focusing on the participatory role of theatre in the sustainable development of communities, particularly rural communities.

Finding inspiration in her own personal experience, Hanson knew that she felt disconnected from her hometown and didn't feel proud of it. She was driven to examine how to better foster that community pride and sense of place through theatre, so during her studies in the UK she researched and worked with theater companies in five rural communities with populations of 1,000 or fewer people.

This kind of social activist street theatre really has its roots in the UK, she says. "They're way ahead of us. When I moved back I thought, 'I'm going to start a theatre company and change the world,'" she laughs. "I had this image, like being in a movie [where the main character is] walking down a small town street being cheered on because [they] saved the town."

As Hanson would quickly discover, if it were that easy, everyone would do it.

"I was shouting into space, 'What I really want to do is rural community development through theatre!' but I wasn't sure how to get started," she says.

Eventually the right people heard her call. She got connected to Andrew Gaylord, a playwright (which she describes as her weak area), and he jumped on board. And so, in 2012, Minnesota's PlaceBase Productions was born.

The focus of PlaceBase Productions is primarily on rural areas, as well as areas that are really neither urban nor rural but have lost their sense of cultural identity.

Hanson and Gaylord started collecting stories for their first project in Granite Falls, MN, titled, Granite Falls: A Meandering River Walk. "We had this idea of what a process like this would look like," Hanson says. "We started with individual interviews and historical research. We do a lot of reading and gathering of textbook history."

But there is also a very human element to their research, and they work closely with partner organizations within the community to show people that they can be trusted, that they're not there to exploit the people's stories. They slowly get to know people in the community through events like story circles, open to the general public, then do specific story swaps at places like high schools and senior centers where a small group of people get together to recount the history and their private experiences of the town. "Visioning" is a huge part of the process, Hanson says.

"We begin with the history of the place but we are really interested in the future of the place," she explains. "What are the cultural gold nuggets we can pull to move into the next phase of community? A lot of times the towns we're working in are really in need of something to jumpstart their economy and population growth."

In Granite Falls they found a beautiful river that the much of the community had seemingly forgotten about and used that as the basis of their production, highlighting it as a resource for the community and using it as a launching point to connect people through their shared histories.

All of their productions follow the same planning pattern. After the story gathering, they then write a site-specific musical script.

Hanson is very careful to note that what they do is not historical reenactment. "We really base our story on the history of the place, and use a lot of modern language and metaphor," she says. "We always tie it to the history and the future of the place. This is not history theatre – it's all community actors, it takes place in a liminal space, we might move from 1850 to present day by moving from one scene to the next. Historians who come to our show might say, 'Wait, that's not how people would speak in 1850,' but for us period costumes and dialect is not what it's about. Our barometer of quality is more

about participant experience and the aftermath of the show in terms of the experience and connections that were made. This is about community development theater."

The script is written with the intention of appealing to a wider audience, connecting the art to experiences that people enjoy and are familiar with; so not just theatre-goers, but also paddling groups connected to the Department of Natural Resources who are excited for a reason to be on the river, or cycling enthusiasts in support of an active living initiative that calls for construction of a bike path through town. The performance is always mobile so the audience is moving through the space and the experience together, whether walking, paddling, or cycling.

After creating a "big, crazy script" calling for a 40-60-person cast, they hold auditions, relying heavily on the people who participated in the interviews and story swaps. Hanson says these auditions attract people who are excited about change and about the history of the town; the storytellers. "They are untapped resources in terms of the creative economy," she says. "We have a ton of fun playing and being silly together and imagining together."

The performance will usually be held over one or two days on a weekend, and they try to piggyback on other events happening in the area so people can come in and find multiple different ways to connect to the area.

The work of PlaceBase Productions isn't over when the proverbial curtain drops. Hanson and Gaylord come back one month after the show to hold a half-day brainstorming evaluation session and watch a video of the performance at a big screening event. At the brainstorming session they ask, "What happens now?," encouraging audience members and participants to reflect on some of the things they've heard and felt since the show. They urge participants to consider, "What can we do with the people in this room to move forward? Who here is willing to take on the next step of what this project might be?" Artistic leadership teams are formed to take the lead on passing the torch.

"That has been phenomenal, witnessing the energy in that room," Hanson says. After all of the participants witnessed that something like this can be "gigantic and crazy," yet can look back later and say that they did it and hundreds of people from the region saw it, it gives them confidence and a renewed enthusiasm – something that might have made them shake their heads and say that it wouldn't work, well, they've already done something

like it and it worked.

Since PlaceBase Productions launched in 2012, they have already seen some real-life projects happening, including a revitalization of community theatre, and even businesses launching by people who were connected through the performance. "We are part of the movement that's happening and connecting these people to each other," Hanson says. "They might have met otherwise and might be [starting a business together] anyway, but we might have helped excel that process."

Now that they are three years into the process they have seen how it has worked in multiple communities and are ready to start experimenting with other ideas of how to connect people on a smaller scale, perhaps with a two-day visioning workshop instead of a full-scale production so that they can touch more communities.

They are currently connected to five communities, each of which they continue to visit regularly. Their goal is to produce four productions per year. Hanson says with the research phase and the trust-building period, that's usually a commitment of six months to a year for each production, which will eventually create a capacity issue for this two-person team.

"I wonder when other artists go into communities that are not their own, what is their exit strategy? When are you done? Because we're never done; we go back all the time," she says. "When we get to 20 or 25 communities, how do you share your heart and passion with so many places? What does your exit strategy look like when you're working in communities that are not your own in a way that is impactful and doesn't look like you're parachuting in and out? You don't want to be seen as this artist who pops in, does their thing, and pops out. We're very sensitive to that."

Hanson sees the work of PlaceBase being able to bridge that gap between "insider" and "outsider," "local" and "visitor." She sees PlaceBase as an entry point for new residents in a community to get involved.

"When people move in, it takes a long time to get over that hump and feel like a part of the community," she says. "One of the great things about these shows is [that they are] a great entry point for new people. They get invested and create something together, meet other people and learn about the city. In terms of retention of new residents, this can really connect them with [a place] and get people excited about it – [they] want to become the stewards

of the place, the next generation of caretakers."

As initial outsiders seeking to understand and meaningfully contribute to a community, Hanson feels PlaceBase Productions is uniquely positioned to look at a community with outsiders' eyes to see resources that the community itself might no longer see.

"The outsider coming in, if you do it right it can be a huge asset. If you do it right," she cautions. "If you don't, it can be terrible. Sometimes you just need someone [simply] pointing out the assets that you live in every day. We actively build the trust; we don't just come in, [point] and say, 'This is great; this is great.'"

This kind of participatory theatre particularly appeals to people who look at their communities and say, "Something needs to change if this is going to be a vital place for me to live." It can also help small towns overcome one of their biggest social hurdles: attracting and retaining young people and emerging leaders, the kind of people who will also come into the town, see areas of potential and ask, "What if?"

**More resources:**

<http://placebaseproductions.com/>



# Haleem Rasul is teaching the world to Jit

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, March 17, 2015

Haleem "Stringz" Rasul is a dancer, designer, and filmmaker born and raised in Detroit. The dancers in his family were on his father's side, and Rasul was inspired by his late cousin who, he says, did some significant work with urban dance.

"He was a B-Boy, a Popper. He was on a popular dance show in Detroit and was featured on the Jerry Lewis telethon as a dancer. He was a key family member I looked up to, so at an early age I got into dance," Rasul says. "When he passed, I stopped. Because I was so young, it was forgotten. No one wanted to speak on it."

Yet he still found himself gravitating towards urban dance culture in Detroit. "I could see it everywhere – on the [local dance show] New Dance Show I could see it every day." Rasul's older brother got into the hip hop scene as an MC, and with his access to clubs he was able to get the then 17-year-old Rasul into places like St. Andrew's where people would be breakdancing like his cousin once did. "From that moment that I saw it face-to-face, that's when I seriously started and never stopped."

Rasul formed Hardcore Detroit in 2001, a dance crew as well as a cultural aesthetic with its own line of apparel that includes T's, jerseys, and denim. Hardcore Detroit has created and performed choreography for numerous major events locally and internationally.

"It started off just a small select number of guys in Detroit after years of me wanting to start my own business," he says. "At the time I started [Hardcore Detroit] there was no one doing professional [urban dance crews]. [This] laid the groundwork for an urban dance service. That's why a lot of people come to Detroit and say it's a blank canvas – we've got the space to work and really create something."

The Hardcore Detroit crew consists of art, music, and dance lovers worldwide. They provide urban dance to any event, from birthdays and bar mitzvahs to Pistons playoffs games and the BET Hip Hop Music Awards. The crew was named "Best Dance Company" by Real Detroit Weekly in 2010 and Rasul was selected for the Red Bull Beat Riders in 2006. The crew teaches

workshops and holds weekly practices every Monday at the Cass Corridor Neighborhood Development Center from 7:30-10:00 p.m. for anyone interested and serious about dancing.

When Rasul got to a certain level years into breaking he would travel to events like the annual Rock Steady Crew (est. 1977) Anniversary in New York, where he would see the urban dance pioneers and people from all over the country representing their region's styles, from the West Coast to Miami. "Everybody was representing and that got me reflecting, 'What is Detroit bringing?' I looked at the dance scene here and it got me asking those questions. Some of the styles here are specific to here, like the Jit."

So he sought out people who could answer his questions, tracking down the pioneers and the history of the Jit. "My first intent was to get them on camera to tell their story put it on YouTube," he says. "But the story was so thick I knew it had to be presented a certain way."

Rasul started getting into filmmaking by going to those anniversary events and seeing groups selling recordings of themselves teaching a dance or performing at an event. His Jit videos initially started out the same way –



*Haleem Rasul. Photo credit: Doug Coombe*

short videos that were a way to put the Detroit Jit out there, giving it wider exposure and showing others how to do it.

As he dug deeper into the history of the Detroit Jit, he contacted the pioneers of the dance – brothers Tracey, Johnny, and James McGhee – and began interviewing them on camera. He also interviewed Motown singer Kim Weston – who first "discovered" the brothers and put them onstage – incorporated videos the brothers had of themselves performing the Jit throughout the '80s, and included additional instructional footage for today's would-be Jitters to follow. This is what became the documentary film *Jitterbugs: Pioneers of the Jit*, a film five years in the making.

Rasul had "a little" background in film after graduating from Western Michigan University with a degree in graphic design. "I knew how much work it would take and it was kind of intimidating, but it fell into my hands and kind of grew little by little. So I'm considered a filmmaker now too; I couldn't see that coming! I also couldn't see winning grants [from the Knight Foundation and Kresge Foundation]; that's a whole other ball game too."

When it came to making *Jitterbugs* it was a much more involved process than the short videos he had previously made. There was storyboarding to do, intellectual property rights to acquire, and money to be raised.

Rasul was able to take the shorter Jit videos he had already made and use them in grant applications. He was selected as a Kresge Artist Fellow in Performing Arts 2010, receiving a \$25,000 fellowship that was used to work on the production of *Jitterbugs*, followed by a \$12,000 grant from the Knight Arts Challenge in 2013 that was used for a premiere event at the Detroit Film Theatre once the film was complete and ready for release. They had an at-capacity free red carpet premiere called *Jit Happens!* with performances by Jitters and music acts from Detroit. The DVD is available on the Detroit *Jitterbugs* website.

The film will also screen this Friday, March 20 at the Freep Film Festival at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, followed by a Q&A with Rasul and members of the *Jitterbugs*, a Jit performance showcase and a chance to learn the Jit, and a dance party to end the night. The next day Rasul and Hardcore Detroit will be at the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts performing the Jit in the 313 to the 312 Choreography Expo.

Rasul's work with Hardcore Detroit and the Detroit *Jitterbugs* has enabled

him to travel across the country to compete in breaking competitions, teach in Sweden, and perform with Detroit (Hamtramck)-based theatre ensemble The Hinterlands in Shanghai. This May he is working on a sort of "Jit exchange" with one of the lead Jitters of Zimbabwe, which has its own style of Jit as well as a huge Jit festival.

"Jit is definitely recognized outside of Detroit now, but still not on a grand scale," he says. "We still made a lot of progress. There are a lot of opportunities for it now and a lot of people are doing stuff in the city with it."

But, he adds, "I'd really like to see our Detroit style make a bigger impact. I'm still pushing it."

**More resources:**

<http://www.hardcoredetroit.biz/>

<http://www.detroitjitterbugs.com/>

# **TU Dance makes modern dance accessible to a diverse community in St. Paul**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, December 02, 2014

TU Dance, a professional dance company and dance education center located in St. Paul, was founded by Uri Sands and Toni Pierce-Sands in 2004. Initially called Space TU Embrace, the organization started as summertime project that allowed Uri and Toni to continue working and interacting with their professional colleagues through the summer.

"Summer is pretty bleak [in the dance world]," Uri says. "People are still trying to work and perform and stay in shape, but there are not many opportunities to do that in the summer."

At the time, Uri had just started to develop his own choreographic voice and he wanted time to create, so Space TU Embrace ran as a six-week workshop over its first two summers, each wrapping up with a four-day public performance in a small black box theatre.

Uri says that TU Dance was really the end result of an "incubation of thoughts" that grew out of his and Toni's experiences as professional dancers touring the country and world and how they wanted to translate those experiences to St. Paul.

Toni was born and raised in St. Paul and received all of her professional training in the Twin Cities. "She went on to have a prolific career here and in New York and abroad," Uri says. "[When we] came back [she] saw a lot of change in the Twin Cities in terms of arts and diversity, but the dance world had stayed the same – it didn't have the same depth of cultural richness, the diversity, that the rest of the Twin Cities had at the time."

Uri grew up in Miami, where he received all of his training, first getting interested in breakdancing in the early '80s and then going on to study ballet through Miami's prestigious arts magnet schools, including the New World School of Arts.

The couple met through the Alvin Ailey dance company in New York. When Toni decided to move back to her hometown, Uri followed two years later.



*Uri Sands and Toni Pierce-Sands. Photo credit: Ingrid Werthmann*

Together they decided that they wanted to do something to foster and promote the dance community in St. Paul, while at the same time also making their art form more accessible to the community.

"We needed to make sure there is that same accessibility of this art form that has transformed our lives, [which means] including people from all backgrounds," explains Uri. "So we decided to created TU Dance. We are committed to sharing and celebrating a unique art form."

They knew they wanted TU Dance (the "TU" representing "Toni" and "Uri," pronounced "to") to be both a professional company and a professional training school, but they had to decide which to focus on first.

"Our vision was to have a fully functional training program for aspiring young dancers," Uri says. "We realized that as young dancers, when we trained we had the [professional] examples in front of us. The people that were there we could look up to, aspire to, and be inspired by." To build that base of professionals, they started with the professional company, which consists of 12 members performing original contemporary dance repertory choreographed by Uri as well as by world-renowned choreographers brought in to create original works for the company. TU Dance celebrated its tenth anniversary this past May.

Four years ago Toni and Uri launched the TU Dance Center, fulfilling the other half of their vision. TU Dance Center is organized into three divisions, offering programs for children and teens that focus on the joy of creative movement and beginning dance technique, a pre-professional program that trains aspiring professional dancers up to age 23, and an open program with individual classes that are open to everyone. They specialize in training for ballet, modern, and West African dance. They are also committed to making these opportunities available for diverse populations.

"We have a fair amount of subsidy that helps prevent barriers so students can train and develop," Uri says. "Part of the core values of this organization is to ensure accessibility on many levels." They have officially completed three years of dance education programming and began the fourth year in September. TU Dance Center currently has 110 pre-professional students in training, after starting with just 18, in addition to the variety of individual classes and community workshops offered at the center. "We feel it's very important for the community to recognize TU Dance Center as their own," says Uri. "We connect artists who come into town to this community, and offer some workshops for non-professionals for a vast age range. It is important to have an ongoing dialogue with our community as a whole."

TU Dance works to engage community members and dance professionals on a number of levels, with open rehearsals, student performances, and community workshops with guest choreographers from New York. Pre-professional dancers can also audition for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and other national companies and conservatories. "These are the



sorts of things we like to make sure are available and accessible to our community here."

In terms of the total number of students of all ages impacted by TU Dance annually – combining their variety of classes and outreach programs that include lecture demonstrations, master classes, educational performances, and outreach efforts in every city the company tours so the students in those communities are able to interact with the company – their total reach becomes something like 3,000-4,000 per year.

Recently the company toured at the South Miami-Dade Cultural Arts Center, in Uri's hometown. "To bring this work to Miami and share that with community, and also celebrating our tenth anniversary at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts in downtown St. Paul, an arts institution that brings in world-class arts from all across the globe...for us to be able to share our work with them and provide accessibility to a wide array of people and a diverse population...[that is a] full circle experience."

The tenth anniversary is a significant milestone for the company, an organization that began from just a seed. "It's a very grassroots organization," Uri says. "We have been able to gain the confidence of significant funders who believe in and support the vision Toni and I have – how we believe our work as artists and how dance [as an art form] is able to transform lives for young people as well as those coming to interact with our work."

At the beginning of this year, TU Dance was selected by the Knight Foundation as an "anchor arts institution" in the city of St. Paul, along with four other organizations considered cornerstone local arts institutions. They were collectively awarded \$3.5 million to be awarded over five years. (Another recipient anchor organization was Springboard for the Arts, which powers Creative Exchange.)

"The Knight Foundation is a longtime supporter of TU Dance," says Uri. "To be recognized by Knight in that way is a true testament to their initiative and their confidence in our work and in what we can do for the community at large."

**More resources:**

<http://www.tudance.org/>



# **REIMAGINING WHAT'S POSSIBLE**

*Finding new possibilities in our social  
and economic constructs*

# Witt Siasoco uses art to create home

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, December 01, 2015

If you take Twin Cities artist Witt Siasoco's extensive body of work as a whole, a common theme emerges: home. Not home as a physical place, or even a symbolic one – "Home is where the heart is," and all of that – but home as a concept that isn't necessarily easy to articulate. Siasoco's work is, in many ways, about examining that concept.

The multidisciplinary artist, designer, and arts educator has created a number of projects inspired by issues facing his community. Themes of collective community ownership, transportation and land use, underrepresented populations, and other social issues continually emerge, again and again circling a larger idea of "home."

After earning a visual arts degree from Iowa State University, Siasoco was "trying to decide if I can actually make a go of [being an artist]" when he discovered the Walker Art Center's artist-led projects and connected with a group of teenagers in the Center's Teen Arts Council, working as Program Manager of Teen Programs for over a decade.

"That really affected me a lot," he says. "I was trying to figure out what [art] means to me and what it means to the community – what it means for an artist to have a vision for working with people that really interested me."

He left the Walker Art Center in 2012 to earn a post-baccalaureate in graphic design at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. "I thought I was going to be a designer but I ended up making a lot of projects about my immediate neighborhood and issues affecting my immediate neighborhood."

That initial project in 2012 was the Department of Change, and it laid the groundwork for much of the public art and community engagement projects Siasoco has been involved with since.

Department of Change began with a condemned house in his neighborhood. He created a realty sign and pamphlet to bring awareness to the building. The pamphlet outlined the reasons for demolition of this particular building, but also provided information for the preservation of condemned properties.

"I found out that condemnation doesn't mean it's going to be torn down; it means the community has a call for action," he explains. "[That project] was really a step in the direction of [me asking the question], 'What does it mean to make art in communities and how can it communicate to people?'"

In 2013, the City of Minneapolis launched a partnership program with Intermedia Arts called Creative CityMaking Minneapolis (CCM), supported by the Kresge Foundation Arts and Culture Program. CCM paired highly skilled community artists with City departments on in-depth collaborations designed to address complex challenges that the City faces. Siasoco was part of the first cohort of artists paired with city planners on a project addressing historic preservation: How does the city address historic preservation? What is the process of historic designation? Which buildings does the community feel need historic designation?

His Intermedia Arts project Drawing on Minneapolis included a Mobile Tracing Unit – essentially a life-size door with a window on it – in which participants chose a photo from one of the 50 properties identified in the City's Historic Capstone Report and "trace" a projected image of the photo. Through their drawings, participants were effectively "voting" for which properties they wanted the City to take a closer look at preserving.

Siasoco's team did 25 community engagement events, then did a huge drawing for Intermedia, created a print series and billboard, and hung installations in storefronts.

Also in 2013, Siasoco was the Artist-in-Residence with the Kulture Klub Collaborative, an organization that engages artistic practice to provide opportunities for youth experiencing homelessness. Through this he created This is Home, a large-scale drawing/installation and zine created by asking youth participants to select a location that had provided them shelter, was a safe space, or a place they called home. The answers ranged from landscapes and landmarks to private residences and public spaces, and were visually depicted in the installation and accompanying zine.

This wasn't the first time Siasoco directly examined the idea of "home" in a project. He first approached the theme through his work with YouthLink's Drop-In Center, also known as Project Offstreets, a safe space for homeless youth to turn to that also provides a variety of health and housing resources.

"I had been thinking about this idea of home and would try to come up with

ways to really make art with [these kids], but I was having such a hard time really getting to talk to them," says Siasoco. "I would just have fleeting moments – oftentimes the kids just want to grab food and don't want to talk. I wanted to talk about their homes, where they are from, did they ever have a home. Using Google Street View I could punch up the addresses of where they had slept, then I used a projector to project this image of their 'homes' and they would sit there and trace and talk about that experience. When you're in transition you forget about what [home] meant to you, and what you want to get back to."

From this he created 30 drawings on a billboard displayed in front of YouthLink. He replicated this project in collaboration with fellow social practice artist Mischa Kegan for Artify's year-long community art project based on the theme "Home is...", supported by Irrigate and led by artist organizer Oskar Ly. This version of This is Home focused on residents of the Hamline-Midway and Frogtown-Rondo neighborhoods and was displayed at the site of the Project for Pride in Living's Hamline Station affordable housing development, a previously blighted section of a neighborhood that had been disrupted by the construction of the Green Line.

A recent project of Siasoco's that also evolved out of Department of Change is THIS HOUSE IS NOT FOR SALE (THINFS). Conceived by Siasoco and his poet friend Molly Van Avery, founder of Poetry for People, THINFS took the image and vernacular of a realty sign and used it in a subversive way as both a symbol of the project's themes and a structure for displaying site-specific art in front yards throughout the Twin Cities.

"Molly purchased a foreclosed home through the Lakes Community Land Trust. There were clothes and furniture and toys strewn about inside, [which made her question], 'Who are these people and what does it mean for me to benefit from someone else's loss?'" Siasoco explains.

The two artists brought together a team of local poets in partnership with the Lakes Community Land Trust to hold dinners at eight previously foreclosed homes around the Twin Cities. The dinners were held with the new homeowners with the intent to explore what it means to acknowledge a home's history and make a life in the wake of someone else's loss. Now the "realty sign," the end product of each of these dinners, lives on in front of each of the houses as a symbol of the home's history and a piece of public art for everyone to enjoy.

At the same time that he was working on THINFS, Siasoco was part of the inaugural artist residency with the Cornerstone Group, a progressive real estate development company interested in solving community challenges through collaboration and meaningful community engagement.

The City of Richfield, an inner ring suburb with an older population and over 50 percent people of color, had approached Cornerstone to build Lyndale Gardens, a transformational town center at a large commercial property that had become a source of blight for the city. During the initial project planning process for there was an outcry for more arts and cultural programming, leading Cornerstone to reach out to Forecast Public Art and resulting in RARE, the Richfield Artist Resident Engagement.

RARE brought in Siasoco and dancer Emily Johnson to live in Richfield for one year and deliver large-scale creative community engagement projects. He decided that the Cornerstone Group really needed to hear about how the neighborhood residents felt about the development happening around them. He started by talking to people and collecting their images and thoughts on Instagram under the title Roots in Richfield, a micro-scale Humans of New York looking solely at Richfield residents and what they want to see happen in their community.

"I've been asking people what is the future of Richfield," Siasoco says. "There is concern that people's rents are being raised; that's a lot of the feedback I got. But on flip side [people said] we need to clean up this place and make s safer. It's really indicative of [what's currently happening in] the Twin Cities and it's a really hard discussion. What does it really mean to do genuine engagement, and who do we bring [to the table]? What does it mean for their [neighborhood's] growth, and is all growth good? As an artist those are the concerns I have and want [to address]."

Siasoco takes photos for Instagram then creates portraits based on those photographs. The portraits are then placed on a billboard by a bus stop that will eventually also have benches and swings, so that people "can sit and engage with some art."

"I've built an incredible relationship with some of these people," he says. "There's a guy who's been working here forever and everyone knows him. Another guy is a three-time felon living paycheck to paycheck. Then there's Judy, a retired arts teacher who does an arts program here on site. I've developed these real relationships and enshrined them in these portraits."

You could call much of the work Siasoco does "placemaking" because he is doing exactly that by all definitions of the term. But, he says, "For me it's really about the person. The 'placemaking' – there's a big conversation that's happening within the arts community in the Twin Cities that's important; we're still trying to figure [out what it means and how to] navigate genuine engagement. For me art is a real excuse to talk with people and have a moment where we connect. It's really essential to our deeper understanding of what it means to be in a community."

Yes, you could say a lot about Witt Siasoco's public and civic engagement practice and placemaking efforts, but at the root of it all is an artist using his practice to create "home."

**More resources:**

<http://wittsiasoco.com/>

<http://poetryforpeople.tumblr.com/>

<http://www.intermediaarts.org/creative-citymaking>

# **Macon Roving Listeners shares voice through listening**

Nicole Rupersburg

Monday, October 19, 2015

There is an art to listening, and that is the art practiced by the Macon Roving Listeners.

A common struggle experienced by neighborhoods in the midst of change – "gentrification," if you want to use the word fraught with controversy and negative connotations, but also neighborhoods simply in some state of transition – is that the existing residents often feel that they don't have a voice, that they have no say in what is happening in their very own communities.

The Macon Roving Listeners are there for just that purpose: to listen. To ask questions. To show people that their opinions matter. And, beyond just listening, also act as agents of change.

DeArmon Harges is the original "Roving Listener," based out of the Broadway United Methodist Church in Indianapolis. His idea was to "make the invisible visible," to discover and share in the dreams, passions, and gifts of fellow citizens simply through listening. His work is based in the practice of Asset-Based Community Development, a movement that considers local assets as the primary building blocks of sustainable community development and joins neighbors with institutions for social change and community building.

The Macon chapter of the Roving Listeners was started five years ago by Centenary Community Ministries with the same mission: to find out what people's gifts are through listening, to hear about what people want to see happen in their communities and also give them a voice.

The Listeners are a mix of youth and adults who go out as a team to knock on doors and interview people in the neighborhood, asking them basic questions about who they are, where they're from, how long they have lived there, what they like about Macon, and what they want to see changed. The Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities is a partner of Macon Roving Listeners, and the Listeners are also a mix of folks with and without developmental disabilities.

Deonna Belcher is a Roving Connector who acts as a facilitator to connect the people that the Listeners interview. She explains that she and the other Roving Connectors take the information collected by the Listeners and compile it, then get to work connecting neighbors based on their needs, skills, interests, and commonalities. For example, two neighbors might hail originally from the same city on the other side of the country and not even know it, or one person might need something built that another person has the skill set to make.

"We provide an avenue for them to connect," says Belcher. "Listening to their stories is just the beginning of it. It's a mapping process to discover what's right in a community versus what's wrong in the community. By discovering their assets it provides us an opportunity to connect and empower them."

Macon Roving Listeners are supported by the Knight Foundation and are also partnered with Mill Hill: East Macon Arts Village, a neighborhood revitalization effort led by the Macon Arts Alliance in partnership with the Macon-Bibb County Urban Development Authority, neighborhood residents, and community stakeholders. The goal of this project is to develop approximately four square blocks of the historic Fort Hawkins Neighborhood in East Macon into an arts village in order to address blight and foster economic opportunity in Macon's oldest neighborhood. This effort is supported by a National Endowment for the Arts Our Town grant of over \$134,000.

"They're taking the blight out of our neighborhood by purchasing abandoned homes to have artists in residency, and turning the old community center into an arts center," Belcher says. "They're repurposing this neighborhood and wanted to go in and find out what the neighbors thought about this and try to get to know them and their gifts, so as the changes happened they were informed and able to speak on the changes in their neighborhood."

Ultimately they would like to pair neighborhood residents with visiting social practice artists. The first artist will move in early 2016.

This summer, the Listeners made an effort to speak to everyone they could in the Mill Hill neighborhood. They interviewed 60 neighbors in total, from "all walks of life," and afterwards had a community dinner so everyone they interviewed could come out and get to know their neighbors. (They do this for each neighborhood they work in.)



They took all of the information they collected from the recorded interviews to the Urban Development Authority, establishing who is new in the neighborhood, who is established, how many vacant houses there are, and the changes people want to see in their neighborhood. Some people want to help the homeless; some want to help the elderly; some are worried about crime, about blight, about transit; some want more activities for children.

"Some people don't realize what is in their own backyard," Belcher says. "We find out how passionate they are about where they live and what they want to see happen. Some people have no idea that they're allowed to have a voice."

**More resources:**

<http://maconrovinglisteners.tumblr.com/>

<http://www.tedxindianapolis.com/speakers/deamon-harges/>

# **Write Your Block relates poetry and place in Philadelphia**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, March 31, 2015

Philadelphia has a rich heritage of poetry reflected in a diversity of poets and a vibrant poetry culture that includes respected institutions like the Kelly Writers House at the University of Pennsylvania and events like the Harvest Open Mic, the largest open mic night in Philadelphia that draws in a variety of performers, from spoken word artists and poetry slammers to musicians and stand-up comedians.

When Mayor Michael Nutter saw poet Sonia Sanchez perform at a City Hall Presents event, he wondered why the City of Philadelphia didn't have a Poet Laureate of its own, and decided to appoint her to the role. Now there is a formal process and a growing interest in the title, which is helping to elevate the significance of poetry in Philadelphia.

Write Your Block is a citywide poetry project from Philadelphia's current Poet Laureate, Sanchez's successor Frank Sherlock. The idea started with his application for Poet Laureate based on his collaborative collection of poems called *The City Real & Imagined*, a re-visioning of public spaces conducted with poet CAConrad as a self-guided psychogeographical wandering through "the City of Otherly Love."

"The idea was to create psychic poems, to write walking paths of citywide landmarks or personal landmarks, and [for people] to create a poem about Philadelphia as they see it," says Lindsay Tucker So, Research and Public Policy Associate with Creative Philadelphia, the City of Philadelphia's Office of Arts, Culture and Creative Economy, which oversees the Poet Laureate program. "He mentioned it in his interview and application and we thought it was an interesting way to elevate the role of poetry in Philadelphia, and that's the role of the Poet Laureate – to make poetry a more visible art form and make it incredibly accessible."

So, an Americans for the Arts Emerging Arts Leader, manages the Mayor's Poet Laureate and Youth Poet Laureate programs and facilitates projects like Write Your Block, a project of the Poet Laureate. She also manages CultureBlocks, the City of Philadelphia's free online mapping tool that visualizes the city's cultural assets and activity alongside local geographic,

social, economic, and demographic data. The different branches of her work seem to dovetail nicely with Write Your Block, a project that is as geographically-minded as it is literary.

"The goal of Write Your Block is to activate people of different demographic experiences with poetry to write about Philadelphia as they see it," she explains.

Write Your Block is sort of a literary exploration of place and identity, a collection of personal reflections from different neighborhoods throughout the city examining the writers' relationships to place and the identity that relationship informs. The ever-growing collection forms a kind of psychosocial map of the city.

For this arts experiment to work, people need to be engaged. To do that, So, Sherlock, and Creative Philadelphia are working with program partners that include libraries with after school committees, community organizations, and teachers and arts education organizations to incorporate this project into their programming. One valuable partner has been the Village of Arts & Humanities' People's Paper Co-op, a collaborative art and activism project that brings together artists, civil rights lawyers, and returning citizens to clear barriers for thousands of Philadelphia residents.

Sherlock is also leading extended workshops in key neighborhoods to get students interested in poetry and have them do their own Write Your Block activities, including getting out and walking around their city. His workshops end in April – National Poetry Month – after which Creative Philadelphia will release a print collection of selected works along with a Write Your Block map to visualize these works in a different way.

While Sherlock's tenure as Poet Laureate ends in December 2015, So says they hope to keep Write Your Block going as a long-term project of her office. "We think it's really interesting and that it will gain more momentum over the years to involve other poets bringing it to their own communities and in their own style of poetry, and expanding on it to make it more fluid based on their personal styles, whether they are Poet Laureates or not."

**More resources:**

<http://writeyourblock.tumblr.com/>  
<http://creativephl.org/>

# **Lenka Clayton, An Artist in Residence in Motherhood**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, February 17, 2015

Since 1860, in the afterglow of the Industrial Revolution and on the eve of the Civil War, the number of working mothers has risen 800 percent. For as long as women in contemporary Western society have been joining the workforce, working outside of the home, sharing the responsibilities of earning the household income, and in turn becoming career-minded themselves, they have had to navigate the challenges of being both a working woman and a mother – two separate social roles with their own unique set of expectations and assumptions, often at odds with one another.

Artists face the same struggle. Artists in residence programs – an important part of an artist's career trajectory and vital to an artist's financial sustainability – are not typically open to families, and women artists with newborns don't get paid to take maternity leave. Plus, the life of a working artist is not quite the same as one with a salaried career. So when professional artist Lenka Clayton was pregnant with her first child and beginning to realize just how much her life as a working artist was about to change, she decided to combine her professional and personal lives and created An Artist Residency in Motherhood, in turn attracting the attention of some high-profile arts institutions and foundations.

"Motherhood can be seen as a choice often that women have to make; if you want to be a serious artist or an engaged parent, it's a decision you have to make," Clayton observes. "It's difficult to talk about sometimes. There's this danger of getting locked into a certain box. [Institutional recognition] helps bring visibility to those subjects, and enables an artist to work in public and have access to a conversation about it. It's been really important to me to connect with new people and bring visibility to the subject."

While pregnant with her son, Clayton was asked by the curator at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Art to be a part of their biennial show. "It was really difficult for me to think about this show," says Clayton. "It happened at a time when everything was going to be completely different – I was very pregnant and [my son] would be born [while I would be working on this piece]. I had to come up with some sort of rules for an impossible task to achieve, but I couldn't promise to achieve an impossible task with a newborn

baby."

Thinking about this show got her thinking about some bigger issues, particularly the intersection of motherhood and the arts from a socioeconomic perspective. "What support is there from the government for freelance artists?" she asked herself. "All of these personal questions going on in my head really became the basis for this project which had never happened before."

Clayton pitched the Carnegie Museum her concept for the show, called Maternity Leave, and they accepted it – surprising even her. Her space was a blank space in a gallery with a white pedestal and a white plastic baby monitor. As visitors got closer they could hear a baby crying or a lullaby – it was live linked to her nursery, and people were hearing what was going on live in her home. "I negotiated with the museum to be on 'maternity leave' as an artist and they would pay me \$200 a week, the same as [London's maternity leave allowance], for the duration of the show," she explains. "It was a big group show in a big museum. That was really the first piece that took this personal narrative and summarized it."

From that show Clayton evolved her An Artist Residency in Motherhood. "I was realizing that, having kids, not only was I not able to travel as before" – another integral aspect of an artist's life is having to travel around to different shows – "but also there are not that many spaces for artists with families to be an artist in residence. It's kind of a closed area. Successful artists are young, transient, nomadic, able to travel from thing to think at the drop of a hat and work for free. That didn't apply to me anymore. That also applies more to a man."

With a residency, she says, it's sort of like being in another world. Resident artists are inspired by being in a different place and space, and the experience of having kids is similar to that. "The formal structure I borrowed from the art world and put over my everyday life to create a distance where I could be a mother and be in this messy world, but also keep my professional life by thinking of myself as an artist in residence," Clayton says.

An Artist Residency in Motherhood was funded by the Robert C. Smith Fund and the Betsy R. Clark Fund of The Pittsburgh Foundation and a Sustainable Art Foundation Award, and supported in kind by Pittsburgh Filmmakers and Pittsburgh Center for Creative Reuse. An Artist Residency in Motherhood was exhibited at Pittsburgh Center for the Arts in 2012, and documents and

works from the project were exhibited in Complicated Labors at University of California Santa Cruz last year. She also received the 2013 Emerging Artist of the Year award from the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts.

"That sort of fiscal, institutional support lent a sort of validity to the project, supporting motherhood rather than being this invisible thing that you have a family and hide it," says Clayton. "That gave it this value. I had student visits and arranged exhibitions. I really tried to impose this structure of a residency onto this domestic space in life with a young kid. I would make work that wasn't about motherhood, not as subject but rather as the material, like exhaustion, or lack of resources, or lack of movement, or the feeling of being invisible. I tried to use these as things to work with and play around with."

She estimates that she made between 20 and 30 pieces while she was the Artist-in-Residence-in-Motherhood from September 2012 to May 2014. "It was really important to me that I was still working in the art world."

Some of the work she produced as part of An Artist Residency in Motherhood was just her working by herself as an artist and focusing on her materials, what she calls the "ephemeral stuff of parenthood," and part of it was a collective endeavor examining what it is to be a parent and work as an artist at the same time.

The pieces she made during this time include a video series called "The Distance I Can Be From My Son," during which she allows her son to run away from her off the frame and lets him go as far as she can before feeling a sense of "sheer panic" and having to run after him, ultimately exploring what she sees as being an invisible tie and an immeasurable distance.

Another project was "63 Objects Taken from my Son's Mouth," a documentation of her life with her son aged eight months to 15 months as seen through the collection of objects she had to remove from his mouth – like stones and cigarette butts. "These little objects symbolize this horror and panic, but as soon as they're out of his mouth it's really funny; I was just sort of thinking about that land between humor and horror [that mothers experience]."

For a project called "Mother's Day," Clayton invited mothers from all over the world to send in a detailed account of the things they do with their children. "So much of the work of parenting is invisible," says Clayton. The accounts she received were incredibly detailed. She calls them "a sort of poetry,"

outlining "these absurd situations that happen every few minutes when you're alone with a small child."

She says she didn't go into this work with an expectation of achieving a particular outcome, and she has been surprised by the response and support she has received at various points. "When the Carnegie engaged with what I was doing, having this very complicated conversation in this honest and humble way within this sort of institutional agenda, and people had to sign a release form to come into the nursery – this whole process was so complicated I was amazed and impressed they worked with me."

When she started with "Maternity Leave" and followed it up with An Artist Residency in Motherhood, the experience of motherhood for an artist was a subject that there wasn't a lot of conversation about at the time. "If you Google 'artist motherhood,' there isn't much [content] around it," says Clayton. "There's a real need to have this conversation and support." She says she receives emails from other artist-mothers thanking her for her work and saying it has inspired them in theirs. "I didn't think so many other people would be touched by this. I'm so happy to be a part of this conversation that wasn't visible to me [when I went looking for it]."

**More resources:**

<http://www.lenkaclayton.com/>

# **Reach Studio reaches artists homeless and in transition, treating them as artists first**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, January 27, 2015

Art therapy is a well-established practice that uses the creative process to help improve a person's physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

RedLine Denver, an "urban laboratory" that fosters forms of social practice in the arts, uses arts as a method of therapeutic expression for the homeless and in-transition population through its Reach Studio, a free program that gives socially engaged artists the opportunity to collaborate, create, and share ideas in an inclusive community.

Reach Studio has been operating for about five years now, started by two students at the Metropolitan State University of Denver who wanted to do something in the community. They approached the St. Francis Center, a homeless center in Denver, and started a program there doing arts instruction. They were eventually connected to RedLine, an organization that emphasizes the convergence of art, education, and community.

It was at this point that Adam Buehler, Reach Studio Coordinator, got involved. "Initially I just saw a flyer out on the street somewhere that said something about an art show featuring homeless artists and said, 'Wow, that sounds really interesting,'" Buehler says. "I went to the first exhibition at RedLine and got to meet some of the artists. I thought it was a really amazing concept and started volunteering with the group after that. I stuck around long enough that they eventually hired me to run it!"

One of the first lessons Buehler learned about working with the in-transition population is that the "homeless" label is often inaccurate, and it can be difficult for outsiders to navigate the waters of what it means to be "homeless" and what it means to be "in-transition" in a way that is sensitive to the prejudices against homelessness while also being mindful that most of the real human people in that population cannot be so easily labeled with a broad stroke.

"I still remember that first exhibition," Buehler recalls. "PJ D'Amico [former Executive Director of RedLine] got up and said something like, 'Thanks for coming out and supporting these homeless artists,' and one of the guys in



the show named Gonzo, he got up there and said, "First things first, I'm not exactly homeless," then he went into his personal specific living situation. To me that kind of questioning of labels is really kind of at the heart of what this program is about. It's not just an art space and then everybody comes together and praises the work of the homeless artists. The folks in the program want to be seen as artists first and foremost. Maybe they're homeless, maybe they're not, but their living situation is kind of secondary to who they are and why they're in this program."

Buehler says he has really tried to let the program evolve per the direction of the participants. "In our original vision statement of the program, it said something about 'this studio program is an open studio arts program for the homeless.' Some of the participants took issue with that language and that label, [first] because for some people it didn't make sense – maybe they were in transitional housing or were homeless before but they weren't anymore, and [second] because they want to be seen for their art and their assets versus their deficits. We ended up changing the vision statement to fit what felt like was more appropriate to reflect how people experience Reach and what they get out of it."

He also led a discussion with Reach participants about who was and was not to be allowed to participate in the program, asking whether a past experience with homelessness was a prerequisite for participation. "All of the artists said, 'No, I love making art with whoever. You don't have to have been through all of that.'" Since then they have opened the program up to anyone in the community. There is still a focus on reaching out to people who don't have their own space to create or their own art supplies – Reach is still connected to homeless shelters and service agencies, and they still hold outreach workshops at shelters and nonprofits led by core Reach artists – but it's not exclusive. Buehler believes this was the best course of action.

"I'm so glad we followed the lead of the artists here," he says. "When talking about deeper issues of homelessness, the stigma and the disconnect between people that are and aren't is one of the biggest barriers – the stigma and the distrust of that label. The more we get people together, especially around art, the less there is that stigma."

Reach Studio is a standard weekly community studio program that happens every Tuesday inside RedLine from 1-4 p.m. The space is open to anyone who wants to come in, use free art supplies and create. Once a person has been active with Reach for a month, they have the opportunity to display their

artwork on the walls of the community studio and sell it (75 percent of sales go to the artist and 25 percent go back to the program to buy more materials and supplies). After five to six months, a participant is allowed more studio time, opening up the studio Tuesday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. as long as nothing else is scheduled for the space, so artists can come in on their own time and "do their thing."

Reach has an annual exhibition at RedLine that showcases the work the artists have been doing. This year's exhibition opens February 6, and for the first time the exhibition is built around a theme, described thusly:

"Unscripted is an improvisational survey of Reach Studio Artists exploration of RedLine's 2015 theme of 'Play.' By need or want, many of the Reach Studio artists have at one time or another been in a position to improvise their positions in life. This exhibition celebrates the ability to make and remake the self in new and unique ways, by mavericks who have exercised that talent in uncommon ways. Reach Studio hopes to preserve the dignity of these acts, and present them with well-deserved consideration."

The exhibition, which runs through March 1, was curated by RedLine resident artist Andy Rising.

Some of the other efforts spearheaded by Reach include an art mentorship program for established participants (who have been in the program for six months or longer), pairing them up with either a resident artist at RedLine or another artist in the community. "The idea is to get two artists together to set up this mentorship opportunity to set some goals in terms of artistic hopes and dreams and get some advice and guidance from folks a little farther along in their career," Buehler explains. Reach also hosts an ongoing workshop series every month when they invite anyone from the community or Reach artists to lead a workshop on a new technique in a medium or speak about their own work to be inspiring to others.

Buehler says one highlight of the past year was working with the Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design, which gave three full four-year scholarships to three Reach artists. These artists started their classes this past fall, and at the end will all leave with a Bachelor of Fine Arts. Buehler hopes to develop more partnerships like this with other schools.

For those who might be skeptical about whether or not art practice has any value in the lives of those in transition with perhaps more pressing

subsistence needs, Buehler has this to say: "People in their situation get the bare bones of what's needed. They can find a place to stay, they can find food, they can get clothes. But there's really something that's missing, so when they learn about the Reach program and they use this space, I feel like I see a difference in the look on their faces. The light in their eyes seems brighter when they take off at the end of the session. It speaks to the need in all of us as humans to express ourselves in some way. When there are limits to that, having an outlet where you can create, where you can make art, means a lot. It brings back a sense of fullness to life. I hear that a lot from people."

Buehler talks about some of the people who come through Reach Studio – those who came for a while then moved on, a woman who got a job and an apartment and now has her own space to create, a man who does day labor and refuses to miss his weekly studio time because it's so important to him. One guy describes coming to the studio as being like "coming home."

"We have been lucky enough to develop a pretty strong culture in the program that is really positive and supportive," Buehler says. He adds, "You never know who's going to walk through the door. There are some amazingly talented artists out there that are just unknown. That's one of the highlights for me – the variety and the sense of possibility."

**More resources:**

<http://redlineart.org/>

# **Nikiko Masumoto cultivates connections between the art of food and farming and stories of place**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, October 07, 2014

Nikiko Masumoto is a farmer, and also an artist. Contrary what people might assume about these two different aspects of her life, they are not at odds with each other. In fact, each one informs the other – her work as a farmer shaping her work as an artist and vice-versa. She refers to herself as an "agrarian artist," cultivating the richness of life in California's Central Valley through farming, food, storytelling, art, and community.

"The importance of imagination in farming as well as in art is essential to my literal livelihood as well as the thriving of my soul," says Masumoto. "Both depend on the generative spirit of creativity and imagination. The link between farming and art for me – they are inseparable. So much of farming and art is imagining the possibility of experience and working towards some exchange in the public realm. For me that is why I farm – I farm to grow food that carries the stories of my family and of this place, the infinite inconceivable pleasures of food, and as an artist I perform and write and create experiences in invitation for people to engage in their own storytelling. The seed of germination is one and the same for me."

Masumoto grew up on Masumoto Family Farm, an 80-acre certified organic farm south of Fresno that grows peaches, nectarines, grapes, and raisins. Hers is the fourth generation to work this land.

Her father, David Mas Masumoto, is a farmer, writer, and arts advocate. He has won several awards for his writing, including recognition from the James Beard Foundation as a finalist, and has also served on the boards of several organizations, currently including the James Irvine Foundation, the Statewide Leadership Council to the Public Policy Institute of California, and the National Council on the Arts, for which he was appointed by President Obama.

"I was really lucky to grow up with a mentor and role model who paved the way for making a connection between farming and art," says Masumoto. "He farmed my entire life but was also a creative writer. For decades we have

talked about farming as an artistic practice in itself."

This might sound like a natural, even obvious, statement to make now, with the rapid growth of "foodie" culture having penetrated all corners of the country, creating a consuming public with a greater interest in and awareness of the food they eat – a highly determined level of thoughtfulness – than probably since the dawn of industrialization and the end of America's agrarian society.

Now, for some, being a farmer is "cool" (even if the "coolness" quotient is a bit affected), as urban farming has become an earnest strategy in the push towards re-urbanization and increasingly more people are leaving their cube farms to cultivate urban farms on vacant plots of city land.

But it wasn't so long ago that Masumoto saw kids getting laughed at in school just for having an association with farming.

"I remember classmates getting teased relentlessly for having any relationship with farming," she says. Since then there has been a cultural shift, from food being viewed as a needs-based commodity supplied by corporate agriculture to understanding food as an art form. "[There was a] pendulum swing of going to college and saying, 'I'm an organic farmer' and that having social currency."

Masumoto says that society is experiencing a moment in which popular culture is returning to some of its roots, getting back to the fundamentals of life – gathering around the table and sharing food, thinking about environmental sustainability. As the popularity of food and food enthusiasts exploded, people started to actually think about where their food actually comes from – the farm.

"One of the parts of food production that has been rendered invisible in so many ways is the art that happens in the fields," Masumoto says. "As farmers, we're growing aesthetic experiences. In the modern food production world there is a lot of pressures and different ideas on how to be a farmer; when the work becomes about the aesthetics, the story of food, that's when you can be transported in a single bite."

As an agrarian artist, Masumoto is specifically interested in stories. She also has a bachelors degree in women's and gender studies and a Masters of Arts in theatre with a concentration in performance as public practice. She

jokes that in the off-season when she's not on the tractor thinking about the farm, she's "really engaged in thinking of storytelling as a mode of community building, as a practice of physical dialogue."

She launched the Valley Storytellers Project, a multi-disciplinary approach to empowering people of the Central Valley to tell their stories, and also created the one-woman show about Japanese American collective memory, "What We Could Carry," culled together almost entirely from the testimony of individuals from the Los Angeles hearings of the 1981 Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians.

"I believe in the magic of storytelling, not only for teller but also the listener. The possibility of public exchange is so rich for inspiring changes in behaviors and public policy shifts."

Masumoto grew up listening to her father's stories, and recalls from a very young age knowing that her Japanese-American grandparents had lived through the internment camps, but because there was so much shame attached to that experience her father had to fill in the gaps of her family's history. "He's an incredible storyteller. He was given this amazing gift to understand how meaning can be made from a story," she says. Through the stories he told of his parents' experience during World War II she came to understand the importance of keeping those memories translatable and alive over generations, which led to "What We Carry." "I had a strong sense that storytelling was deeply rooted in my heart of justice."

Her most recent projects have seen her in the role of facilitator that is "parallel to my life as a farmer," creating places for storytelling about place.

Last fall she organized an "art-guided bus tour" of the Central Valley, a region known for its incredible bounty of food production and yet, as the one of the poorest regions in the nation, it is unable to feed itself. "There's this really poignant paradox about this place," says Masumoto. She wanted to create an opportunity for local artists to tell their story of place through Highway 99, the central artery of Central Valley, so she created a free day-long bus tour called Passages/Home that stopped at three community places along Highway 99 where the six local artists created and shared site-specific work across a variety of genres, allowing the artists and members of the community the opportunity to explore the meaning of that specific place.

"My favorite part was when we staged a performance art engagement piece

at a rest stop. The artist leading us in engagement...transformed [yoga] poses into [interpretations of] local history, then this mariachi band comes marching by! It was this amazing moment of where the publicness of creation and place combined to show that artistry and art is already happening here. This accidental encounter was this amazing moment of connection and of place."

She is also wrapping up with Cohort 1 of the Catalyst Initiative, a pilot project of The Center for Performance and Civic Practice creating partnership work between artists and community partners to address a community need through arts-based civic practice projects. Her cohort focused on issues of hunger and food access and was done in partnership with the Center for Land-Based Learning, a nonprofit that educates youth about agriculture across the state of California.

"The project has been two-fold: [first] sharing arts practices and design skills with their instructors for them to integrate into their artistic programming with youth – a meeting of arts and sciences in an effort to teach high school youth to create a sustainable future through food. The second part was to design and co-facilitate a digital storytelling workshop about hunger. Again, storytelling is the vehicle for opening a larger civic dialogue about hunger in a



*Nikiko Masumoto. Photo credit: Gosia Wozniacka*

state that produces more food than any other state."

The end goal of that workshop was for it to inspire and encourage students to share and invite a public conversation around hunger at a public festival in California's state capitol, Sacramento. "It was a very emotional experience for some of the students because hunger is attached to so much shame, [just] for not having access or power over food."

Masumoto also sees a strong link between farming and food and being a rural artist, and believes that rural arts create an opportunity to balance the urban-centrism of our culture.

"The parallels are amazing between thinking about food and farming and being in a rural arts community," she says. "There is such a need for cross pollination between rural places and suburban and urban places. There's such an opportunity between art, storytelling, and food to create many more avenues of consciousness."

**More resources:**

<http://www.masumoto.com/>

<https://valleystorytellersproject.wordpress.com/>



# **The McColl Center offers urban residencies to socially-conscious artists**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, June 17, 2014

What is "environmental art"? Specifically, environmental art is public art that mitigates some sort of environmental issue at its location site. But in a more general sense, environmental art contributes to the environment around it, enriching its community and fostering a relationship between the people and the place, and the people in the place.

In an equally general sense, this is a large part of the mission of the McColl Center and its artist residency programs.

The McColl Center for Art + Innovation has had an environmental artist residency program since 2009, but a \$400,000 grant from ArtPlace America last summer is enabling the Center to create an artist-led Arts & Ecology Community Campus in alliance with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Housing Partnership to be completed in 2015 in the Brightwalk community at historic Double Oaks.

Environmental artist residents at McColl have led projects like the creation of a wet garden to alleviate a problem with storm water drainage in a neighborhood park. This project was conceptualized and installed in collaboration with community residents, who in turn became the stewards of the garden.

The work of these environmental artists is all done in collaboration with the residents in the community based on their feedback of what environmental needs most need to be addressed, and the projects in turn create safe, inviting outdoor gathering spaces for the community.

The McColl Center has been working with community partner, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Housing Partnership, in this area of Brightwalk.

"They're incredible partners," says Lisa Hoffman, Associate Director of the McColl Center who also spearheaded the Environmental Art and Community Engagement department. "They have identified a number of the environmental issues and social issues of integrating a new neighborhood into [this] historic area."

The environmental art in this area is used as much to address ecologic concerns as it is designed to bridge the socioeconomic divide between the new and historic parts of the neighborhood.

Resident artists learn to engage the community, work collaboratively on the design and construction of environmental art installations, and also mentor students from local universities and high schools who are interested in pursuing careers in art, ecology, engineering, or design.

But the environmental artist-in-residence is just one facet of the Center's residency program.

Last year, after a long-term strategic planning process spanning several years that examined how the Center can be of the most value to both the artists and the Charlotte community, the Center announced a new focus in their renowned residency programs with the introduction of ten different "spheres of impact," which they identified as being key to the future of Charlotte: beauty, business innovation, craft, design and architecture, education, environment, health, international, technology, and social justice. Artists are curated throughout the year within these domains. The focus for the artists-in-residence is ultimately one of social consciousness and community engagement.

The McColl Center hosts residents year-round for three to eleven months, during which time they receive an honorarium, travel and living accommodations, their own studio, a stipend for materials, technical advice, and labor to assist them.

Artists can come in from anywhere in the world. They are vetted by the organizational team at McColl on whether or not they're a good fit for the program through extensive Skype conversations followed by site visits. "It's about getting to know who they are and being good, creative listeners," says Hoffman.

The artist is then paired with the right community partner who "is looking for this injection of creative talent to help solve an issue – something they have identified as a need for them." Once the artist and community partner are paired, McColl helps shepherd them through the process of exploring one of those spheres of impact. "This is really a co-construction collaborative effort [with both the artist's and the partner's] goals and mission so aligned to make it a perfect fit in order to get to the desired outcome."

There is a prerequisite that artists be interested in community engagement, though they can be residents at any point in their careers. "Artists might already have an engagement model that they need to mold and adapt, or we might help them develop an engagement model of their own," Hoffman says.

The artists also have time in their studios to develop their practice. The residency is an evolution of their studio practice with community engagement, and all artists have the opportunity to exhibit in the first floor gallery of the 30,000-square-foot neo-Gothic church built in 1901 that is home to the McColl Center and its artist residents.

Whether or not the artist is specifically environmental in nature, the artists-in-residence at the McColl Center each contribute to the fabric of the community around them in their own unique, positively impactful ways.

**More resources:**

<http://mccollcenter.org/>

# NEW CONTEXTS

*Putting classical artforms into new contexts to surprise and engage audiences and participants*

# **Hattie Mae Williams brings guerrilla dance performances to public places with Tattooed Ballerinas**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, March 10, 2015

Hattie Mae Williams grew up in Miami and attended the New World School of Arts magnet high school where, she says, she learned a lot about how to use art as a way to promote social change. She then went on to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre in New York for her MFA where she became interested in site-specific dance.

"I was starting to see that theatre was predominantly for a certain demographic," Williams says. "I was learning that a lot of people didn't go to theatres." This realization, among others, became the impetus for the Tattooed Ballerinas. "It doesn't make sense all the time for me to perform in theatres. The Tattooed Ballerinas formed because I was finding it difficult to fit into this certain structure. People had a certain idea of what a dancer was, a certain aesthetic. But the people I was working with, including myself, [we didn't really] fit into this aesthetic."

She wanted to create a place where people like her – both dancers and audience members alike – felt comfortable, where there wasn't this sort of stilted perception of the theatre that is only for certain people (as audience members) and only embraces certain people (as performers).

And yes, Williams has tattoos.

The Tattooed Ballerinas, which Williams describes as "more of a movement than a company," does site-specific performances in nontraditional locations intended to reach a wider audience. The guerilla performance group explores spaces that people already occupy and promotes the idea that these are spaces that can be used differently. Since 2003, Williams and her fellow performers have put on performances in public places like laundromats, grocery stores, empty lots, Target stores, abandoned churches, and bus stops.

"We're reaching an audience that has always been interested in the arts but didn't really feel the theatre was their place," she explains. "[The theatre

community] shot [itself] in the foot by making it exclusive. There's no real connection between the performer and the audience in the theatre. Some things definitely call for that atmosphere but some things really call for interaction, not just 'you have your gaze on me and I'm entertaining you.'"

Williams has kept her foot in both worlds – that of the professional "Uptown" world as well as the guerrilla-style performance world of her own making. It's important to be able to pull from both worlds, she says, and while there were some eyebrows raised when she first started the Tattooed Ballerinas project, she is finding that nontraditional site-specific performances and cross-genre collaboration are becoming more the norm.

"Site-specific dance has a long lineage of history where people were making these happenings and doing this performance art," she says. "[When I first started] people were curious [but also thought], 'That's just Hattie being Hattie,' with me walking around in my skin color with tattoos doing modern and classic ballet. Now it's becoming more of a practice, like, 'Of course, why wouldn't you do this performance in Walgreens?'"

The Tattooed Ballerinas is interdisciplinary and project-based, with artists – dancers as well as visual artists – in New York and Miami, where Williams moved back about a year ago.

"My whole goal is to reclaim community spaces," she says. "It's kind of bizarre that there's not any real community spaces outside of commercial [space in Miami]."

This desire took shape as the Miami Sites Project, a two-part site-specific piece that is part performance, part documentary, and all cross-collaborative. The first took place at The Miami Marine Stadium and the second will be at The Venetian Pool in Coral Gables, both public places that are significant pieces of Miami's history.

She just finished filming at the Miami Marine Stadium, a structure built in the 1960s that has been abandoned for 20 years. Previously used as a gathering space for various events, it has been closed since Hurricane Andrew stormed through. Much as the Tattooed Ballerinas are guerilla performance artists, guerilla graffiti artists have since taken over the space, covering every square inch in graffiti. The Miami Sites Project, which was awarded a Knight Arts Challenge grant, is a site-specific dance performance with a coordinating film documenting the performance and the space.

"Archiving and documenting is a really important part of my work," Williams says. "The friends of the Miami Marine Stadium are trying to raise funds to reopen that space but there is talk that maybe it won't reopen. I thought it is important to Miami history to document it."

She is particularly interested in the history of the site and what it is being used for now. The Miami Marine Stadium is located on an island that was once a Black-only beach, where Black soldiers were trained how to swim during WWII. Sewage from the luxury (and white) Fisher Island nearby was also pumped out there when it was Black-only. "I went into this project thinking this is a beautiful space and an amazing historical structure, then all these other things started coming up."

Williams feels a creative energy bubbling in Miami, one that exists beyond the glorified spring-break-in-December that is Art Basel, and one she wants to be a part of. "Artists are more motivated to create a scene that people can benefit from," she says. "I definitely wanted to be a part of that because [I saw] a lot of things were changing here. This is my home. I wanted to be a part of that influence. New York has fed me but it was also sucking me dry. If I'm going to invest and give back, I'm going to do it in my hometown."

**More resources:**

<http://tattooedballerinas.blogspot.com/>

# Sam White makes the Bard's enduring themes on the human condition relevant to Detroiters

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, January 06, 2015

Shakespeare...in Detroit? Sam White not only thought it could happen, but also that it should. So, in 2012, she founded Shakespeare in Detroit. White – an actor, comedian, journalist, marketer, teacher, and theatre-lover – moved out west to Las Vegas back in 2007. In 2008, she attended the Utah Shakespeare Festival. As a lifelong Shakespeare fan, she found herself thinking, "If they can do something like this in the middle of the desert, we can surely do something like that at home in Detroit where we have all of these parks and [water]."

She moved back to Detroit in 2008, but spent most of her time trying to find a job while still doing stand-up comedy. In 2012, she worked with Detroit's respected business accelerator, TechTown, to create a business and feasibility plan for her theatre troupe, and in August 2013, Shakespeare in Detroit (SID) put on their first performance.



*Sam White. Photo credit: Doug Coombe*



"I didn't know if anyone would come," she says. "About 500 people showed up, and that showed me I was on to something."

That first SID performance, *Othello*, was held in the open air at Grand Circus Park. Next came *Antony and Cleopatra* at the Recycle Here! facility on Holden Street. "We used the venue as inspiration," White says. "We did it with no sound [system]. All of the costumes were repurposed or recycled since it's a recycling center."

A *Midsummer Night's Dream* was performed in New Center Park to a crowd of 800, *Romeo and Juliet* bowed at both Mumford High School and Grand Circus Park, and *The Tempest* kicked off the 2014-2015 season at the YMCA's Marlene Boll Theater. Next up will be *King Lear* at Marygrove College in April and *Macbeth* over the summer.

"We perform in places where people live and work and play," White says. Sometimes her troupe is invited to perform in a certain space, and sometimes she is inspired to approach a particular place. She recalls seeing the Detroit Chamber Winds and Strings "Structurally Sound" presentation at Recycle Here!, hearing Marcus Schoon perform on an electric bassoon while promising the audience that he was going to change the way people thought about the bassoon and make them think about it in a new and interesting way. "I thought, 'Well, if he can do that with a bassoon...what he's doing with music is what I want to do with Shakespeare.' So I was inspired to do that show at Recycle Here!"

White says that SID is different from other Shakespeare companies in a few ways. First, because they "do crazy things like have performances in places like parks and recycling centers where people would be anyway." Second, because she herself has roots here – she jokes that people love to hear her "Seven Mile to Stratford" story, about how her mom got her into Shakespeare at a young age and "this little girl from Seven Mile and Greenfield fell madly in love with this guy from Stratford."

Ultimately, though, it is SID's approach to its audience engagement that really differentiates the company.

"For me it's important to make it connect with the audience," she says. "It has to be relevant in some way to them. With *Othello*, at the time there was this questioning of the legitimacy of the mayoral candidate because he didn't

look the way others did, [so we were] looking at Othello as being an outsider despite his qualifications " – here she is referring to Caucasian mayoral candidate Mike Duggan, who would become Detroit's first white mayor in 40 years, but not without some resistance based on his race and suburban affiliations – "Then, with Antony and Cleopatra, the Romans wanted to hold on to all the old things; they didn't like change, they didn't like things that were new and different; but then you had the Egyptians who loved everything new and different. [This was about] old and new Detroiters [coming together to see] wonderful things to come for the city. We try to make it relevant for people to their everyday lives and speak to their lives."

If the Bard's enduring popularity over the centuries reflects the universality of his themes on the human experience – on life and love and power and jealousy and rage and loss and wonder and hope – then White's approach reflects a universality in the Detroit experience as reflected in these works from half a millennia ago. She also seeks to make Shakespeare approachable to all Detroiters – not just those who are seasoned theatre patrons and/or those who can afford it.

"We are committed to having one free summer show per year," says White. "We are huge on accessibility and having more kids from Seven Mile come out to enjoy Shakespeare. Not everyone has money for a ticket or even transportation, so we need something [free and] on the bus line."

Additionally, SID seeks to break the mold of the "typical" theatre-goer, and has so far been successful at doing just that.

"The [stereotypical] traditional theatre goer is 65 years old," White says. "Our typical audience member is 30 and she's really incredible. I like that we're getting young people to get out and see Shakespeare. The thing about a lot of other businesses coming to Detroit is that they have maybe a few years of examples that work in other cities; with Shakespeare you have centuries of proven consumer engagement. People from all over the world come to theatres to see Shakespeare."

It's also a potential tourism driving force for the resilient city working tirelessly to rebuild itself to retain the people already here while also attracting new ones. "The reason why New York City is New York City is because there is such a healthy theater community. If you want to create a tourism community, you have to give [tourists] worldwide experiences. Shakespeare is that. People go to Stratford [Ontario] for Shakespeare; why not make Detroit a hotspot too and have international tourism here? Art can't be an

'or,' it has to be an 'and,' and we need to keep art talent here. People aren't going to stay if they don't have those experiences. If we really want to have a healthy, thriving city, we need to have our artists, and Shakespeare is great bait."

**More resources:**

<http://www.shakespeareindetroit.com/>

# **Bach and Boombox declassifies the classics, mixing the Beastie Boys with Beethoven**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, November 11, 2014

Nathaniel ("Nat") Chaitkin grew up in the music world. Both of his parents were musicians and he grew up about a mile from the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York. "My idea of living on the edge was sneaking into New York Philharmonic concerts!" he laughs.

Though training as a classical cellist, in high school Chaitkin spent two years listening to nothing but Jimi Hendrix. "There was this pingback of what I was working on as a musician and what I was actually listening to, and that made perfect sense to me. But then I got into the real world and people don't listen to or care about the music that I [play]."

He remembers a friend of his in college saying, "No offense Nat, but I hate what you do," listing all the reasons why there was no way he would ever see a classical concert. At the same time, Chaitkin was talking to one of his music school professors who played a lot of jazz, "someone very comfortable in being seated in two different worlds."

At the time, classical musicians sat on their cultural thrones inside lavish concert halls, revered by the socioeconomic elite (who could afford to attend the concerts and support the organizations through charitable giving) and generally seen as being "above" everyone else. There was a schism between those who attended such concerts, donning all their fineries while quaffing champagne, and the general public, who might prefer to wear jeans and T-shirts on weekends and catch a rock band playing for free at a community festival. Those two worlds seemed entirely separate, almost alien to one another. And as a result, the general public has a perception of classical music being impossibly elitist.

But Chaitkin doesn't agree.

"That's the way people have viewed this music, but that isn't what it was when it was written," he says. "That's very 20<sup>th</sup> century and a very American thing – the idea of exclusivity and it being the providence of the rich. Classical music is expensive [to train and produce] and you need wealthy patrons, but then a lot of other people feel left out because their image is that they're not

always welcome. They take that exclusivity they perceive and project it onto the music itself. It's one thing if they don't want to dress that way and spend that kind of money on something they're not sure they like, but for the music itself to not be accessible is a misperception."

He believes that classical music is made of the same basic building blocks as all of the popular rock, hip-hop, and pop music of today. "There are certain things that go on in every kind of music that people can latch on to whether they're aware of it or not," he says.

The idea of straddling these two different worlds appealed to him tremendously. Where so many people saw only differences, he saw all of the similarities. He brainstormed ideas of things he could do to bridge this gap, but it would be several years before he acted on it. He finished school, went to Washington D.C., joined the marine band, played at the White House for eight years, taught at Georgetown, then at Michigan State University in Lansing, then moved to Cincinnati. It was there in Cincinnati, two years ago, that he won a grant that was offered to local artists to bring what they do out into the community. "So almost 20 years later I pulled out this [idea] that had been sitting in a filing cabinet."



*Nat Chaitkin. Photo credit: Tina Gutierrez*

And that was how Bach and Boombox came to be.

With Bach and Boombox, Chaitkin "declassifies the classics." Structured as an interactive performance and conversation about the essence of music, Chaitkin plays music from Bach and other classical composers on his cello, then plays recordings by pop, rock, and jazz artists like the Beastie Boys and Myles Davis on a boombox, all done in a relaxed, casual setting.

"My main goal is to present what is often seen as different, or remote for some people, as just as fun as anything else to listen to," he says. "I spend the first few minutes playing Bach and introducing them to Bach the person. Then I play AC/DC's 'Back in Black' to get people's attention, Beyonce for my daughter, Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> is in there..."

The underlying discursive theme to his work is that music repeats itself – it all works the same way.

"I use James Brown to get people to hear trio form. That's a perfect example of how a bridge works, and it's the same thing that people run into at a symphony concert," he explains. "I just try to make it as barebones and fun as I can. Wherever I go and whoever I'm playing for I try to make it as fun as possible. The classical world is isolated and insulated, often for financial reasons, but those things have nothing to do with music; not the perceptions people have of it. Music is music. That's the goal – I want people saying, 'Oh, I never thought of it that way,' and maybe down the road get people going to a concert. I'd like to be the person helping orchestras and arts organizations expand their audiences after seeing me."

Chaitkin brings his program to youth outreach programs, schools, community centers, retirement homes...even the airport. "I'll go pretty much anywhere! I think that's been the most fun of this – going places and people saying, 'What on earth are you doing here?' There's [the idea that there is] a certain place and time for this music more than any other kind of music, 'it should be in this kind of hall and you dress up and be quiet.' It's just fun to blow that up. [I played] across the street from the ballgame last summer [and in the airport food court in front of the McDonald's last winter]. That's not behavior you expect from a classical musician. I enjoy deflating that stereotype whenever possible."

What Chaitkin is ultimately trying to do is open the doors to classical music to a much wider audience, and the vehicle he's using to present it is what

they're comfortable with. After opening up that door a little bit, those same people might be more willing to check out a classical concert that they might not have before, which also serves the ever-growing number of arts organizations trying to overcome perceptions of exclusivity and inaccessibility in order to engage new audiences.

"There is much more competition for philanthropy now," Chaitkin says. "For a long time orchestras thought they had their people and they would always be there, and that's not true anymore." Just look to recent strikes, lockouts, and renegotiations in major symphonies in Atlanta, Minnesota, and Detroit for evidence that the cultural climate has changed faster than these organizations have been able to address it.

Chaitkin says he expected some of his classical colleagues to turn their noses up at what he is doing. "[There's this idea that, as a classical musician,] you don't compromise anything. What we're doing is so noble and so wonderful that if you do your job as an artist then people will show up, and they stop there because for a long time that was all that was needed. Now that ship has sailed. Now [it] is a given that we're going to have to do things differently." And his colleagues generally seem to know and accept that. "By and large, [they] think [what I'm doing] is great."

In the future, Chaitkin would like to continue growing Bach and Boombox and build up his network of schools, bring the program into theatres and smaller performance spaces, take it on the road, and even partner with classical organizations on co-programming. "I spent my whole life playing in orchestras and that's what I love," he says. "I would love to partner with different groups to get new people to come and build a program that uses what I do as a connection to something specific that they're doing in a week or the next night and get this group of people engaged in the orchestra. It's something to open the door for people. Let's make this piece accessible so when they go they have something that makes them feel at home and makes them want to come back."

**More resources:**

<http://bachandboombox.com/>

# **Erik Howard brings the corner and the community together in unlikely ways through The Alley Project**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, October 14, 2014

To read the abundance of news coverage coming out of Detroit over the last few years heralding the downtrodden city as a hotbed of creativity and innovation, attracting young creatives and start-up entrepreneurs from all over the country – the Detroit-is-what-you-make-of-it, "blank slate" narrative – one might be tempted to think that there was no such social activism or creative energy there prior to, say, 2009.

But while there have been innumerable socially-minded projects and organizations taking root in recent years, there are just as many that started planting their seeds years, decades even, before there was any promise that they might come to fruition.

Young Nation is one such organization, and it has grown organically since photographer and youth advocate Erik Howard and his collaborators started discussing an idea for a neighborhood-based group in 1999.

"Things don't happen out of nowhere, and they don't happen when it's popular. Most of the work happens before it's popular," Howard says. "[A lot of the] big ideas happened at a time when there was nothing. There were no foundations. You had to pioneer. You had to blaze some trails. Why did we want to do that? Because we didn't have anyone that could [do it] it for us and we wanted to do that for them, [the next generation]. A lot of the great stuff is born out of social capital."

The group was born out of the corner culture that existed on Carson and Pitt in Southwest Detroit, where Howard grew up.

"In the '80s Carson was a mix of incomes and ethnicities," Howard explains. "I grew up with people who looked like me, [white, people who were] Arab, black, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Honduran; there was just a little of everything going on on Carson. One of the things that was always going on was the corner. Carson and Pitt had a pretty intense corner culture...it had a pretty storied history of street economy. Anything you can [imagine] about '80s



street corners was happening."

When Howard refers to "the corner," he's referring to street economy: gangs, guns, drugs, all of the ugliness that is a reality that simply cannot be glossed over. In his neighborhood, there were "corner kids" and there were "porch kids." The "porch kids," including Howard, had strong family units, support systems that kept them off "the corner." The corner kids weren't so lucky, and putting time in on the corner was just a part of life, an expectation Howard compares to joining the military.

"[Some] people in the United States will say that joining the military and serving your country is part of growing up, part of coming of age. It's just what you do," he explains. "On streets like Carson, among the youth the corner was kind of looked at as the military: you're supposed to do some things and spend some time on the corner, and even if you have to do some things that are ugly that's just part of it; it's what you do."

For the corner kids, it was a way of creating a substitute family in place of the family life they didn't have at home. "Young people will find family units [no matter what]; whether they're healthy or [if it's] by exploiting themselves and other people is the variable," Howard says. "While leading young people as parents, teachers, and older people on the block, it becomes really valuable to think, how are they getting what they need? Are they building up themselves and the community or are they exploiting it?"

Howard and his Young Nation co-founders, Augie and Ron, wanted to create a neighborhood organization that would help young people build up rather than exploit. "We wanted to create something for people to do between the porch and the corner that tapped into the assets of both and addressed the liabilities of both."

They looked at the needs and assets of the different kinds of institutions that serve youth – urban church youth groups, schools and nonprofits, and, yes, street gangs. "All of these institutions have been successful in some way in selling themselves to young people. All three have had success stories of appealing to, attracting, and retaining young people, but they all also have tremendous liabilities. What we tried to do is take the best practices of all three and not the liabilities."

The group officially formed as Expressions in 2002, a mentoring group built around a low-rider car club because that was something young people were

interested in. "It was something that exists in communities and neighborhoods where families are strong but also where street economy is strong," says Howard. "We thought it would be the perfect storm to bridge the gap."

Expressions started with youth on Carson Street, but ended up attracting youth from all different parts of the neighborhood. As the number of youth grew, they found that the kids who were interested in low-riders also had other shared interests and talents – specifically informal (social) media and street art – so they started looking at those.

As Expressions grew, the organizers decided they wanted to keep it flexible and informal, free of the bureaucratic process, but they wanted to create a formal organization that would support groups like Expressions. And so Young Nation was born.

"What was great about Expressions was that the porch and corner came together to meet the needs of young people with assets that already existed," says Howard. With Young Nation, "we wanted to invest very heavily in the idea of social capital. The corner actually helped us get Expressions started."

Of the three founders, Howard was the one who had, at that point, just graduated from college and was thinking of things from a positive youth development approach. Augie was particularly interested in low-riders and street art. And Ron was one of the older guys from the corner, a guy they weren't allowed to talk to growing up. But there was still a natural synergy between the porch and the corner, and that synergy enabled Expressions to happen.

"We all used the same sidewalks, even though half of us grew up on the corner and half on the porch," Howard says. "There was a lot of pride on the block. Some of us became teachers and social workers; some became gang members and drug dealers. Some went to college, to the military, or to prison. Some got killed. Some killed other people. But what happened as we grew up, we still had that pride and stayed in touch. Now I get to mentor the kids of the guys who grew up on the corner, and now those kids are starting to have kids. We try to make sure our mission is driven by passion and social capital, [which] we believe [will keep it] sustainable."

Expressions became the Detroit chapter of the Los Angeles-based USO Car

Club, a respected low-rider club that treats its members from all over the world as part of a global extended family. Their work with media evolved into the local website Inside Southwest Detroit, created to support community-driven narratives that champion the idea of being producers of media instead of consumers of media, shifting the power balance and producing their own stories instead of relying on outsiders to tell the stories of their neighborhood. And finally, their work with street art became The Alley Project (TAP).

"We realized our young people had an extremely high-risk door they were entering street art through," Howard says. "They were putting themselves through unreasonable, ludicrous legal and physical risks, so we wanted to reduce that risk that they were coming [into it] through."

If anyone questions the personal risk involved in learning and practicing street art, Howard outlines a scenario: most people remember how they first got into basketball – the net being so high, the difficulty in making shots, and how after continued practice they got better and better. Now, Howard says, imagine that there were no lights, you could only practice after midnight, and you had to run from everyone you saw because there were people who wanted to hurt you and/or arrest you. Would you still have been able to learn how to play basketball?

Art and design are no different.

"TAP is about reducing risk," says Howard. "Early on, probably up until 2010, people said, 'You can't build a mentoring group out of a graffiti group and street art.' Yes, you can. Nothing is all good or all bad."

In an alley behind Avis Street, there were garages full of gang tags. Howard figured well, the gang members probably didn't have permission to put those tags there and they probably didn't get in trouble for it, and the kids need somewhere to paint. So he had them start painting the garages. The first three garages were Howard's, his aunt's, and his neighbor's. The fourth belonged to an elderly neighbor named Wally.

Howard remembers the day Wally came outside and grunted, "You know, they're getting better. In the beginning I thought, what is that scribble-scrabble? Now I can read it. It's nice. I wish I could afford something like that." And so he became the fourth garage.

"That fourth garage met and overcame a major obstacle of intergenerational

barriers," says Howard. That relationship they built with Wally became a watershed moment for the fledgling group.

TAP started out as a small space for just a few kids. As the project grew, they needed more space, so they brought together a group of neighborhood stakeholders – neighbors, neighborhood youth, area for- and nonprofit organizations, and local artists. Now 35-50 kids use the space each month, there is a garage that has been converted to a studio and gallery space, a new garage has been activated for a church youth group, and several more neighbors are interested in activating their spaces.

There are also massive boards, each six to twelve feet tall, set up where people can come paint freely, and the alley itself has become a gallery full of murals, each created as the result of a workshop between youth, an artist leader, and the occupier of the space. Each mural is a monument to the unlikely relationships they have formed, like the one with Wally, that have resulted from TAP's initiatives. "Every mural involves at least four people. If it weren't for this initiative, these people would never have occupied the same space."

For Howard, these unlikely and unexpected relationships are the real measure of success. "It goes back to social capital and why creative processes lend themselves so well to community building. It's about the frequency and depth of unlikely relationships."

Wally passed away over the winter, and TAP is about to paint a mural in his honor. "We're about to put a big Wally head on Wally's old garage!" laughs Howard. "Through Wally we were able to build relationships with our other elderly neighbors."

Howard remembers another time when an 85-year-old neighbor named Jim had three twenty-something graffiti artists in his backyard drinking wine and shouted at Howard from over the fence to come join them. He laughs as he says, "Jim gardens. He goes to dive bars. He has an old boys' club. I don't even know where the wine came from, none of them even drink wine!" What impressed him the most was that it happened entirely without him. "[That was the goal.] We wanted to create these automatic processes. That was all them responding to the changes of the physical environment that can support those interactions."

At the core of all these stories of new and unlikely relationships is that,

Howard says, "People who otherwise wouldn't talk to each other and were afraid of each are now communicating on a regular basis, sharing their lives with each other, and creating together. And that's our mission."

**More resources:**

<http://www.facebook.com/tapgalleries>

<http://erikpaulhoward.com/>

# **Swaraj Yoga teaches self-rule to those in recovery**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, April 22, 2014

The image you might conjure of a "stereotypical" yoga devotee – thin, probably affluent, likely to be white and even more likely female, any age but with a decided youthfulness – is in direct opposition with the clientele that Laura Alma McCarthy works with at Swaraj Yoga.

"Swaraj" is a Sanskrit term that means "self-rule." "I stole that from Ghandi!" jokes McCarthy. "It's all about empowering people to find freedom, basically. He freed the Indian people and I'm working with addicts. I used this term because I thought it was a damn good one."

Ninety-eight percent of the people McCarthy works with through Swaraj Yoga are in recovery. Others struggle with mental illness but with drug abuse at the base. Her program is designed for men, and she works with those in the jail system, shelters, and recovery programs.

McCarthy says that she got into this by total accident. She is an artist by trade as well as a yoga practitioner, and had started teaching at a yoga studio for some extra cash. "I found [yoga] made a big change in my overall functioning," she says. "But I had no desire to be a yoga teacher at all. I didn't want to teach yoga in a studio. I wanted to be in my art studio."

She started volunteering at the Urban Ministry Center in Charlotte where she developed a yoga meditation program as part of their overall recovery program. "Recovery and the practice of yoga parallel one another, from what I observed as an outsider," McCarthy says. "It's pretty much an intellectual process and this is the physical component. People with addiction are very disembodied; they're disconnected from their own system." As yoga is ultimately about mind and body harmony, it serves the recovery process well to help reconnect those with addiction to their own bodies in a positive way.

At the same time, she was struggling with a little disillusionment as a commercial artist. "The commercial world can be a challenge," she says. "What frustrated me the most was that the audience wasn't that large. I was talking to a certain populace and it didn't waiver much. Art has a major capacity to be a motivator for social change, so this project for me has been

a stepping outside the studio of paint and canvas and opening the studio to the community where the canvas is people."

After a few years of volunteering, her studio slowly began to creep outside the front door and into the community, and her volunteer work turned into an actual job. Not only does she serve as a recreational therapist for those in recovery, but she also works very closely with the organizers of recovery programs – social workers, therapists, directors of treatment centers. The work she does now is very much collaborative. "This is the most exciting art project I've done in a long time and it's constantly remaking itself," she says. "You're reaching everybody and the [end] product is its impact in the community. And what greater thing can art do than actually impact the community and the people in it?"

McCarthy insists she is not a social worker, but rather an artist taking a social focus in her art. "I see myself as an artist, and artists have that ability to be objective. We see the world in a slightly different way, and can take that knowledge into the community to people who don't step outside of their roles, which is what artists are trained to do." Being an "outsider" put her in a unique position to identify an alternative method of treatment for those in recovery. It also emboldened her start knocking on the doors of shelters and jails and asking if she could start a yoga program.

Over 80 percent of homeless people are men who suffer from substance abuse issues and mental illness. Substance abuse is a part of the cycle of homelessness and incarceration. When McCarthy started knocking on doors with her idea for a yoga program, she stuck to institutions and programs that didn't have access to alternative forms of health and healing. Now Swaraj Yoga is an established nonprofit available in eight different treatment centers, and McCarthy is working on expanding her reach to work in other clinical treatment areas and create a basic training model for other teachers. Integrated as part of the recovery curriculum, the response to McCarthy's program is generally positive.

"There's always skepticism," she says. "There is a general misconception that yoga is for women. You never know how people are going to show up, especially in that setting. I always understand that it takes people a little while. The guys that come in are the roughest and the toughest, but nine times out of 10 they open up to it a few weeks later and it's amazing. You can't not feel something when you start to relax and your mind starts to calm; you just feel more present. Your nervous system responds and your brain

responds. It works in spite of you."

For McCarthy, using yoga to help other people change their lives has also helped her to find purpose in hers outside of being an artist. "It was definitely a scary thing for me to step away from painting because that's what I was doing going to do. To step away for something that doesn't have a connection to the art world... well, hell, sometimes you don't know why you start something or why you do something, then it comes back around."

She gave up her studio for a few years but found she had an "identity crisis" and was floundering. Now she has a studio again and still paints, but, she says, "The process has [completely changed]. It's given me time to come back to the studio in a totally different way. Now I have this outlet for reaching out to people."

**More resources:**

<http://swarajyoga.org/>



# **Corner Concerts promotes Macon's local music scene with a placemaking agenda**

Nicole Rupersburg  
February 02, 2016

Macon's Corner Concerts exists in a unique creative space where placemaking meets urban exploring meets pop-ups meets professionally-produced live concerts.

If that sounds difficult to define, well...it is. But the bottom line is that Corner Concerts celebrates Macon's rich musical heritage by hosting concerts in some of Macon's most architecturally and culturally relevant vacant properties.

It all started when Andrew Eck, a full-time electrical engineering student at Mercer University and a multi-instrumentalist, wanted to start a sound production company. The only problem was that the business is largely reference-based, and he didn't have any references.

A friend suggested he build his portfolio by hosting his own pop-up style concerts, like the pop-up boutiques that would appear in vacant storefronts. There were certainly enough vacant properties that could host concerts, Eck knew, and it would be a good way for him to take a deep dive into the local music scene.

"That got me really excited so I created a business plan and got the right partners in place to get that going last year," Eck says. "I pulled some money of my own together for the sound equipment and speakers without really knowing what I was doing."

If necessity is the mother of invention, naïveté might just be its muse. It takes a certain amount of pluck to say, "I'm just going to buy the equipment and host my own concerts around town." But without Eck's boldness, Corner Concerts wouldn't exist.

The first concert was held on the rooftop of a parking garage. About 200 people showed up – a pretty good turnout, truth be told.

After the first couple of shows, George Murray, the guy at Guitar Center who Eck was buying his sound equipment from, wondered what the hell this kid

was up to. By the third show, Eck brought Murray in as a partner and they were splitting everything 50/50. They pay for the shows through stage sponsors, and were also awarded enough from the Knight Foundation to cover most of the costs for the bands for a year.

In 2015, Corner Concerts held nine shows in six different locations. The locations were selected through Eck's urban exploring – or "urbexing," if you will. A uniquely urban sport, urban exploring refers to the exploration of vacant or abandoned structures – blighted homes, former industrial plants, dilapidated skyscrapers – as a kind of architectural spelunking.

"I always had natural curiosity to go exploring buildings," Eck says. "The whole purpose of Corner Concerts is to get people to value these buildings that they drive by every day that have overgrown bushes in the front, so that they have more value than just a boarded-up building."

Eck always works with the property owners and whatever other relevant agencies for the concerts, dotting all his I's and crossing all his T's, so concert goers don't have to worry about their safety or being shooed off the property.

"I had the hardest time convincing people to do it the first time, so that's why it was held on a parking deck," he says. "Once I had one under my belt, and they could see I didn't burn it down, that they can trust me, and that I have insurance and everything in place, the building owners were more convinced."

Eck's goal is to reinvigorate interest in these overlooked and largely forgotten spaces. "While I have the key I try to give people tours and get as much interest in it as I can. I would love for these buildings to get turned into something and get used. When people go in they get their creative wheels turning."

While none of the properties Corner Concerts has visited have found a new life as an occupied building quite yet, Eck says, "All these people went from not knowing the name of the building to knowing its name and its history. They've been inside and seen what it looks like. They know its story and why it's important."

Corner Concerts has held events in venues as varied as the historic Shriner Temple downtown, built in 1929, and a brownstone apartment building built

in 1880s. This year, the Historic Macon Foundation is a partner in Corner Concerts and will refer buildings and provide accompanying written history.

In addition to alternating locations, Corner Concerts also alternates genres. The focus is on promoting Macon's local music scene, as well as hosting unique shows – like a night with a local jazz band and an R&B show with kids performing soul music. On the schedule for this year so far is a gospel concert in March and a collaboration with Macon Pops in May.

But that's not all Eck and Murray have in store for 2016. As they plan the Corner Concerts schedule for 2016, they are also in the midst of opening a music incubator space in downtown Macon in the coming weeks. The 5/4 Music Space will offer practice space and a recording studio to incubate musicians and bands so they have a place to practice around the clock and also be able to record.

"We already have three bands signed up for practice spaces," Eck says. "That's the reason why we did this, because we knew there is such a demand for it because bands don't have a place to practice 24-7."

In addition to that, he says, having a sort of co-working/incubator space also serves as a social and creative hub for the musicians.

"I'm a member of a makerspace downtown and the whole point is to bring in creative people of varying talent," Eck explains. "It makes all of them better by being around each other. There will be a band in room A, me booking in the next room, and in the break room we'll talk about all the business development skill sets they need. By seeing them on a daily basis we can really help them out. When someone is paying to be there, we can help them as best we can to incentivize them and motivate them to create and find success with their musical art."

Eventually 5/4 Music Space will be located in the Historic Capricorn Studio, which is currently undergoing renovation. The location opening soon at 340 Walnut St. will be used in the interim so that incubator can get up and running. They plan on running a crowdfunding campaign in the coming weeks as well.

While Corner Concerts has, by all appearances, been a successful series, Eck says it's difficult to quantify "success" for them.

"We struggled with defining success for our project," he says. "It's not all about attendance and revenue, but more about placemaking both in the music scene and in the architectural scene. How do you really define these non-measurable feelings? We just kind of have to trust that what we're doing is working."

**More resources:**

<http://www.cornerconcerts.com/>

# **SOCIAL CHANGE MOVEMENTS**

*Artists providing creative leadership for  
social and cultural change*

# **Arab American National Museum is the first and only museum of its kind**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, August 04, 2015

The metro Detroit area is an area rich with cultural institutions that celebrate the heritage, history, legacy, and continued contributions of artistic, cultural, and intellectual importance of a number of different ethnic and cultural groups. The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit is the world's largest institution dedicated to the African American experience. The Holocaust Memorial Center Zekelman Family Campus in West Bloomfield was the first freestanding institution of its kind in the United States, and is considered the most provocative of the country's Holocaust memorial museums. And in Dearborn, the Arab American National Museum is the first and only museum in the United States devoted to Arab American history and culture.

If you're familiar at all with Dearborn, Michigan or the Arab community that calls Southeastern Michigan home, you might have heard the folk statistic that Dearborn has the largest Arab population outside of the Middle East. There's a shade of truth to that, though to the letter of its wording it's incorrect – Southern California has a larger ethnic Arab population, though spread across a much larger geographic area. That said, Southeast Michigan has the highest concentration of Arab Americans in the nation, making this area a natural fit for a museum dedicated to Arab culture.

The Arab American National Museum (AANM) is part of a larger nonprofit called ACCESS – Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services – a 44-year-old human services agency based in Dearborn, and the largest Arab American community nonprofit in the nation.

ACCESS is a "human services" agency but it goes far beyond the basic social services that the term calls to mind. The organization covers everything from social services to youth education to entrepreneurship and employment training, offering a vast range of social, economic, health, and educational services to the diverse Arab American population of Southeastern Michigan.

In 1986, the founders of AANM had the bold idea that the arts are integral to the well-being of an individual as well, so they started a Cultural Arts Department through ACCESS doing cultural competency training on who

Arab Americans are to the greater public, and also offering cultural programs for Arab Americans. The AANM is an outgrowth of that.

In the wake of 9/11, the need for an Arab American cultural museum became ever more apparent, as Arab Americans were faced with extreme prejudice and persecution from other Americans who did not understand their culture. An effort went underway to go across the country and ask people from Arab communities in cities like Los Angeles, New York, and D.C. what they wanted to see in an Arab American museum, and if they would support it as a national community.

The Arab American National Museum opened in May 2005 after what was a relatively short amount of planning time. The museum is truly a national one, the first and only one of its kind highlighting the experiences, objects, and art of Arab Americans from all walks of life all across the country. It is the only Affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution in Southeastern Michigan, and is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, through which only six percent of the nation's museums are accredited: major designations considering this is only their tenth year of operation.



*Devon Akmon in front of photographs by Mohamed Mumin.  
Photo credit: Doug Coombe*

Unlike other museums, the AANM is a true community-based museum, focused more on people than on objects. "We're a community-building museum," says Devon Akmon, Executive Director of the AANM. "Our focus, first and foremost, is about building a community."

That community is both a local and a national one. The AANM produces programs and events locally as well as across the country; in fact, about a third of their programming takes place outside of Michigan, and there are several cities they work closely with that have large Arab American populations – including New York, D.C., Houston, Jacksonville, and throughout Southern California – to design programs that represent those local communities that are still tied to the vision of the national organization based in Dearborn.

One way they do this is through touring exhibits. Patriots & Peacemakers: Arab Americans in Service to Our Country is currently on display at the U.S. Diplomacy Center and has been traveling for four years now in educational and cultural institutions. The exhibit tells true stories of the heroism and self-sacrifice of Arab Americans serving our country, and is significant because it takes the Arab American story and presents it to a mainstream audience in a mainstream venue and places that story within a national, mainstream context.

Akmon says that one of AANM's key strategies is to create histories that explore topics of immigration, migration, and displacement, and share them with other ethnic cultures, highlighting experiences that are similar but unique. "This essentially begins to break down barriers and dispel stereotypes," he says. "We're constantly striving to find ways to connect people both Arabic and non-Arabic." Especially in a post-9/11 world in which conflicts among people in Arab countries continue to affect American perceptions. "There is a constant push-pull. It's constant work. It doesn't stop."

Little Syria, NY: The Life & Legacy of an Immigrant Community is another exhibit developed by AANM. It focuses on the first major neighborhood of Arab Americans in the country, located in lower Manhattan from the late 1800s until the 1950s, when the community was displaced by the construction of the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel and later the World Trade Center. This exhibit documents the neighborhood's history as well its religious and cultural institutions and newspapers, historic "firsts" for the Arab American community. The exhibit's tour will end in the fall of 2016 at the Ellis



Island Immigration Museum, a reminder that the Arab American immigration story is just one small part of America's immigration story.

"One of the complexities in telling the Arab American story is that they've been coming [to America] for hundreds of years," explains Akmon. "They come from 22 different countries with different religions backgrounds. They are incredibly diverse; there is no monolith narrative. Because they are so diverse, we tell individual stories to build empathy. Their stories are essentially the American story. They show that there's a greater American story at play. [We want people to see these stories and think], 'Wow, that story is not so different than my own family's.'"

Another exhibit currently on tour is Creative Dissent: Arts of the Arab World Uprisings, and it focuses on the creative output from the Arab world as part of the Arab Spring.

The Dearborn museum itself has four permanent exhibits: Coming to America, Living in America, Making an Impact, and Arab Civilization: Our Heritage. Current temporary exhibits include The Youth/Dhallinyarada, 13 massive photographs of young men actively and positively engaged in their Somali community and American society (pictured above with Akmon).

In metro Detroit, AANM looks to reach new audiences and promote Arab American arts and culture while dispelling myths, stereotypes, and xenophobic beliefs about Arab peoples through various programming. This year the AANM had an entire film festival of its own within the Cinetopia International Film Festival. The Concert of Colors, which just held its 23<sup>rd</sup> annual event, celebrates the diversity of the region through music. Yalla Eat! walking tours take people down Warren Avenue through the heart of the Arab American shopping district in East Dearborn or through Eastern Market in Detroit to visit Arab-owned bakeries, coffee shops, produce markets, butchers, and other food purveyors.

"We look forward to using our environment to get people out and immerse themselves in the culture beyond the museum," says Akmon. "We're about creating experiences and looking at unique elements of the museum that are educational and fun that also involve the community in the process too."

Earlier this year the AANM inaugurated their 4,700-square-foot flex art space called The Annex, essentially a concrete box with state-of-the-art AV equipment and a collapsible stage that allows for a greater variety of

programming and events outside of museum hours that might include community-produced plays, language lessons, gathering space for other nonprofits and ethnic communities that don't have facilities of their own, even children's birthday parties. "It really allows us to function more as a cultural center," says Akmon. "It's a community gathering space and allows us to really run the gamut in terms of community engagement. It's pretty dynamic in terms of its usage."

The Arab American National Museum is currently a Knight Arts Challenge 2015 finalist with the hopes of launching an artist-in-residence program at the as yet under construction City Hall Artspace Lofts in downtown East Dearborn, across the street from the museum, which will feature 53 affordable live/work spaces for artists.

"Our corner of Michigan and Schaefer will truly be a cultural corner," says Akmon. "We will build out first Arab American artist residency program in that space, bringing in Arab artists from across the country and around the work to produce new work and design community engagement programs while in town. This is part of our creative placemaking strategy to help revitalize this area. [An Arab artist residency program] is pretty much unprecedented on this scale."

As the country's first and only Arab American museum, the AANM is under quite a bit of pressure to do it right and do it well. "It's an incredible responsibility," Akmon says. "We think about that a lot. We don't have a lot of margin for error because we are such a public presence for the Arab American community. It's important that we do good work and get it right."

**More resources:**

<http://www.arabamericanmuseum.org/>

# Reading between the Thin Blue Lines with poetry

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, July 07, 2015

If you were to casually ask your friends and peers what they think about police officers in America, there is a pretty good chance that you're not going to get very flattering feedback (unless, of course, one of your informal pollsters happens to be related to an officer). Some of the stereotypes and misconceptions about police officers that exist in the American consciousness paint them as overly-macho, power-drunk, misogynistic, racist – "killer cops;" men encouraged to be MEN in all of the negative ways that could possibly entail.

Americans have a difficult relationship with those sworn to serve and protect, and vice versa. Performance artist and activist Marty Pottenger sought to shift some of these perceptions – the public's perception of the police, the officers' perception of themselves – when she started the project Thin Blue Lines through Art At Work in Portland, Maine.

In 2003, Pottenger was president of the board of the American Festivals Project when they organized a national conference called "Arts and Democracy." One of the panels she organized explored, "What if art making and creative capabilities were integrated into municipal governments as one of their tools for dealing with such exciting times locally, globally, and nationally, when political, economic, and social institutions are pretty much guaranteed to break?"

She says she got a glimpse into the power of creativity through a project she did about Americans and money called "ABUNDANCE." "I really saw the impact and potential of very simple art making on the part of people who did not identify as artists," she explains. Over four years she facilitated work with 5,000 people, through which they created poems recalling their own experiences with money growing up and examined their own relationships with money growing up to compare to the relationships they have with money today.

"They had dramatic insights," she recalls. "Money is a scary topic for everyone. The way they felt before and afterwards was undeniable: here's this element of human nature – [self expression through poetry] – that isn't

used that often by most of us and was certainly not being used where social services break down. Without knowing any of the details of what was coming – this was 2003, [a few years before the Great Recession] – I knew this could be almost the missing element."

And so poetry became a powerful instrument of arts-led social impact in her arsenal.

"That's how Art At Work started," Pottenger says. "Fortune smiled on me resulted on me having an art relationship with Portland as a playwright and activist. I had the mayor, the fire chief, and the president of the city's NAACP in a play I wrote from their workshops. I accidentally-on-purpose found a city that would let me be a part of their infrastructure for eight years, from 2007 to 2015."

Pottenger is founder and director of Art At Work, a national initiative first piloted with the City of Portland departments, unions and elected officials to improve municipal government through strategic arts projects.

Knowing that there would be a lot of on the ground work required of her in order to work with city departments, she immediately got started building relationships. "People don't want to tell you what their issues are right away; they want you to see how great they are," she says. "After a little while I learned the police department had historic low morale. I learned the departments are more siloed, more in competition than united, so I continued to meet officers and challenge my own acquired (by experience) and learned fear and trepidation around the police, and I talked to them and I thought, 'What would be an art form that would both be challenging but also powerful for them?' Making good art is supposed to be hard. It's supposed to be challenging and take you to hard places. Writing poetry is a really demanding activity, but it's clear that it's inherent in us; it's a natural thing." She pauses. "They obviously were not excited about writing poetry at all."

Her goal was to help the police improve their morale. She explains, "That's going to show up in the likelihood that they're going to be disrespectful to the public, to their families, to each other. It will show up in substance abuse and depression. This is a community issue. This is on behalf of the most targeted among us. To have the police feel like they have some respect – that will change everything. That was a key concept from the beginning."

Furthermore, "There is a very complicated relationship between what they do

every day and how they psychologically handle it. The common perception that poetry and homosexuality are connected - and possibly contagious - was another less visible but very real issue. In describing it I'll sometimes summarize by saying that 'Once it became clear that writing poetry didn't turn anyone gay unless they were gay already....three times as many officers volunteered to write poetry for the next poetry calendar.'

To bridge that gap, she wrote a poem called "That's Fine," about people in Starbucks stepping away from officers but going up to firemen and slapping them on the backs and thanking them, all the while acting like the police are to be reviled and avoided. She posted this along with other poems around the station. She introduced them to the idea that "certain kinds of men" did write poetry, using the US soldier poet Brian Turner as an example. She learned more about their power structure and who they respected, identified the leaders of the police staff and built relationships through those power frames.

Still nobody wanted to write poetry. A year into her efforts she was asked, "Does it really have to be poetry?" "I really wanted to say, 'Yes, it does,' but instead I said, 'No, it doesn't. You could do photography, but poetry demands a kind of internal vigilance, alertness, and observational skills; a keenness of the writer that I think best matches good police work in what is required to be an effective officer.' That spoke to them enough that they agreed to do it. So we were one step in a direction but we weren't quite there yet."

The next push came in the form of tragedy. An officer, Rob Johnsey, died in a controversial self-inflicted gunshot wound – the official opinion was that it was "accidental" – and Pottenger attended the funeral. At the funeral it was revealed that Johnsey wrote poetry and his best friend, "a really hard-nosed guy" who had been a very vocal opponent of what Pottenger was trying to do, had no idea. It was after that the officers agreed to her project with the money raised going to Johnsey's family.

"Their whole culture is about stepping up and being there for each other," Pottenger says. "Even with poetry, [in this instance] even the fear of turning gay wouldn't dissuade all of them."

She decided to make it a calendar. "I don't even read poetry books!" she laughs. Each month would feature a photograph and poem created by participating officers partnered with local photographers and poets.

"Part of [a person's sense of] morale is in their relationship to their family. Most officers literally can't share most of what happens to them throughout the day with their family. It's scary, it's gross, it's disgusting, it's heartbreaking. It was important to have a calendar that will actually be at home on their walls and integrated into their families, with soccer and little league practices written on it showing this is their job and this is their family. Since policing is predominantly a male culture, I knew if I gave the calendar to the officers, they'd leave it in the trunk of their cruisers and it would never cross the threshold of their homes. As proud as they are of it, I know white working class men. So I mailed it to their homes, and that's part of the strategy to get it to their partners without making a big deal about it."

Five officers agreed to write poetry and she found five local poets to partner them with, in addition to five officers who agreed to take photographs paired with five professional photographers. Partner activities including ride-alongs, time spent together at headquarters and over coffee, rhyming and editing suggestions, and swapping stories. She had specific criteria for the artists they would work with: poets had to be published and photographers had to have gallery shows. They had to be people who were trying to inspire in their arenas.

She also had separate training sessions with the poets. "I needed to find poets who would follow my lead and are really good at what they do, but also poets who were able to put their own specialness aside and really devote themselves on behalf of someone else, to really think about what that person needs." An officer can be in a life-threatening situation in five minutes – having a poet along for the ride who makes it his or her life's mission not to obey anyone puts both of them at risk.

Pottenger had to work to overcome internalized beliefs and prejudices with the poets as much as with the officers. At the same time, she also wanted the work they produced to be good, and not just a throwaway. "We're looking to change morale and change their lives but we also want to write something good, for godssakes!" she laughs. "[I told them], 'It's okay for this to be hard, to be work.'"

For the first meeting between the poets and the officers, she warned the poets not to quote any poetry at all. It was going well – people were making jokes and getting to know each other. Then, 45 minutes into the hour-long meeting, one of the poets ignored her instructions and quoted poetry. "It

cracked the room," she says. "The next thing you know, emotionally and spiritually there were no more officers in that room. The other four poets saw it too, so they knew that I knew what I was talking about and that it was a real thing and not just me being odd and bossy. Which I am both of those things!"

She also forbade the poets from reading their own poetry to the officers at any point. "The fact that the officers were riding in the cars with poets is traumatic enough! It's just human nature to want something in return, but the officers are adults – they can look [the poets] up on the Internet if they want to. I also forbade them to mention two words together: 'poetry reading.' I had correctly assumed officers would not even think of that."

That was Pottenger's next hurdle: getting the officers on board with a public poetry reading. "It was like I was talking to the Grand Canyon and the phone was dropped," she says of when she called to tell them the great news – that they could do a reading at the public library. "That's a no go," was the response she got, along with a quality of silence totally new to her. "If I thought getting them to write was hard, it was nothing compared to reading in public."

They ended up with a sold-out crowd at the public library. The police thought it was just be them, the poets, and Pottenger – they had no idea how powerful it was going to be to read poetry in public. "It was so unbelievably moving, what a night!" she exclaims. "It changed their relationship with the community. It was huge. The next year they were eager to do it, even in the worst snowstorm of the damn winter."

That next year 15 officers wanted to write poetry and 15 wanted to take photographs.

In a survey conducted by the Kellogg Foundation afterwards, they found that 83 percent of the officers felt increased morale and the other 17 percent just didn't like Marty Pottenger. "Which is fine, I get it. I don't like myself sometimes either!" she laughs.

Pottenger's Art At Work project with the City of Holyoke, MA resulted in equally dramatic positive relational shifts between Puerto Rican-heritage community, activists and police officers. And though Art At Work has been developed in only two cities to date, it speaks to a much larger issue that affects the entire country. As tensions continue to rise between the police

and the public, as stories continue to circulate through national media documenting police abusing power and victim blaming, as the "boy's club" mentality comes under increasing public scrutiny and comparisons are made between American officers and Third Reich Gestapo, it's becoming ever more clear that Pottenger is right: institutions such as these are guaranteed to break.

But that doesn't have to mean that the relationship between the police and the public is beyond reconcile. Strategies such as Pottenger's show that, as much as the public treats the police as stone-faced merciless authoritarians, they will in turn behave as such, and they face psychological struggles of their own for which there are no social agencies conducting outreach and engagement and a brutally internalized macho mentality that prevents them from reaching out on their own. The faces of police are still human ones, which is something everyone - even the officers themselves - seem to forget.

**More resources:**

<http://www.martypottenger.com/>

<http://www.artatwork.us/portland.php>



# **People's Paper Co-op rewrites the narratives of those with criminal records through papermaking**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, June 02, 2015

Anyone who has ever filled out a job application is familiar with the question, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" Many people can easily check "no" and move on without a second thought about the one in five people in the United States who must check "yes," and what those people have to do in order to find steady employment and earn a living as a returning citizen. The People's Paper Co-op in Philadelphia addresses that process.

Mark Strandquist and Courtney Bowles started the People's Paper Co-op (PPC) as part of the Village of Arts and Humanities' inaugural SPACES artist and residency program in August 2014. Both are artists, educators, and community organizers with a background in social justice issues and a vast range of past creative projects and experiences between them.

Previously the two co-founded the People's Library in Richmond, Virginia, transforming discarded materials into blank books that anyone in the city could fill with their histories, which were then added into the permanent collection of the Richmond Public Library. This community engagement project also introduced a teen mentor program and has grown to include other library branches throughout the country.

The papermaking process has been something of interest to Strandquist and Bowles for a long time, but their work with People's Library seemed to be just a precursor of what was to come. He jokes, "Courtney and I are not master papermakers; our main collaborators are YouTube videos! But papermaking is a really accessible process."

Strandquist in particular has also done a lot of work around criminal justice issues, and it was through a photography exhibit called Prison Obscura in Philadelphia that he and Bowles were connected to the group Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE) and the Village of Arts and Humanities. They attended one of the free workshops that PLSE hosted at the Village.

"Within two hours, 200 people began the process of clearing their records for

free at this workshop, [a process that can] cost thousands of dollars," recalls Strandquist. That same day they toured the Village, and soon they had developed their own strategy of how they could further facilitate the work PLSE was doing through the Village with more of a personal touch of their own, addressing the human element of the legal paperwork.

"A lot of our work is about working with people most impacted by certain issues to become the leaders and voices of those issues," says Strandquist. "The experience [with the lawyers] still felt like a social service space, which are often sterile and cold. We proposed to the Village to form a collective of formerly incarcerated men and women to work with us to transform how those legal clinics look and feel."

The People's Paper Co-op became one of three collectives to be a part of the Village's first-ever SPACES residency program, and it functions as both an advocacy organization, working closely with the lawyers on various aspects of engagement, as well as a papermaking business that empowers and employs people in reentry.

"You've gone through this process with this lawyer that dredged up some memories," Strandquist explains. "It's a pretty intense experience going



*Posters at the Co-op. Photo credit: People's Paper Co-op*

through your whole past in a dehumanizing document. We wanted to create something after that that is transformative and reflects the process [of transformation]."

With the People's Paper Co-op papermaking process, formerly incarcerated men and women who are working with the PLSE to clear or clean up their records are able to print their records out, tear them up and put them in a blender, transforming them into blank sheets of handmade paper on which they then write "Without these records I am..." underneath Polaroid photos of themselves to envision who they are as people, not as records.

"A mug shot tells the same story over and over again regardless of how you change," says Strandquist. "This is a reflection on what this new moment in their lives is going to look like. Their rap sheets become a blank canvas for them to talk about themselves." These results will be stitched together to create giant paper quilt.

The People's Paper Co-op also functions as a collective business, making handmade paper that is turned into journals, cards, and hand-drawn books

that are sold in various spaces and events. Strandquist says that not being labeled strictly as an "advocacy group" has allowed them access to places and events they would otherwise not have access to. Because they also make paper out of donated flowers, which gained them entry to sell at the PHS Philadelphia Flower Show, the world's largest flower show, where they were also invited to do a demonstration of how they make their flower paper.

While a flower show is typically not the kind of space where criminal justice issues are discussed, people started asking Faith Barton, the co-op member leading the demonstration, questions about her life, in turn learning more about the social practices behind the People's Paper Co-op.

Strandquist explains that if a person is crime-free for over seven years, he or she is no more likely to commit another crime than someone who never has. Someone like Barton, who has taken on a huge leadership and mentoring role with PPC, is held hostage by her record. PPC, which is deeply engaged in advocacy work while still providing paid employment opportunities and job skills training, provides recourse where little else exists.

"It's really important for those people impacted by those issues to become leaders on those issues and [in the] social advocacy," he says. "There are

more people in this country with criminal records than the entire population of France, but reentry is part of this conversation that's less talked about. Ninety-eight percent of those in prison will get out in five years. To discuss how hard it is for people to reenter and show alternatives to how people experience that is really important to us."

Each book made by PPC features stories written by co-op members, and are themselves also ways of sharing these issues. Co-op members develop skills in papermaking, public speaking, community organizing, critical thinking, and journalism. Co-op members are paid a stipend for their work, and are also paid for the workshops they lead at arts and education institutions. PPC has a storefront at the Village that is open from 11am to 4pm Monday through Thursday where they will also have local writers come in to lead workshops.

Strandquist emphasizes the importance of having a really diverse curriculum program that includes job-based training, advocacy work, and teaching experience. "The goal for the co-op members is for them to walk away with a resume that far outweighs the criminal record they walked in with."

What started as a five-month residency has evolved into something more permanent. While Strandquist and Bowles had to initially treat PPC as an idea they were working through and waiting to see what happened at the end of the five months, the Village made it permanent after the end of the residency and is committed to seeing this project continue. This also means that their co-op members went from having a five-month-long temp job to committed employment.

PPC is currently a finalist for the current Knight News Challenge, focused on elections (the community of formerly incarcerated persons are less likely to be registered to vote and more likely to be disinterested in civic participation, and PPC would work to activate these voters who have historically been ignored), and will tour through the southern states this spring. They'll head from Philadelphia to Houston to exhibit the project at Project Row Houses, and are also working with the group Art Built Mobile Studios on a mobile version of the project that could make stops along the way to host local legal clinics, papermaking workshops, and public presentations of the project.

**More resources:**

<http://peoplespaperco-op.weebly.com/>

<http://markstrandquist.tumblr.com/>

<http://villagespaces.tumblr.com/>

# **Joi Sears leads the Theatre for the Free People on the world's stage**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, February 03, 2015

Joi Sears is a lot of things; stationary isn't one of them. She started out as a dancer, starting with the Cincinnati Ballet then moving on to the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre in New York and the Dance Theatre of Harlem. After that she got into theatre acting, and then photography, music, poetry, spoken word...though, despite her many varied interests and activities, she still describes herself as a "theatre-maker," with writing and directing as her primary focus.

"My background is in theatre," Sears says. "In New York, as an artist, you end up becoming a waiter who auditions a lot. That was not the kind of life that I wanted."

It was during grad school that she expanded her work within the arts.

The artist and arts activist, originally from Cincinnati, studied the intersection of arts and social change while attending graduate school at New York University. It was during these studies that Theatre for the Free People first emerged.

"I wanted to create an organization that was really dedicated to using art as a vehicle for social change," Sears says. "[That can mean] anything and everything. We're really focusing on artists who are using their creativity to make the world a better place."

Theatre for the Free People focuses on community building and arts education by organizing educational workshops, working within marginalized and disenfranchised communities and in schools in lower-income and minority majority districts. The group also produces artistic and creative works, primarily large-scale multi-disciplinary events.

After leaving Cincinnati to study theatre at Marymount Manhattan College, Sears lived in New York and abroad for about 10 years, including stints in Amsterdam, where she worked with an artist collective for several years and produced an "Artist as Activist" event, and Brazil, where she studied directly under Augusto Boal, the creator of Theatre of the Oppressed.

Boal was a director, writer, and politician. He created Theatre of the Oppressed in order to use theatre to open up a dialogue to discuss social issues in the community, working within mental institutions, prisons, and impoverished communities. His techniques – which focus on the deprivileging of the role of "instructor" into that of neutral facilitator and blurring the line between education and art, with audience and facilitator learning and exploring issues together – are used in Brazil and throughout the world. Boal passed away in 2009, but Sears was able to go to Brazil and learn his techniques from him prior to that. These techniques can be highly interactive – with an obvious intentionality and visibility – or entirely invisible, performed in a public place where the "audience" isn't aware of the performative aspect of the performance.

There are also more therapeutic techniques that address the oppression a person experiences from within, looking not just at how a person feels oppressed by society or by another person but also by him/herself (as Sears describes it, it's that voice in your head that tells you you're no good). "[It's] using theatre as a rehearsal for change, as a rehearsal for the revolution," Sears says. "It's about using theatre to put the audience in the position to experience and invoke change in themselves and in the world."

Sears uses the techniques she learned studying under Boal in her manifestation of Theatre for the Free People. She had created an "Artist as Activist" program in New York City and wanted to do something similar in her hometown of Cincinnati when she decided to move back two years ago. She says she took the ideas from the work she had done in New York and Amsterdam and merged them together in Cincinnati.

One of the projects she has led in Cincinnati was a ten-week workshop for local artists, activists, and community organizers. "Most people wouldn't necessarily consider themselves artists but are looking to do more creative things in their personal lives or in their work with organizations in the city," says Sears.

The participants worked together to explore some of the major social and environmental justice issues that they were witnessing in the city through games and discussions. "We were kind of exploring the city in different ways," Sears says.

Along with initiating dialogue, the group worked together to produce a larger

event that celebrated arts and activism in Cincinnati called "The Exchange." "The idea was to create a space where artists could exchange ideas with one another and with the community," Sears explains. "Also throughout the course of that each artist, activist or entrepreneur had a personal project they were working on."

She refers to a participating couple that wanted to launch a tea business. "I offered my support and expertise on branding and marketing. I worked one on one with them on developing their business as well as discussing social justice issues and planning the event. At the event they launched their business; they had a space where they sold their products and were able to market their brand to other people in attendance. It kind of had a threefold approach, which was really based on the three parts of Theatre for the Free People – arts education, services for artists and creative entrepreneurs, and producing the event."

That third prong to Sears's efforts to use art to affect positive social transformation is Free People International, the parent organization of Theatre for the Free People, which she defines as "a social enterprise specializing in offering creative solutions for some of the world's biggest social, environmental and economic challenges through the arts, design thinking, and social innovation." Through Free People International she offers services and consulting to emerging creative entrepreneurs, organizations, nonprofits, cultural institutions, and NGOs, solving the problems they face in their institutions.

"It's really just problem solving, digging into our basket of theatre, arts, social innovation, design, product design, and figuring out which kind of tool can best solve that problem," whether that be social justice issues, like the well-documented police brutality in Ferguson last year, or environmental justice issues.

"I am an artist," she says. "I feel like artists have such a responsibility to be the voice of conscience in our society and put a light on social issues, environmental issues, and economic justice issues. [We have to] put our brains together and figure out how to tackle issues important to us."

She jokes that Free People International is the end result "if all of the amazing things about the arts and all of the equally amazing things about design and innovation had a baby and this baby wanted to change the world – that would be the baby."

A major part of her work through FPI is social innovation through consulting design, and the word "International" is no misnomer. She created an environmental justice program in Southeast Asia through the United Nations, visiting Thailand and Cambodia, and before that she was in Greece to attend the Rhodes Youth Forum.

For her work in Southeast Asia, an initiative she calls "Green is the New Gangsta," she recently received the World Summit Youth Award, which honors young people around the world for using technology to address the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. This project is all about making being green "cool," which she developed through the "Artist as Activist" program she had been facilitating.

Never one to allow the grass to grow beneath her toes, next up on Sears's globe-trotting itinerary is Germany, where she has a fellowship focused on creating economic opportunities for social and creative entrepreneurs during which she and 19 other fellows will work with international retailer H&M on creating a more eco-friendly and sustainable packaging system while developing their own initiatives. For this fellowship, her new initiative is an online platform that will act as a forum for creative exchanges between artists, creatives, and entrepreneurs, offering online courses for skill sharing and creating a space for artists and makers to be more financially independent, with an outlet for them to sell their products and services online.

But she isn't concerned about leaving behind the work she is doing in Cincinnati (or anywhere else, for that matter). "One of the things I'm really interested in is creating, building, and nurturing communities that are self-sustaining," she says. "The group that came together under me still meets without me, which is kind of the legacy of the work that I do. I give them the necessary tools to go off and do their own thing; now they're doing their own grassroots activism work around the city."

**More resources:**

<http://www.freepeopleinternational.com/>



# **Of corn and men: Yvonne Escalante explores themes of social and environmental justice through corn**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, July 08, 2014

Corn: it's a rather pedestrian agricultural product. Chances are, you probably don't think too much about corn as you go about your daily life. You buy ears of corn for your summer barbecues. You read about corn as a cash crop and its potential as an alternative energy source. You also read about the dangers of high fructose corn syrup and how that product is directly responsible for the poor health of an overwhelming number of Americans.

But do you really think about corn?

Yvonne Escalante didn't think too much about corn when she was growing up in Southern California; certainly no more than the rest of us, anyway.

Escalante attended San Jose State University, where she received her MFA in spatial arts, and California State University, Long Beach, where she earned a BFA in metal arts. As a visual artist, she works in metal sculpture. Her work explores themes of social and environmental justice, drawing connections between the degradation of the planet and marginalized peoples throughout the world as a symptom of industrialized agriculture. She does this through ubiquitous, easily-recognizable objects that people use on a daily basis without thinking twice about...objects like corn.

"[I] really started [thinking about corn] when visiting my grandfather on his 96<sup>th</sup> birthday and for first time started listening to stories," Escalante says. "He was a retired corn farmer from Iowa. I started thinking about how much things have changed for him; how the practice today had changed so much and what ultimately drove him out of being able to stay [in the industry] and sustain in his chosen career as a farmer."

She started researching what it means to be a farmer today and how that had changed from her grandfather's time when people were actually able to maintain a sustainable living as farmers. This was the catalyst for a four-year investigation into all things corn.

Over that period of time, Escalante made several pieces that were born out of her investigation of corn and how it has represented both life and death throughout American history – life, in that corn was how early Americans, both natives and settlers, were able to sustain life; and death, in that the industrialization of agriculture has not only meant that corn has evolved from life-giving nourishment to death-dealing poison, but also that the simple dreams of Americans prior to agricultural industrialization are now unsustainable, farmers can't survive, and corn has become a kind of pestilence on the planet.

"The ancients – pre-Columbian, South American – thought they were born of corn," says Escalante. "We had lost our reverence for this life-giving thing. It [has become] more of a weapon on attack. It's causing environmental degradation, health issues...there were more and more layers I found as I deconstructed this object, thinking about how corn has infiltrated every part of our lives."

Her visual explorations of corn include *A Kernel of Truth*, featuring "corn bullets." Escalante described this work in her artist's statement thusly: "Today corn manifests in an array of artificial varieties: fillers, sweeteners, and fuel. If we look closely, past the kernels of delicious summer BBQs, the true essence may present itself. Once a source of nourishment and life, corn now manifests as an accurate and direct weapon of attack. These bullets retain the memory of corn's origin while bearing its modern brass armor."

*Jiffy Pop* was her first corn-themed work, a hanging sculpture comprised of half-consumed corn on the cob "missiles," a commentary on how corn has an ambivalent identity in the world, "at once a source of nourishment and a cause of conflict." *Keeping Time* was her final thesis piece in her corn studies series, featuring a glass corncob encased in a music box, honoring the ritual of actually enjoying corn and the legacy of her grandfather who has since passed. "It really came full-circle," she says. "The *Keeping Time* music box really hearkened back to the original love of corn, this affirmation of eating and enjoying corn, ritualizing the approach people take to eating corn cobs." The glass cob has "bites" taken out of it, and those bite patterns dictate the tune played by the functioning music box.

Out of her investigation with corn, Escalante opened up a network of connections within the community she never previously imagined. In San Jose, the San Jose Museum of Art hosted a collaborative project called *Around the Table* with satellite exhibitions held throughout the city all on the

theme of food and what we "bring to the table" in the hidden political and social choices we make in what we eat. She was involved in the Lend Me Your Ears exhibition at Art Object Gallery, produced in partnership with the Ecological Farming Association, which focused on the themes of modern and sustainable farming.

Not only did her corn explorations connect her to a greater community of food and environmental activism, but it also helped her re-connect with a part of her heritage she had grown disconnected from. Her mother's side is German and her father's side is from El Salvador. Growing up in California, she felt little connection to her El Salvadoran heritage. "Through this project I rediscovered my heritage and roots. It actually allowed me to connect with some really amazing organizations in San Jose, ultimately seeing this series as family portraits for me on a personal level. It was a perfect marriage of two halves.

She was part of a group exhibition called Maize y Mas: From Mother to Monster?, contemporary art exhibition exploring the unique heritage of corn in the Americas, at Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana (MACLA) in San Jose.

"I'm looking at this body of work through two very different lenses, but they still represent all of the things I see in this work," she says. The story of corn is not only how we, as a culture, have grown disconnected from the land and turned something that once represented life into an agent of destruction, but also of how we – and Escalante as the artist specifically – have become disconnected from our own culture, heritage, and history.

"The story of corn for me is symbolic of the way we have disconnected ourselves from growing from the earth, from creation," Escalante says. "That's true culturally as well as our tenuous connection to where our food comes from now and what we're actually consuming."

In what is perhaps the natural evolution of her work as an artist concerned with issues of social and environmental justice as well as cultural history, Escalante has now taken on the role of an educator, teaching classes at San Jose State University on jewelry and small metals. "My life's goal, when I finally chose to do what I wanted to do which was to make visual art, was also to be an educator." Now she teaches students new to metalsmithing the time-honored tradition of metallurgy and demystifies the techniques. "[Metallurgy is so completely] based on process and really honoring

traditional techniques, I feel honored being able to pass that on to the next generation. It sounds corny but it's true!" No pun intended.

**More resources:**

<http://www.yvonneescalante.com/>

<http://maclaarte.org/>

# **Public art as social activism: Ta-coumba Aiken creates art that heals the heart and soul**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, June 24, 2014

Ta-coumba Aiken grew up in Evanston, Illinois during the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, the rise of the Black Panther Party and Black Power, and the prominence of the NAACP's civil rights activism – "all these different groups of African Americans that were trying to have a voice in how we should move forward," he remembers. "In all of these things I would see community activism but I didn't know what it was called. It was just called breathing then."

At 52 years old, Aiken has had a storied career as an artist and arts advocate, a career that began when he was just six years old when he showed his first exhibition in his parents' basement.

"I realized in my twenties or thirties when I started doing a lot of residencies that I kept referring back to my first exhibition ever," Aiken recalls. He says his father was a good man, but also a practical one. He was a garbage man; his mother was a housecleaner. Young Aiken wanted to be an artist, and his father was eager for him to do anything but that.

"He had my stuff and was ready to throw it in the garbage can. My mother caught it right before it went in and my mother asked in a really sweet and wonderful way, because he just melted at the sound of her voice, if I could do an exhibition."

His father was only trying to help; he didn't want his son to struggle through life as a starving artist. But he agreed to let Aiken show an exhibition of his work in his hand-built rec room, a room where Aiken and his brother were rarely allowed. "There were all kinds of hand-made woodworking from dad [in there]. He might have not wanted me to go forward [with my art] because he had wanted to do that himself as a kid and he didn't want me to go through the same hurt."

Aiken made flyers for the show. His teachers passed them around to other schools, and his mom passed them around at work. On the first evening of the three-day exhibition, a line formed down the street and around the block while the family had their supper. One woman begged to be let in early

because she had to head to Chicago that night; when she came upstairs she was crying, saying, "His work is magnificent." "Boy was that a fuel-injected phrase!" Aiken laughs.

At the end of the three days, after Sunday supper, his father took Aiken down to the rec room to count all the money they had collected in a cigar box. "Dad says, 'Well son, there seems to be some people interested so we should see if you made any money.' He told me to open the box but my hands were too sweaty. This was life or death for me!"

The box was filled with coins and paper bills for a grand total of \$657.36. "He told my mother he didn't want me to starve because you can't make any money at this, and here I had a box of money," says Aiken. "I think when he turned his head he was either smiling or teary. I said, 'Dad?' He looked at me. 'Can I do my art?' And he looked at me and stared at me and said, 'Yes, and you can pay for your own damn law school.'"

Aiken remembers all of the different people who came to visit over those three days, people of all different ages and races and socioeconomic backgrounds. "All these different people from all these different walks of life made it possible for me to do my art for the rest of my life," he says. "That's when I realized art wasn't in the gallery: it was in the streets. It was in the clothing people made and the music people made and the [signs on buildings]. That was my first ah-ha moment. I've had a few since then!"

Since then Aiken's career as an artist has been filled with ah-ha moments. He has created public art in collaboration with schools, neighborhood organizations, and city planning and development departments. "In the '70s I started doing murals. One person pays for it but then hundreds of thousands of people can see it. One piece of artwork touches thousands of lives."

His art has taken him around the world, including the 2nd World Black and African Cultural Arts Festival (FESTAC) held at the National Nigerian Museum in Lagos, Nigeria as part of the international group exhibition in 1977. This was another ah-ha moment. "I had the mindset that I wanted to do better for the community," he says. "After going there and seeing what my people have been doing for centuries...when I came back I was different. I'm colorblind but when I came back I 'saw' color. After that I was unstoppable."

Throughout his career he has worked as an illustrator/graphic designer for Honeywell, which led to him designing posters for an NAACP conference,

which led to him curating an exhibit for Black History Month, which led to him curating exhibits for the Minnesota African American Museum and Cultural Center that examined the relationship between African Americans and Jews as well as a whole show dedicated to Black Native Americans. "I take opportunities as they come," he says. "I really wasn't trying to do anything that made me [a bigger name], but the things I would do would lead to [other opportunities]."

His work naturally evolved into art activism, addressing social justice issues like racial inequity, housing development, civil rights, gender inequity, and Black studies. Even in his earliest days as an illustrator and graphic designer, he used his art to represent people who were underrepresented, focusing on Afrocentric themes. "I was using art as a way to bring attention to things, which later became known as 'activism' when the term came along."

In 1997 Aiken teamed up with his mentor Dr. John Biggers, one of the top African American artists in contemporary history, on a public mural called Celebration of Life, a massive mural located on a highway retainer wall that was later torn down. Aiken is now working on another mural project in the same spirit and practice as that one, selecting and training a group of African American artists on how to create public art.

Aiken is also currently working in Bloomington with a group called Creative Community Builders, a team of consultants, researchers and planners dedicated to helping communities through engagement and problem-solving. He has served on numerous committees, including the public art and design committee for the Minneapolis light rail. He hosts community engagement workshops dealing with diversity and celebrating similarities. He is also a long-time resident of the Lowertown Lofts Artist Cooperative in Saint Paul.

Ultimately, Aiken is a painter, an illustrator, a graphic artist, a muralist, a lecturer, a curator, an arts advocate, and a community collaborator. He works with ink, paint, glass, metal, wood, clay, ceramics, and landscaping materials. He has achieved a career as an artist through grants and fellowships, exhibitions, commissioned works, speaker workshops and other collaborations. His work spans several decades, disciplines, and mediums. "My thing was having all these different outlets so people can see me and I can see them," he explains. "I create my art to heal the hearts and souls of people."

He feels that the future of art is not in what gets stored and displayed inside

museums, but in what is available for all the public to see and enjoy. "I don't know what the future of art is, but it should be in the communities. I want my art to be relevant in how it makes somebody feel."

**More resources:**

<http://ta-coumbaaiken.com/>



# **NURTURING NEW ARTISTS**

*Innovative youth programming  
supporting the next generation of  
artists and creative thinkers*

# Alex Gilliam is Building Heroes

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, October 27, 2015

Public Workshop started in Philadelphia in 2009, but is really an outgrowth of the work Alex Gilliam has been doing teaching design and architecture over the past 17 years. With Public Workshop and the recently launched sister nonprofit, Tiny WPA, he is able to take that work a few steps further.

"Project-based learning is great but until we actually got away from the notion of simulation and legitimately gave youth an opportunity to have an impact and change the world around them, we weren't really maximizing the learning opportunities and sense of empowerment that equals great achievement in school," he says.

He remembers teaching in a school that was in such bad shape that the students had tried to burn it down. At the time, he felt like he hadn't achieved as much as he wanted in terms of "Big D 'design'" and hadn't maximized the impact he felt he was able to have. At a low point, he recalls walking into the gymnasium and 50 kids running up to him asking if they can help him with his projects. Two girls were particularly insistent so he told them to go scrape the paint off of some doors and much to his surprise, they didn't get snarky or blow him off – they scraped the paint. And that's when it clicked for him.

"That helped me realize that even though we hadn't got to this Big D 'design,' we repainted 37 doors, we fixed the bleachers in the gym, and all this stuff was really starting to have a profound social impact in the school," says Gilliam. "Incidents of fights were decreasing and teachers were saying, 'Wow, I never thought of some of these students this way before.'"

He created this project thinking about how architects and designers could very simply get involved in their communities and have an impact. "Here was something you didn't really have to be a teacher to do," he explains. "A designer or builder can be designer or builder and still make things happen."

Gilliam then decided he wanted to roll out a national model of design-build public school reform. "Fifty percent of schools have dire physical needs that are legitimate opportunities for much more," he says. "They're having a really negative impact on the sense of pride and achievement in schools. Instead of really trying to spend all of our time controlling kids, give them control and

amazing things will happen, even in the most challenging of circumstances."

Public Workshop is now in three different public schools throughout the country, doing this type of design-build work in very different settings – from urban Philadelphia to rural Virginia.

"A lot of the schools that are being held up as beacons for interesting models are in wealthy districts or private schools," Gilliam points out. "We're in urban or rural settings with schools that are having real problems trying to educate young people. If we can build rolling two-story tree houses in a school cafeteria and have it be this incredible boost in the school's maker culture and sense of identity, rewriting the social fabric in the school, we can do this anywhere."

It's important to also note that this isn't just about youth – Gilliam's design-build approach impacts the whole community.

"What I've found over the past six to seven years of really aggressively doing this work with clients all over the country, is that when you put young people as the underdogs of designing change in the community and do it in a very public way – all of our work is done outside on the sidewalk – we're wired as humans to copy one another. Action begets action. That trait is heightened when it's an underdog doing something no one thinks is possible."

For Gilliam and Public Workshop, design – good design, the quality of which doesn't need to be sacrificed for the sake of being done by the community – is an important element of community engagement.

"Good design is an important part that gets people to stop and say, 'Holy crap.' I really deeply believe that just because something is made by or with the community or youth doesn't mean that those can't be well-designed, well-fabricated things that empower, teach build ownership, and engage the community. Those things are not mutually exclusive; they are actually deeply interconnected."

Much of the work of Public Workshop can be considered community engagement, from their temporary and semi-permanent build projects to community engagement consulting with entities like the Philadelphia Water Department.

"We're helping them rethink their engagement process around their water

structure project and understand how to strategically connect that in the programs they already have," says Gilliam. It really simply goes back to this notion of, "Well, have you asked the community what they need?"

Gilliam is certainly no stranger to asking the community what they want and need. In fact, that is the impetus for much of Public Workshop's work.

"It doesn't make a difference how challenged the area is, if it's Flint [Michigan] or rural Virginia. Ask any community where they want to see services, and the first thing is almost always something for the kids – something to keep them off the streets, give them exercise, somewhere they can play. We're using play as this entry point into much deeper and more painful conversations. There are few more powerful tools to bring together tremendously diverse groups of people than getting people designing and building play."

This year Public Workshop has done a lot of work with parks and playgrounds, with one on a portion of Lancaster Avenue in West Philadelphia having particular significance.

This vacant lot was known as an area plagued by drug use and other social issues, and the business owners there wanted to put up a fence and block it off. A father who lived in a building behind the lot thought it would be great to have a place to play there, but community stakeholders shot down the idea, claiming it would never work. So Public Workshop put the fence up but moved it ten feet back from the sidewalk, creating a mini park with seating. Once the community stakeholders saw how positively people responded to this pocket park, Public Workshop was able to get a grant to design and build some play and exercise equipment.

"Now we have drug dealers protecting the bench. We have homeless men who have been deeply committed to the project because they see this as providing need in their lives, not just internally but also externally – they want people to see them as humans and as valuable citizens. We have young kids playing, partially handicapped people jumping in – just this tremendous coalition of people who are becoming advocates for this space. Play is spilling out into street and now traffic is calming. What's so exciting about this work is that there's nothing like this anywhere that's happening on a business corridor, working with the business owners and really directly dealing with the people who are considered a problem."

Public Workshop, which is a for-profit company, launched a nonprofit

organization this summer called Tiny WPA ("Works Progress Administration," so named for the New Deal which paid for millions of unemployed people to carry out public works projects during the Great Depression). This nonprofit will allow them to leverage their visibility and resources to do even more of this socially-minded work within schools and neighborhoods and have an even greater impact in the community.

Tiny WPA works with youth and adults alike on creative place-based change projects, and is also shepherding the next wave of what they call "Building Heroes." The Building Hero Project is a social venture, a community design leadership program that teaches youth and adults to become skilled leaders and agents of change. This program brings people together who want to do great things, teaching them professional build skills while also connecting them to others who are like-minded about having a positive impact in the community through design. Gilliam says that finding people who can lead and execute the kind of work Public Workshop does is difficult, so the Building Hero Project is also a method of growing their capacity to do more of this work and extend the impact of what they're doing in Philadelphia and the greater region.

"The Building Hero Project is a project-based community design leadership curriculum where the training tools are projects," he says. "It's kind of shop class on steroids and human growth hormones!"

Currently the program is funded through a mix of grants and the sale of hand-crafted pieces made by program participants through the Building Hero Project Etsy store. Gilliam's goal is not just to fund this project, but to fund it in such a way that participants can also get paid.

"Nobody has really been able to make it work effectively, where the job training component is paid to keep those people who are teetering on the edge from going over," he says. "Tiny WPA gives us increased access to different kinds of funding for programs like Building Hero." Tiny WPA will create a new workshop and storefront on Lancaster Avenue, across the street from the pocket park playground they built, in order to integrate themselves into the business life in the neighborhood and not just the social life.

**More resources:**

<http://publicworkshop.us/>

<http://www.tinywpa.org/>

# **YEPAW encourages youth to pursue lifestyles of excellence through the arts**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, August 18, 2015

Youth Excellence Performing Arts Workshop (YEPAW) got its first start when founder and artistic director Leslie Barnes had a conversation with a friend who claimed that the youth generation at the time – 1990 – was a lost and hopeless one. Barnes disagreed, and decided to prove her friend wrong.

Barnes brought 50 young people together every evening for a week to learn 10 gospel songs and present them at a concert at the end of that week. The group was called the Youth Excellence Gospel Choir, coming out of Barnes's background as a minister and theologian who sees gospel music as a way to bring people together in a way that is creative and collaborative.

Each year the group grew and grew from 50 to 100 to 300 kids. Finally it became YEPAW, now in its twenty-sixth year, incorporating many different kinds of artistic disciplines in addition to gospel music – though each year at summer camp the kids all still learn and perform a gospel choir song together as a group.

"We encourage youth through the arts to pursue lifestyles of excellence," says YEPAW Executive Director and alumni Alexandra Wright. "We use arts to teach kids that they can excel in any area of their lives: academically, at home in their communities. Anything they put their minds to they can accomplish. We use arts to teach them that they can do anything."

YEPAW has a partnership with the University of Akron to house the kids on campus and use the University's theatre space for a week each year in July. During that week, between 200 and 300 kids ages 12-21 converge on the campus and work at their creative practice for more than 12 hours a day.

The kids are immersed in classes all day and can choose from 16 different areas of focus, including dance, creative writing, drama, orchestra, visual arts, drum line, and photography. Because YEPAW is a faith-based organization, spirituality is also an element of the curriculum with inspirational devotionals to start each morning, though it is not a prerequisite for any child or family to come from a particular faith background.

"Our target is inner city at-risk youth, but we want all kids to be exposed to the program regardless of their ethnicity or religious background," says Wright.

YEPAW alumni have gone on to be doctors, nurses, and teachers overseas. "Kids who have come through this program are doing some incredible things," Wright says. "Our staff is largely from the program. We give back to the program and are thankful for it. When we see kids go off to college and...finally step into the careers they've been dreaming about, that's the rewarding side of what we do."

The gospel roots are still a part of the program as well, and each day after lunch the kids attend a mass choir rehearsal. That is followed by "a time of renewal," in which different people from the community come in and talk to the kids about leadership; community engagement; arts awareness; responsible use of social media; abstinence from sex, drugs, and alcohol; and anything else that might be important in developing young leaders.

"Our overall goal is to teach them about making good decisions and how the decisions they make now affect them later," Wright explains. "We're teaching them about being responsible citizens of the community."

Evening classes and another choir practice follow the guest speakers, and the kids give a small concert about midway through the week at Haven of Rest, a non-denominational Christian social services organization that provides food, clothing, and shelter for the homeless and needy in Akron. "This teaches the kids it's important not just to receive a service, but it's also important to give back to the community in a meaningful way," says Wright.

She says they "work work work" until Saturday, when they are sent home to get some rest before the Sunday concert.

The Sunday community concert at the University of Akron's E.J. Thomas Hall, with about 3,000 people in attendance, is the culmination of their week of learning and training. At this event all of the different classes present what they have worked on over the week, whether they learned a dance routine or created an art project.

"This teaches kids they can learn all this in a week's time because they put their minds to it. And if you can do that in a week, what can you do in a full

year?" The underlying message, Wright says, is encouraging kids to stay focused and committed to school and put their minds to their schoolwork in the same way they put their minds to the work in this week-long summer camp.

Admission to the summer camp is open to everyone who fills out the application and pays the registration fee of \$220. The cost per child for this camp is actually \$780, but much of it is subsidized through grant money from organizations including the Akron Community Foundation, the Ohio Arts Council, the Margaret Clark Morgan Foundation, and the Knight Foundation. They do have interested families who have a difficult time affording the registration cost, so YEPAW does everything they can to find scholarship assistance so they don't ever have to turn a student away for an inability to pay.

"We deal with the challenge of inner city youth," Wright says. "Although we are not a social services organization, we do a lot of that. If we have kids who have transportation issues, the staff are picking them up and dropping them off. We do it all. We feel like we're making a pretty great impact on greater Akron."

In addition to the original YEPAW summer camp, there is now also WEPAW for little kids ages 4-11. This is a three-day arts experience in July that lasts from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and includes choral music and rhythm and movement study. They also get to sing one song with the "big kids."

"We wanted to start teaching little kids appreciation for the arts at a young age and developing a feeder into the larger program," explains Wright. WEPAW gets about 90 children and is in its third year. "We're excited about that program and fostering an appreciation for the arts in kids as young as four."

YEPAW isn't only active in the summer. The organization also runs the Knight-funded YEPAW 365 leadership and arts awareness academy, focused on leadership as well as arts and cultural engagement. This year-round program is open to kids enrolled in middle school and high school, roughly ages 11-18.

The kids are exposed to a lot in the 365 program; previous years have taken the kids to see theatre performances on Broadway, a leadership academy in Disney, and master classes with Yo-Yo Ma. Kids in the program meet with



facilitators weekly from September through May, learning leadership skills and how everyone is a leader in their own way. "With this group we really do a lot of community engagement and volunteering," Wright says. "The community in Akron is really supportive of YEPAW so we always want to make sure the kids in the community are always give back to them."

YEPAW has about 50 kids annually in the 365 program, but the criteria is a bit more selective than that of the summer camp.

"We really want to develop leadership skills and [teach the kids how to] be more involved in the community," says Wright. "We want the kids who are really serious, though I do take kids who maybe aren't that serious but show some potential. When you're in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade you might not be that serious about [leadership] but could still use some direction. I'm always an advocate for the underdog! I'll say, 'She's gonna be great, you watch what I tell you!'" They're not always only the perfect kids; I was a less-than-perfect one, too."

After 10 years with YEPAW and three years as Executive Director, whoever took the chance on a less-than-perfect Wright clearly made the right decision, as she is, by her own testimony, a testament of the program's success.

**More resources:**

<http://www.yepaw.org/>

# **Denver-based Youth on Record is an innovative music education program with national relevance**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, April 14, 2015

Youth on Record was formed in 2007 by members of Denver hip hop and rock band Flobots as a platform for youth and youth-adult organizing. It has evolved significantly since those early days, and is now the number one music education provider for Denver Public Schools.

Youth on Record employs professional working musicians to teach for-credit classes at alternative academic high schools in Denver. It is the only model of its kind in the country.

Jami Duffy, Executive Director of Youth on Record, says that the program addresses two major issues: the American dropout crisis and artist employment opportunities.

"We are working in a neighborhood with a 12 percent graduation rate in a city with a 58 percent graduation rate," Duffy says. Through this program, at-risk youth ages 16-22 receive course credit for music and performance education including music production, spoken word poetry, and music fundamentals. Every student gets five academic credits in their classes; the organization currently works with 700 students annually. "We're really helping to put these kids on the academic pathway to graduation."

Duffy came on as Executive Director in 2010. She had previously been a board member and has spent her adult life working at the intersection of youth advocacy, social work, and the arts. She says the YOR board members had a collective vision to build the organization. They had been offering after-school programs, which are effective for elementary and middle school students, but for high school students they really wanted to get inside the classroom. "[For this to work for high school students], they need to either be getting high school credit or a paycheck," Duffy says.

"This was really a collective vision that we have worked tirelessly to achieve. Part of it was the absolute conviction that art must be used to address the most pressing issues of our time. What was happening to the young people

in our city was unacceptable."

They hold classes at their Youth Media Studio, a 6,000-square-foot state-of-the-art music education space. They just finishing building out their recording studio, partnering with internationally successful Denver-based band The Fray on getting equipment. There are also 25 music workstations, all learning-abled, and a poetry "kiva," which Duffy describes as a "really warm space" where the Denver Slam Poetry team meets and practices. The Youth Media Studio was built in partnership with the Denver Housing Authority as part of the DHA's massive \$200 million Mariposa redevelopment spanning several blocks in West Denver and including both low-income and market rate apartment rental units.

"The Denver Housing Authority is considered the most visionary housing authority in the U.S.," says Duffy. "The fact that they invested \$2 million [into Youth on Record] really catapulted us ahead by 10 years." Denver Public Schools has also been an instrumental partner in moving YOR forward, as have the artist-instructors. "All those artists combined with the housing authority combined with the school district – this has been a nonstop labor of love, but it's working."



*Jami Duffy. Photo credit: Kara Pearson Photography*

In addition to teaching 60 kids every day five days a week at the media studio, instructors also go directly to high schools, as well as to youth residential treatment facilities to work with kids who have experienced trauma, have addiction issues or learning disabilities, and those who were just simply abandoned.

Duffy estimates about 1,000 students have gone through the academic program and earned credits, with about 5,000 total being reached through additional assemblies and workshops. The model is working: through 2013, 85 percent of Youth On Record students boosted their attendance in all classes, and 71 percent improved their grade point average.

Additionally, Youth on Record employs 15 musicians who get paid for their skills, allowing them to teach their craft and not have to piecemeal their lives together by bartending and doing other unrelated jobs here and there, as musicians are so often forced to do.

"Because they have that stability can go continue to make music, record, [go on tour]. Half of our musicians just got back from SXSW. By having such a stable job within the music industry to them means being able to continue working in their industry."

As Youth on Record conducts research to create and implement a national model of their program, they are already receiving national attention. Youth on Record is the primary partner for Denver's My Brother's Keeper Initiative, launched by President Obama to create more opportunities for young men of color. A youth summit held at their facilities in February brought in over 100 young men of color to discuss the issues that they really care about – primarily having better relationships with their schools and with law enforcement. YOR was also honored last year at the Future of Music Coalition Honors Dinner, and is partnering with PBS to produce a documentary on the organization's work in addressing this national education crisis head-on.

They're also doing a variety of work with well-known national music acts like Sleater-Kinney, OK Go, Kimya Dawson, and the Fray. "These are artists who walk their talk in their communities," says Duffy. "[Youth on Record is] really starting to be seen as a one-of-a-kind model."

Duffy says they are currently in conversations with cities all over the country that are interested in launching a similar program, and hopes that, within 18

months, they will have their "phase two" rollout finalized. "This is a fascinating education model that's working," she says. "It's not just a concept that's good; it's actually working, which is amazing."

**More resources:**

<http://www.youthonrecord.org/>

# **PAR Projects is building a home for arts education and programming in Cincinnati's Northside**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, September 09, 2014

Things don't always work out the way you plan, but they do tend to work out the way they're supposed to.

Jonathan Sears is the co-founder of Professional Artistic Research (PAR) Projects, though he is the only founding member who remains with the organization.

PAR Projects started in 2010 under the name Northside House, which was to be a gallery space with a community focus. Just days after opening, they were quite suddenly and unceremoniously kicked out of their original space and lacked the capital to pursue legal action to reclaim their rights to it. When this happened, the Northside community of Cincinnati rallied around them, offering them a number of spaces to host the full year's worth of programming they had planned.

"The community stepped up and started offering us space. They really saved the show," says Sears, Executive Director of PAR Projects. The open arms treatment Sears received cemented his and PAR Projects' relationship with Northside. "Since then we've been curating shows around Cincinnati but with a focus on Northside. Just seeing how the community stepped in when all that crazy stuff happened...they told us they want us here, so we should respect that. Usually when people are down on their luck it's like, 'Sorry about your luck.' But we were fielding phone calls daily: 'Hey I got this space, let's do your April programming here.'"

Things don't always work out the way you plan, but they do tend to work out the way they're supposed to.

Northside House became PAR Projects and, at the request of the Northside community, the gallery with a community focus became a community-focused organization with a gallery component. And they're staying in Northside.

"Northside is one of the most economically and racially diverse neighborhoods [in Cincinnati]," Sears says. "There is a strong acceptance of the LGBTQ community, there are upper class people and lower class people, there are Appalachians. There is every single kind of mix here and everybody gets. It's one of the more upcoming communities in Cincinnati. It's not false; it's not gentrification – this has been happening over the span of 20 years instead of three years."

He says it is also a neighborhood where many artists congregate and feel comfortable, but there was never any kind of central arts hub or strong gallery presence that was open to the community. "It kind of felt like a natural fit," he says. "It's good to be in a place where people actually want you to be and you have room to grow."

PAR Projects recently purchased the parcel of land at 1622 Hoffner St. in Northside, which had sat vacant for 20 years prior. The land, which included an 80-year-old Amish-built barn, will be the site of PAR Projects' education and gallery space – made entirely of shipping containers.

After being kicked out of Northside House, the project was reduced to two U-Haul trucks in the parking lot across from the gallery. "That started this idea of temporary spaces," Sears explains. Eventually they discovered that shipping containers could be upcycled as building materials and as stand-alone units for businesses and gathering spaces, still (even now) very much a new concept in America. "That opened our eyes to what can happen when you keep things mobile."

They started with temporary pop-up shows in different communities that had vacant spaces the community wanted to activate. They transformed abandoned warehouses into event spaces, and transformed an abandoned piece of land into an edible garden with a sculpture park.

"It's really organically building," Sears says. "I wouldn't have thought any of this would have happened but you do what you're supposed to do." Things don't always work out the way you plan, but they do tend to work out the way they're supposed to.

The site on Hoffner St. will eventually have 12 shipping containers retrofitted into 2,000 square feet of usable space for arts education and programming. They already have the first two shipping containers, one of which became the Makers Mobile, their mobile outreach center that serves as an art gallery and

education space which has allowed them to bring a gallery to communities and work with groups like Lighthouse Youth Services on educational programming.

"That was more rewarding than I would have thought," Sears says. "We were dealing with teenagers who just needed their eyes opened to the arts."

For Sears, this is a cornerstone of what PAR Projects is all about. He remembers being a sophomore in high school and his parents told him he needed to either figure out how to make a living with his art or go to military school. This led him to a career in graphic design and he ended up teaching graphic design at the university level. But, he says, "It didn't feel right."

With the educational component of PAR Projects, Sears wants to teach people usable life skills in the arts in a way that is accessible, financially and otherwise. "The long-term goal is and always has been to teach practical arts – graphic design, video production, editing. We will offer courses boiled down to the community level so people can actually access them and form a career center of sorts. We'll teach them things people are actually interested in learning and can have as life skills."



*Jonathan Sears. Photo credit: Courtesy PAR Projects*



The shipping container project, the first of its kind in Cincinnati, will be completed in phases. First, though, they will stabilize the historic barn on the site that has fallen into disrepair over the last 20 years of neglect. "With that has opened a new stream of programming we didn't think we would be doing. The building is half indoors and half outdoors, and Playhouse in the Park is already interested in doing yearly programming."

Things don't always work out the way you plan, but they do tend to work out the way they're supposed to.

After that they will construct an outdoor movie theatre, projecting onto the back of two shipping containers, to create an access point for the community and get people accustomed to visiting the space. They hope to have that finished by the end of October. Going into winter they'll be forming the final committees for their programming, running another fundraising campaign, and beginning the first phase of build-out with five shipping containers creating a horseshoe-shaped courtyard.

Beyond the programming, the Hoffner site will have space for community fundraisers (which will be offered pro bono), and PAR Projects will still have a strong gallery presence with the goal of bringing in national artists. As far as the art component, anything goes. "It's really about having conversations and surprising people, and having consistently strong shows. Every successful thing we've done has been a major collaboration. We worked with the Symphony, we worked with communities across the river [in northern Kentucky]. It's really power in numbers, applying creativity to different projects to make them special."

**More resources:**

<http://parprojects.com/>

# **CREATIVE BUSINESS MODELS**

*Shaping the new economy through  
creative entrepreneurship*

# 1xRUN is the future of art

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, December 08, 2015

In November 2015, 1xRUN (one-time-run) celebrated its fifth anniversary of delivering limited-edition time-released prints through its e-commerce store.

1xRUN is the world's leading publisher of fine art editions and is an online destination for original artwork from the world's leading contemporary artists. It is entirely democratic in its reach: prints are sold on a first-come, first-served basis, and the prints themselves are usually between \$50 and \$100 (originals cost more, of course). The works sold through 1xRUN appeal to a demographic rarely targeted by the stereotypical consumer-based art world – the street artists and the hip-hoppers and the streetwear brands and the singer-songwriters and musicians. In other words, the youth market.

Started as a side project by Jesse Cory and Dan Armand, 1xRUN has grown to employ 24 people, including graduates from the College for Creative Studies and BFAs from Michigan State University. They have moved from a tiny gallery space in Royal Oak, a suburb of Detroit, to a three-story, 10,000-square-foot fine art gallery in Detroit's rapidly evolving Eastern Market district.

This new home, Inner State Gallery, opened in 2013 and serves as the base of 1xRUN's production operations, as well as artist-in-residence studio and apartment space.

Through their artist-in-residence program, they have hosted over 100 artists from 40 different countries. More than 850 well-known and emerging contemporary artists from all over the world have been represented in tens of thousands of pieces sold through 1xRUN, which have expanded to include a variety of original works, books, and exclusives in addition to the limited edition prints.

1xRUN saw 100% revenue growth in 2014 and 50% growth in 2015. Cory feels they are on track to hit \$5 million in revenue by the end of 2016.

At this point it is safe to say that their little e-commerce site is no longer a startup.

"Five years – that's a good milestone," says Cory. "The business has grown

substantially. We have 24 employees and have started a retirement program that makes being an employee not just a temporary job but a livelihood, so they can raise a family and buy homes and cars. We're creating these opportunities with the understanding that we're no longer a startup. Failure is still always in the rearview mirror but we're looking at it from a great distance in the overall view of what we have accomplished."

The biggest struggle, Cory says, is understanding how to become profitable. "You can make a lot of money and do a lot of cool projects, but how do you understand the nuts and bolts of what business means? We're really trying to implement systems and processes, all these things we had no idea existed in business. We started as just a heart and a dream!"

They also work collaboratively with other galleries and art shows all around the country and world to co-publish prints and help grow "the movement."

Cory says, "When we're talking about entry-level art consumers we're talking about the global segment. How do we bring the joy of art, the age-old tradition of storytelling, to more people? That's been a highlight for us, to grow it. Our contemporaries in the consumer-based art market are all about figuring out how to grow that market segment."

By curating and selling the kind of work they like to the kind of people they hang out with, Cory and Armand have created a whole new collector base from an almost entirely untapped demographic, many of which are new to collecting or do not self-identify as "collectors."

The brand continues to grow and evolve each year, reaching and building new audiences in innovative ways. Cory says the main thing they have done over the last two years was cement their global partnerships, referring largely to the POW! WOW! global mural festival, which started as a week-long event in Hawaii and has since grown to include events in Long Beach, Tokyo, and Taipei – all of which 1xRUN has been present at with pop-up shops.

"It made sense to grow our brand in the POW! WOW! segment because our focus is people who are fine art painters who are now in the public domain," Cory says. "Now we're using their curators to bring artwork from Tokyo and Taipei to our audience, bringing all these contemporary Asian painters that people don't know to our audience, then doing pop-up events in those cities with our brand."

He refers to the evolution from "street art" to public art in the contemporary art movement. "As the street art movement continued to grow, contemporary fine art painters started painting murals. Now there is an explosion of mural festivals all over the world, and now people like ourselves can do it. Who'da thunk it?" he laughs.

This past September, 1xRUN/Inner State Gallery spearheaded Murals in the Market, a mural festival concentrated in Detroit's Eastern Market that saw roughly 50 artists painting 40 murals over nine days.

"We always wanted to bring a mural festival home," Cory says. "We wanted to bring the experience of what we learned in participating in POW! WOW! to Detroit, pairing local artists with international artists to paint murals in the public domain."

They programmed nine days of events and activations, including barbecues and tailgates where the public could come out and meet the artists.

"We had people in their 50s and 60s from the suburbs who were coming down to experience the market again for the first time in 10 years. We did a whole series of announced and unannounced talks. I gave 250 people free walking tours, and mostly the demographic of those was older females who were interested in learning about public art. Then I walked into the gallery where we were doing a talk with Social Club Grooming Co., which is pretty much all young African American males. My heart just fluttered! We basically hit every sector of the demographics of our city."

They also made an effort to present women and African Americans in the festival, aiming for inclusivity in this public art endeavor.

"We had a lot of female painters. Hebru Brantley painted a mural and there were young kids there who could see someone who looks like them who is an artist. The social impact was much greater than we ever anticipated."

Murals are by no means a new endeavor for Cory and Armand. It all started with a mural on their Royal Oak building. They then moved on to Woodward Windows in 2011, a public art project that activated vacant storefronts along Woodward Avenue in downtown Detroit. Then, in 2012, 1xRUN made national headlines with the Detroit Beautification Project. They regularly work with their artists-in-residence to produce new murals and have also partnered with civically-minded students.

Murals continue to be a big focus of theirs and a means for them to continue growing their brand and realizing their vision. Over the last year they have focused on growing their client services, creating murals for corporate partners in Chicago, London, Amsterdam, as well as several in Detroit for clients like the Detroit Windsor Tunnel and Ford.

"We're starting to ramp up these opportunities to work with companies to create public art," says Cory. "We do campaigns that are slightly different than what they're accustomed to, to dress up their offices or have art inside of their buildings. That's one of the biggest components of our company now."

But working with corporate clients does not mean they have lost sight of their mission to bring free art to the public. Last year they did a placemaking project for Quicken Loans, activating Monroe Street in Greektown for eight weeks through which a 16'x8' mural was created out of 12"x12" squares. At the end of the project, all of those squares were given out to the public for free.

There is no denying that the art world is an extremely fractured and segmented one. On one extreme end are the social practice artists – the foundation darlings who get grant funding for socially-minded creative community engagement projects. On the other end of the extreme are the Larry Gagosians and Damien Hirsts.

1xRUN exists in a space not easily defined by the implied lines in the sand of the art world. Cory and Armand, as de facto arts organizers, promote public art while creating an ever-growing collector base. They blend commerce with community. They are for-profit yet for the public benefit. They have a global reach but are deeply committed to their local community. They are job creators in the creative economy and help artists earn a living with their practice through every RUN.

And they just might be the future of art.

**More resources:**

<https://www.1xrun.com/>

# **Stephanie Pruitt puts poems in vending machines and makes her art her business**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, November 24, 2015

Stephanie Pruitt loves finding ways to get poems in unexpected places. That's why she puts poems in vending machines and places those vending machines at various locations around Nashville.

Pruitt is a poet, and has been writing poetry "seriously" for over 15 years. During that time, she says, she did a lot of things to make ends meet along the way. She published work in literary journals and magazines, the traditional "establishment approved" forms of publishing, and also self-published her own books. She would hit the road to read in "traditional" literary spaces and at church and psychology conferences – the kind of conferences not typically associated with poetry – all while selling her books out of the trunk of her car.

"Ignorance was more my blessing because I was making a living on my books and poetry and I didn't realize it," she jokes.

She would take her baby daughter with her but once the girl had to start school, Pruitt took "the menial jobs every artist has," when she found she actually liked marketing and business. In fact, it seems she had a natural talent for it. "I never felt like it was a compromise for my art. It would feed it," says Pruitt. "In the last few years I really focused on writing and how I love [finding ways to put poetry out] in the world. That allowed me to carve out a marketing niche."

For Pruitt, poetry is an art – a calling – but also a business. She works with clients and partners with organizations to do things like installing her poetry vending machines for events and poetry-bombing buildings. With an undergraduate degree in marketing and an MFA in creative writing, Pruitt is as comfortable and confident in her craft as she is in finding ways to promote that craft. She excels in thinking outside the box...or the glass jar, as it were.

Her poetry vending machines started when she came across a vintage gumball machine in a store. As a self-professed "collector," Pruitt fell in love with the charming piece, but she couldn't justify buying it without a reason. "I obsessed over it for weeks!" she laughs. "So I decided to figure out what to do with it to make it functional."

At the same time she was finishing up a poetry project that she didn't quite yet know what to do with. She figured, "What if, instead of publishing them in magazines or another book, I published in this vending machine?"

She called some business owners she knew and said she had this new marketing opportunity for them, in order to gauge interest. Two out of four of them said they were interested, so she thought the idea might have some legs.

The poetry vending machines are a unique, whimsical collision of publishing, public art, and brand engagement. Vending machines are set up in retail locations, schools, cafés, and at corporate events, fundraisers, conferences, weddings, and private events. Everything within the poetry bubble is customizable: the slips of paper can feature a unique promotion, ad, or QR code, and poems can be commissioned from specific artists or around a specific theme.

"I've been looking at everyday objects and places with fresh eyes," she says. "Things that seem totally unrelated – I want to connect those dots."

Most recently Pruitt has been working with developers to put poems on the sides of buildings. This project is a slow-moving one, but she's hopeful. "That also started out of curiosity – I generally just wanted to see if I could put a poem on the side of a building! Most of the stuff I come up with, when I call a business they think I'm crazy. Once in awhile one of those ideas takes. People get it if you speak their language without changing the message."

Sometimes Pruitt's work shows a business sense and savvy other artists struggle with, and sometimes her work is a matter of social practice. Poems and Pancakes falls into that latter category.

At Poems and Pancakes, Pruitt and her husband Al Gaines invite upwards of 80 people into their home where they make hundreds of pancakes and host a reading from a poet they bring in from out of state.

They invite their friends, neighbors, people from their church group, people they meet in the grocery store. There are babies and hipsters and folks in their 80s. There are people on food stamps alongside Belle Meades. "It's the weirdest, greatest, most uncanny get-together of people in Nashville!"

Poems and Pancakes started in a personal way: she and Gaines had been



married less than a year and had very different groups of friends. "We were trying to find a way to bridge that gap to connect our very disparate groups of friends," she explains. "There is something about eating pancakes that is disarming. It takes you back to this really oversimplified, really simple moment in time. There was something about the setting we were creating that really did merge these circles we hadn't seen before."

The fact that it is a home and not a restaurant creates a more intimate and more casual environment. People feel comfortable. It's not high-minded or stuffy – it's pancakes!

"I do like connecting social dots," Pruitt says. "I like finding ways for poetry and other arts to be the glue [connecting them], and find ways to really communicate the value of art in ways that resonate with people not connected with the traditional arts audience."

They have brought in major names in poetry like the award-winning Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets Marilyn Nelson, paying for travel, providing accommodations, ensuring an engaged audience, and encouraging book sales so that the event is worthwhile to the participants (Nelson used the event as her book release and sold out of every copy, including her reader).

"I'm not going to read for free anymore. I won't do it. So I'm trying to create a reading situation that I would respect and that would be really valuable to me," Pruitt explains.

Now Pruitt is shifting her focus to help other artists learn how to communicate the value of art in unique ways to resonate with people from all different kinds of backgrounds. She hosts workshops and eventually wants to start a retreat focused on how artists can practically make art and make it as an artist without compromising who they are.

She continues doing readings and speaking engagements, finding ways to talk about the tough topics we're not supposed to talk about in public, like "connecting art and business and talk about how artists often get completely screwed and how it makes sense for all of us to appropriately compensate arts and artists."

Through everything she does, Pruitt has found a way to make her art her business and her business her art, finding intersections between art and

commerce and, where she can't find one, making one herself.

"I don't know that it was a strategic thing," she says of her ability to merge two otherwise disparate fields. "A lot of it at the time was intuitive and based on some question like, I wonder if I can jump? Then maybe I fall. Then I get up and do it again."

**More resources:**

<http://www.stephaniepruitt.com/>

# **Joan Vorderbruggen is the one-woman powerhouse behind Minneapolis's Made Here**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, September 16, 2014

There's really no better word that can be used to accurately describe Joan Vorderbruggen than "dynamic." Vorderbruggen has a dynamic personality that she is able to use to lead dynamic public art projects that she creates from the ground up, working with a multitude of different artists and arts organizations (not to mention different personalities), all of whom adore her. She is an organizer, a leader, and a true inspiration – a word that maybe gets tossed around a bit too liberally but in Vorderbruggen's case is absolutely appropriate.

Vorderbruggen has been working since she was 11 years old, when she got a job waitressing in St. Paul, and has been working tirelessly ever since then. "I was a terribly neglected kid," she says, and she doesn't mince any words when it comes to her own past. "I was a high school dropout on top of that."

She did earn her GED and went on to get a nursing certificate. She spent 11 years waitressing and another 17 years nursing, and it was while she was working full-time as a nurse that she got deeply embedded in the Minneapolis arts community.

She and her then-future-husband, musician Tom Siler, moved to Brooklyn in 2001 where she was bit by the event and artist organization bug. She developed an itch for writing and creative storytelling and attended a Moth event with the theme of "brakes." She wrote a story about "putting the brakes" on a sexual experience in a bathroom stall – something she quickly realized after hearing a few of the other stories was not really in keeping with the tone of other storytellers. So she created her own storytelling event called Storyhole and encouraged people to tell the kinds of stories they couldn't tell anywhere else. "We would sell out the room, and I kind of got a buzz for organizing."

When Vorderbruggen and Siler moved back to Minneapolis she orchestrated "a total carnival wedding" involving 40 artists and musicians. "All these people came together without much guidance. It was super incredible. It felt like a gypsy party! And I felt like, 'Oh my god, I love organizing these people,' which led up to, 'I want to do something more.' I realized the street could be

showcase for their work."

The quality of life back in Minneapolis proved fruitful for the creative juggernaut. "I was inspired by having more time and space and money and I caught on fire with creativity," she says. "I was working with textile art and cool dye processes, making upcycled flip dresses." Her dresses appeared in the Smitten Kitten Sexy Craft Fair in 2009, and afterwards the erotic boutique carried her dresses in-store.

"I would go restock the racks with new dresses all the time. It's a feminist sex shop so they couldn't put their products in the window, so I asked them, 'Can I please make a window display for your seventh anniversary?' Sales increased by 40 percent that month, and for a year and a half after that I would do their storefront every six weeks and won some awards. Then I started doing other independent retailers in Uptown."

It could be said Vorderbruggen has a bit of a Midas touch, because it certainly does seem like everything she touches turns to gold. Or, at least, a valuable earth-friendly, eco-conscious material. She decided she wanted to do a whole city block of storefront displays on University Avenue to try to revitalize a dying area. "It sort of lit a fire under my ass," she says, though her idea wasn't met with an equal level of enthusiasm. "I get really frustrated when someone tells me I can't do something; it's almost the best thing that can happen."

She dedicated six months to studying storefront art and started shopping her idea around to other areas in Minneapolis. The Nicollet Avenue "Eat Street" commercial district in Minneapolis's Whittier neighborhood welcomed her enthusiasm and willingness to single-handedly spearhead the project, and so the first iteration of Artists in Storefronts launched in April 2012 featuring 26 different shops. She worked with the shop owners and the artists to coordinate the entire project, wrote the press releases, managed the social media campaigns, and led weekly walking tours. Then, towards the end of its run, she received a large anonymous donation that enabled her to commission some murals and set the precedent that every time she did an "Artists in Storefronts" series it would leave something permanent behind.

She then orchestrated a second Artists in Storefronts run and was about to take some time off "to be a person and not a workaholic" when the Whittier Alliance told her they didn't want it to stop and would find a way to pay her. "I couldn't say no to it," she says, so that became Artists in Storefront 3 and it

was "bigger and larger and better than ever." For the fourth installment of the series she did a pop-up, then she took a couple of months off. Because, it should also be noted, she was still working as a nurse full-time while leading all of these projects. (A fifth installment was held later.)

"It had been a solid year of working 80-100 hours a week," Vorderbruggen says. "I knew I wanted to do something more with my life than being a nurse but I wasn't comfortable with going to a fine art college; it just seemed so exorbitant and inaccessible. I figured I would just do it," and by that she means just do the art she wanted to do, "and worked full time as a nurse during all of this. It was really challenging, but I have a really supportive partner and a really supportive family and friends."

She never would have considered quitting her job in nursing until she was admitted into a competitive residency program, Elsewhere in Greensboro, North Carolina, and had to quit her job in order to have the time off to attend. "[I figured] if I don't take the time to ask myself the question of how do I want to contribute to the community in a creative way, [I'll never be able to]."

At the same time, the most notorious boondoggle of Minneapolis development – the 13-year-old failed "Block E" urban mall project in downtown Minneapolis – was going through a sputtering stop-start series of revitalization attempts. Mired in local controversy, Vorderbruggen wanted nothing to do with it – until a friend asked her, "But how do you feel about the artists you work with?" She answered with, "Are you kidding me? I f-ing kill myself for them."

In a meeting that included a representative from the Hennepin Theatre Trust, the group spearheading the project, Vorderbruggen made her thoughts clear – something that comes pretty easily to her – and that night got an email from the representative saying that Hennepin was extremely interested in having her lead the Block E project and wanted to present her idea to the board the next day. So she stayed up all night working on the proposal, outlining everything she would need and how much it would cost, and at 10:30 a.m. presented it to the board. She did the entire Block E project, called Made Here and featuring 30 visual displays, for \$8,000.

Made Here was not without its complications, and Vorderbruggen was not immune to the stress. During this time, she continued working full-time as a nurse. When Hennepin asked her what she wanted, she said, "I want one hard job." When told that they needed a couple of months to

monetize the project, she went home and cried. "I was bereft. I thought I had no future in this, after I had spent two years killing myself over it."

Andersen Corporation came in with a substantial sponsorship, allowing Hennepin to continue the project on a large scale and hire Vorderbruggen part-time. She still kept her nursing job and went to her first day of working for Hennepin, when she spent a solid eight hours in meetings and doing nothing else. "I went home and said there's no way; I can't do full time nursing and this, so I emailed my supervisor and said thank you so much for this, but I'm not okay with not being successful. I'm okay with being a workaholic but not with not being successful. Then on Monday they hired me full time and I quit my job."

Vorderbruggen is the Hennepin Theatre Trust's Cultural District Arts Coordinator. Made Here has generated hundreds of thousands of dollars in sponsorship and has paid almost \$50,000 in artist stipends since it started. "I told them, no more cashing in favors. Every single artist is going to get paid. I'm done operating that way; it's not okay. Now even the buskers that play on receptions get paid."

A second iteration of Made Here launched in June featuring the works of 50 individual artists and 11 artist collaborations covering 15 city blocks. Made Here is the largest storefront window initiative in the country. The Hennepin Theatre Trust's long-term vision is to activate the cultural district of downtown Minneapolis and create a center for arts and culture for people from all over the world to visit. There are 57 cultural partners in the district and the Trust is working on creating an overarching brand that will broaden the initiative to include all of these different institutions, commission public art and activate public spaces, and promote everything happening at cultural and educational galleries.

Leading the charge is Vorderbruggen – welcoming, candid, ferocious, and kind, with an uncanny ability to command attention and communicate with people on a number of different planes.

"My professional career has really been a short stint. Artists in Storefronts started in April 2012. There are a lot of things I don't know and sometimes I feel like I'm at a disadvantage," she says. "The statistics show I shouldn't be successful. Part of me has this burning fire in my backbone – I'm smart, and it wasn't fair I didn't get an education, but I deserve more and I'll fight for it. Maybe it doesn't come in this formal package, but maybe just showing

people that I know how to do shit and think and imagine amazing things, even if it requires me to roll up my sleeves and do hard work, I'll do it. I can feel my agricultural background – 'Yeah I'm a peasant! Yeah I can do this!' Sometimes hard work is the most transformative work you can do."

As for her future, she says, "It would be nice to teach other people how to do this, especially other people who might be jaded from their past."

**More resources:**

<http://joanvorderbruggen.com/>

<http://www.madeheremn.org/>

# **April Denée is the mother of BUSK!**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, August 19, 2014

"Busking" refers to artists performing in public places for tips. Unfortunately, "busking" all too often gets mistaken for begging, and buskers are treated by the police and public alike as pan-handlers.

April Denée has closely studied busking in Charlotte for several years. For her immediate post-college career she worked on the creative side of marketing, but, she says, "What I am and what I have always been is a writer."

She went on to earn her masters in English, then worked as a freelance copywriter and journalist through her business March Blake Media. She found that her niche was in calling attention to the arts. "I'm not a painter. I'm not a musician. I'm not a dancer. I'm a writer; that's my art," she says. "I find so much light [in that]. It's a way of understanding others."

She found herself doing increasingly less copywriting and increasingly more journalistic coverage focusing on social and community issues, particularly in the arts.

"I was becoming hampered trying to communicate the importance of these art forms," Denée says. "You have to see it. You have to be in that moment and see that real human moment."

Since she had done some photography work in her marketing job, she decided her next evolution was to offer a video component to the stories she was writing – particularly appealing in today's multi-media-driven media climate.

At the time, issues surrounding homelessness were a hot button topic in Charlotte. As Denée was spending a lot of time filming on the streets covering those issues, she became increasingly aware of a little pocket of "noise" in the otherwise quiet Uptown neighborhood. That "noise" was coming from buskers.

"I'm meeting them and getting to know them and realizing there's so few of them and they're all in this little pocket," she says. "I realized that I'm not dealing with a little one-off [film] short anymore; I'm not dealing with a 500-



word article anymore. This is a tapestry of an issue. It's all related at that point. BUSK! is about a city and the people in that city."

The 45-minute film she created, BUSK!, took three years for her to complete. In it she follows several buskers – musicians, singers, painters, a magician – in their daily lives and daily struggles, much of it as it relates to public acceptance, safety, and dubious law enforcement. The film explores "people in the city and their relationship to art and artists and street life."

The film morphed a few times over those three years – Denée says she, as the storyteller, started out angry that buskers were being written off and treated as beggars and public nuisances, then evolved to the point that she viewed the project with a journalist's remove and started also exploring the city's issues that were also legitimate. "I'm grateful it took three years," she says. "By the end of it I had a much better perspective and was much more well-rounded on the issue."

Her work on the film led to her building relationships with the buskers and ultimately to her organizing Buskapalooza, a street art festival featuring buskers that ran every year for three years. There were musicians, stilt walkers, painters, b-boys, salsa dancers, sketch artists, a cappella singers – all different kinds of artists representing all different kinds of busking.

"It was a good time," says Denée. "It was clean and fun. The point with it was not to start with that angry position that 'We're going to get out there no matter what.' The problem is that the artists and the city government don't know each other. I wanted to introduce them all to each other. I wanted it to be positive and have everyone see what things can be like."

The festival also helped legitimate buskers in the minds of the public. Instead of being worried, "'that guy is going to rob me if I stop and listen to him,'" Denée says, "'he's part of this beautiful thing that's' happening right now and there's this big booth that tells me he's legit. The city government is involved and that shows me this is legit.' He's just creating this beautiful thing for you."

Unfortunately for the city of Charlotte, Denée says, "No matter how much we beat the bushes, have festivals, and have a documentary that premiered in the middle of the city, they're still not getting it. There are a couple of people within the city government who are on our side largely, but there is still a lot of misinformation and lack of information."

She has seen some positive results from the film, though. After the premiere of the documentary, she heard from the fire department that they loved the film, wanted to share it with their fellow firemen, and were not even aware of the fire safety issues related to busking before seeing it. Someone in Columbia, South Carolina – a city where buskers were treated under pan-handling and nuisance laws – reached out to her about putting together some talking points in an effort to create a unique busking ordinance that was then put into law.

Denée also got connected to the Busking Project, a worldwide organization dedicated to celebrating and supporting buskers and changing the public perception of busking.

At the end of it, she realized, "There are no devils and angels [in this situation]; there are just problems and solutions. Everyone [in Charlotte] now knows which artists and which city officials will work with each other, and they have banded together."

Denée has since had to relocate to El Paso with her husband, who serves in the military, though they plan on returning after their three years in El Paso are over. "I kind of felt like a mom leaving her kids!" she jokes. "I became the 'mother of busking,' but my job was not to be mother hen. My job was to pave the way for other opportunities and be a catalyst."

"Something like [busking] is a way to drive the arts and support it. It's so good to help art in that way. I've been helping it through journalism. This was a different kind of help; it was about touching people where they are."

**More resources:**

<http://buskmovie.com/>

# **Artists U teaches artists how to make a life**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, August 05, 2014

The hardest thing about making a life as an artist is actually making a life as an artist. That's where Artists U comes in.

Andrew Simonet is a choreographer and a writer who directed the Headlong Dance Theater in Philadelphia for 20 years, from 1993-2013. He now works independently as an artist. "Parts are very similar – fundraising, building partnerships," he says. "It's also very new. This is a new sector for me."

Simonet started Artists U in 2006 to address what he saw as a real need within the artist community to educate artists on how to make a life, and not just a living, with their art. "In my community I'm struck by how challenging it is for artists to sustain themselves," Simonet says. "Initially, Artists U was focused on performing artists because that was my world. I felt like there were things we could do individually and as a community [to have more of a] conversation on sustainability. Now we work with all artists."

He attended an early professional development workshop from the Creative Capital Foundation where he says he was "blown away" by "how wrong artists are in their vision of the world." He became a Creative Capital artist leader after that and traveled the country doing intensive weekend workshops. He wanted to see something like that in his own city, and so Artists U was formed.

"I went to so many [professional development workshops for artists] when I started out and so much of it was useless," Simonet says. Workshops were often run by arts professionals, not artists, who didn't understand or address the real struggles that artists face.

Artists U consists of artist-led professional development workshops and one-on-one planning sessions that are open to all artists. The intensive two-day workshops look at strategic planning, artist statements, and time and money management, while the one-on-one planning sessions with artist facilitators are available for any questions and issues artists might have to turn their "challenges and dreams into to-do lists."

"Our workshops are really good. They're targeted, they're generous, they're

all artist-run. We're all artists. We can't devote ourselves to [Artists U] full-time because we're working artists, and that's the point," Simonet says.

"Fundamentally they're really about empowerment. No one's going to save you as an artist. You have to change."

The workshops teach artists how to build a life as an artist. "A lot of the challenges artists have is the balance of time between life and work," Simonet says. "There is an overemphasis [in other programs] on the 'making a living' part. Financial issues are real and need to be addressed, but most of the artists talk about time. Part of building a life as an artist is getting past the point of 'everything will be fine if I can just make a living.' If you're totally career-driven you can still be exhausted and not doing the work you're passionate about. Money is overemphasized in artists' minds and in professional development. There are more complicated things than money."

Simonet also tries to break artists of the negative association often attached to having a "day job." "Day jobs are great!" he exclaims. "If you have a day job, you are still a full-time artist."

The Artists U concept has since expanded to other cities, launching Baltimore from the ground up and South Carolina in partnership with the South Carolina Arts Commission. Artists U trains artist facilitators in these cities and empowers them to do this leadership work in their own communities.

The best is, all of the Artists U resources are free and available to all artists.

In addition to founding and directing Artists U, Simonet has also released a book called *Making Your Life as an Artist*, a downloadable book that covers everything he has learned about this world. "I want to try to reach people," he says. "Relatively speaking, I'm not going to get in front of many artists in my life. This is something digital and downloadable to get out there."

And, like everything else he does through Artists U, it's absolutely free.

### **More resources:**

<http://www.artistsu.org/>

# **Floco Torres is a self-made man in Macon**

Nicole Rupersburg

Tuesday, July 29, 2014

What do you do on your lunch break? Rush out the office door to grab something from the nearest fast food joint or food truck you can find? Order take-out from a nearby restaurant to eat at your desk?

Floco Torres has something different in mind.

The Macon-based independent rapper helped launch Lunch Beat Macon, along with downtown Macon arts organization The 567 Center for Renewal. Lunch Beat offers an alternative to the usual boring, rushed lunch hour that serves merely as a bridge between the first half of your workday and the second half. On every second Thursday of the month, Torres and other organizers bring in different DJs and have food catered for the best lunchtime dance party you'll ever attend.

"On your lunch break, come dance and sweat it out!" says Torres. There is no alcohol (you still have to go back to work afterwards), just food and DJs and other people dancing as an alternative to the usual boring old lunch hour.

Artists, professionals, service workers, and college students alike come together to eat lunch, dance, and network for one hour. This is just one of many creative projects that Torres is involved with.

"I always try to stay as involved as possible with the music scene," Torres says. Torres has been a musician and songwriter since he played violin and trumpet as a kid, but didn't consider a career in music until life brought him, quite unexpectedly, to Macon.

"I went to [journalism] school and a professor told me to get out and not be a journalist because there's no money in it," Torres says. "He said, 'You're going to be miserable. If you want to do writing, find another way.' So I dropped out of college and moved to Atlanta for an internship with a record label that fell through [before I got there]. I was bummed out so I came to Macon where my grandparents live. My plan was to stay a little bit and move back to Atlanta, then move to L.A. and become famous," he laughs. "I've been here six years now...it's sort of the kind of place that grabs a hold of

you."

Torres learned early on that if you want something done, you have to do it yourself. As a rapper and recording artist, he is a self-made man, self-distributing his own albums, booking his own tours, even handling his own album artwork. As an independent artist he has been named Macon's "Best Hip Hop Artist" three times and recipient of "Best Local Album" twice. He'll have another self-produced album coming out this summer and will be back on the road touring this fall with yet another new album to follow this winter.

As he grows as a rapper, his tours branch out further to other parts of the country. He takes opportunities to play in the southwest, northeast, and Midwest as much as possible and to get on as many major festival bills as possible. "I don't do as many shows in Macon anymore. You have to try not to play out your hometown too much." As an indie rapper he has made a lot of noise, he says. "[I can't be] ignored as easily as before."

Torres is also a camp counselor at the Otis Redding Singer/Songwriter Camp through the Otis Redding Foundation, which he has done for six years now. He also serves on a number of nonprofit and arts organization boards, including the Macon League of Creative Interventionists. And, despite his old professor's advice, he still writes as a freelance journalist, covering the music beat for the Macon Telegraph. "That's my way of contributing and making sure the information gets out there."

When opportunities have passed him over, Torres just went ahead and made his own. He is still writing - and creating and producing and teaching and engaging - but now he does it all on his own terms.

**More resources:**

<http://flocotorres.com/new/>

# **ORGANIZATIONS OPENING UP**

*Integrating art and artists to reshape  
organizational structures*

# Building Equity in the Arts in Denver

Laura Bond

Thursday, December 17, 2015

Suzi Q. Smith was excited to bring her daughter to her first opera. A prominent Denver poet and teaching artist, Smith grew up listening to classical opera; she trained as an opera singer for two years. When she saw the advertisements for Opera Colorado's *Aïda*, Verdi's famous work about an Ethiopian princess, set in Egypt, she bought tickets.

"I was drawn to see *Aïda* because I was excited to finally see myself, my daughter, represented on the stage. The advertising poster clearly depicted an illustration of an African woman," says Smith. "As African Americans, I find that there are very few opportunities in the world of classical music to feel included."

When the performance began, Smith and her daughter were surprised and disappointed to see that the role of *Aïda* was performed by Alexandra Lobianco. Lobianco is white, as was the entire cast. As was most of the audience.

"There are very few operas that specifically include black people; if casting black people was too much of a stretch, I really feel like they should have done a different show," Smith says. "We were so disappointed that we left at intermission, and it will definitely take some time before I am willing to return."

Smith is a sophisticated consumer of culture, and she's connected, with a sphere of influence and a large social media following. In other words, she is exactly the kind of person that Colorado Opera and each of the downtown performing arts institutions -- Colorado Ballet, Colorado Symphony and Denver Center for the Performing Arts -- want and need to attract.

In growing, changing Denver, where audience demographics and tastes are more fluid and sophisticated than ever, engagement of culturally diverse audiences is vital to sustainability. It's also essential to creating more access and equity in the arts.

But as Smith's experience suggests, engagement of people from diverse groups isn't easy. Beyond marketing, it requires building relationships, one patron at a time. It also requires authentic and relevant programming, an



institutional willingness to change and meaningful connections to a range of community organizations and leaders, including artists.

"When you look at the question of how you ensure that people have access to the arts, regardless of their socioeconomic status and their race, it's a very nuanced and complex issue," says Gary Steuer, president and CEO of Bonfils-Stanton Foundation. "The question is how do you transform your audience and the whole experience to be welcoming, comfortable. It's not just about putting spin on business as usual. It's about a larger question of how you best serve all residents of Denver."

The foundation took on that question this summer, when it surveyed Denver's leading arts groups, both mainstream and grassroots, in an effort to "elicit honest dialogue about the barriers and successes of engaging diverse audiences." In response to the research by audience development expert Donna Walker-Kuhne, the foundation recently released a set of recommendations; among them, arts organizations are encouraged to adopt an inclusive approach to staff recruitment and development, to develop long-term community partnerships and to integrate cultural diversity into core audiences.

No small order for the arts.

## **A will to build**

"Fortunately in Denver you have even the larger institutions that are genuinely interested in building more diverse audiences and their looking at strategies to serve the whole community," Steuer says. "They're learning that it's not just about marketing; it's not as simple as, say, advertising in the Spanish-language newspaper to get Latino audiences. You have to look at everything. Does your staff reflect the community you're trying to serve? Are you owning this conversation about equity in terms of your strategic plan and as part of your vision?"

Bonfils-Stanton Foundation's efforts build on the city's Imagine 2020 Cultural Plan, unveiled by Denver Arts & Venues in 2014. In its own research, Denver Arts & Venues uncovered large swaths of residents who either can't, or don't, participate in the kind of cultural offerings that draw hundreds of thousands of people -- and millions of dollars -- to downtown Denver. Participation in the downtown cultural arts was reported as low among African-American and Latino survey respondents. Asked why they don't go more often, many said

they wanted to but either didn't know what was available, or if they did, they chose to do other things. For many respondents, it was simply easier, cheaper and more appealing to stick to close to home, where cultural offerings were presumably more relevant to their lives.

One of Imagine 2020's primary goals is to increase participation among these underserved communities. Among the public forums Denver Arts & Venues has hosted as part of the Imagine 2020 Speaker Series, the sessions on cultural access and inclusivity have been the most popular; the series will focus on these topics in 2016.

Denver Arts & Venues has also loosened some funding streams to support arts-based community building. So far, much of this work has been done by small-and-midsize organizations that are structurally and historically more grassroots and nimble than, say, a legacy ballet or opera company.

"Creating equity in the arts cannot be attained with a one-size-fits-all approach," says Tariana Navas-Nieves, director of cultural affairs for Denver Arts & Venues. "It is about the humbling experience of recognizing what has not been done, about educating ourselves on how to connect with individuals and communities that are not like us, about bringing experts to guide us through a process that will be uncomfortable yet necessary if we wish to truly be inclusive. Organizations need to look not only at their programming, but at their own practices -- their staff, board, programming expertise. The great news is that I see a willingness towards something that is important to our Denver residents, as we confirmed through our Imagine 2020 input process."

## **Reinventing outreach**

Within the companies that are resident to the Denver Performing Arts Complex, most efforts to address audience equity issues have focused on the most obvious barrier: cost. All provide free tickets in partnership with the city's 5 By 5 Program as well as ArtReach, which distributes tickets to more than 50,000 people per year. In 2014, the Colorado Symphony provided more than \$300,000 in free community tickets as an offset to rent at Boettcher Concert Hall, in support of Imagine 2020; the program continues in the 2015-16 season, without the subsidy.

These programs, as well as cultural programs like the CSO's annual Mexican Independence and Martin Luther King, Jr. tribute concerts, do draw diverse audiences. But they are typically separate from those experienced by core

audiences. And no one really knows whether or not those who come for free cultural programming ever come back -- or why they do or don't.

"We know that for a lot of the families we serve through our community programs, even just coming downtown is an intimidating experience," says Anne O'Connor, director of education and community partnerships for Colorado Ballet. "We're constantly struggling with this question of, 'How do you get over these barriers? How do we say it right? How do we offer help, and when do we offer help?' We're constantly looking for feedback and adjusting, but it's difficult."

Most companies have implemented some tools to improve the experience for those who are new to DPAC, with its maze of venues and congested lobbies. Colorado Symphony has a patron "conciierge" available to answer questions before, during and after shows; DPAC recently hired two Spanish-speaking box office agents. But it can still be an intimidating place: O'Connor likes to encourage newcomers to come in groups, with a guide from within their community.

A wealth of research on audience development illustrates that, however a person comes to a performance and whatever happens on the stage once she's there, a meaningful shift to audience diversity is unlikely without a foundation of true inclusion at every institutional level. Without culturally representative influences on the executive staff or in the board room, for example, many cultural organizations are left to make guesses about what does or doesn't serve, motivate or reach non-white audiences, when they consider the question at all.

The danger of this disconnect, says Tony Garcia, executive artistic director of Su Teatro, is found in the chasm that separates Su Teatro and other culturally specific companies from the DPAC-level performing arts organizations, which claim the overwhelming share of public and private support for the performing arts. Garcia and his counterparts at Cleo Parker Robinson Dance and Museo de Las Americas, for example, must work harder, smarter and leaner to reach core audiences and sources of support.

"We are absolutely in competition, not in the sense that there should be only one Latino art exhibit or theatrical company, as there should be enough interest in a multitude of Latino cultural arts activities as there our throughout the country," says Garcia, who has held leadership positions with a number of local and national bodies working to increase cultural access and preserve

Latino heritage through the arts, including the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture. "The competition is for resources and access. For example, if you were a sponsor, who would give you a better profile: the large mainstream institution or the little barrio group? If you are a newspaper or TV outlet, what event would you want to advertise? If you were an artist, what gig would you want to do? Where would you get better pay, better exposure and, in some cases when artists have been able to actually create at these events, a better opportunity to experience your vision?"

"One of the challenges is that there's so much emphasis put on big: the big institutions, the big arts," says Steuer. "They're getting funded to reach a Latino audience, while those organizations from within those communities struggle to get access to resources to serve those communities. And then you have the other-side-of-the-coin challenge: How do the culturally specific organizations [like Su Teatro] build audiences outside of the core? How do you connect people to want to learn about Latino culture, to want to go to Su Teatro and Museo. How do you get the whole community to be curious about other cultures and to serve and support those organizations?"

Leadership development among the next generation of arts administrators may unlock answers to such questions. As part of a plan to implement recommendations that came from this summer's research, Bonfils-Stanton plans to work with arts groups large and small to build true fluency with issues of inclusion and access, including networking, professional development and other supports for staff members of color.

## **Creative connections**

There are signs that cultural consciousness among the major performing arts companies in Denver is raising at the creative level. DCPA eliminated its resident company in 2013-14 in an effort to broaden casting opportunities; in recent seasons, DCPA has mounted productions that feature Latino and African-American stories, characters and actors, including this year's celebrated *One Night in Miami*.... Colorado Symphony has collaborated with contemporary artists drawn from a range of genres, including jazz, hip-hop and gospel; this season, the CSO hired Andres Lopez, born in Colombia and schooled in Latin America, as assistant conductor.

Also this season, Colorado Ballet launched a new black-box series that more closely connects the company to groups in Denver's Arts District on Santa Fe, where its new building is located. The ballet company has also deployed

technology as a tool to broaden access by offering a free live stream of *The Nutcracker* to schools and communities in Colorado -- and around the world. More are planned for 2016.

"The entire mission of my department is built around the idea that dance is for everybody, and that the universality of dance means it can be experienced and enjoyed by anyone," says Colorado Ballet's O'Connor. "I'm always looking for any opportunity to open the door to every population."

And what about Opera Colorado, purveyor of what is arguably the least accessible, and most European, of all the performing arts? It's developing two non-mainstage series designed for smaller crowds with edgier tastes. Next season, it will stage *As One*, whose lead character undergoes a gender transformation during the short chamber work. The series are part of a new strategic plan designed to pull the company further away from the financial crises that has dogged it for the past three years.

"We had to sit down and decide: What is Colorado Opera going to be?" says Camille Spaccavento, director of external affairs and marketing for Opera Colorado. "We knew we had to evolve. We had to change. So we asked, 'If we were an opera company just opening, what would we look like?' The mainstage operas, the *Aïdas* and the *Carmens*, are important, but what are the other things that move the art forward, serve the mission, have an educational element and create art that is relevant as art -- and relevant to the community? Going forward, we'll definitely be looking for more connections, more engagements with the community that really makes sense."

At Su Teatro, Tony Garcia would rather see energy invested in programs that have authentic connections to Denver's communities of color. Currently, he's leading an effort to broaden distribution of Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD) funds in order to more equitably represent the cultural work of smaller and more grassroots organizations such as Su Teatro. But he's learned to define success outside of the popular norm.

"Su Teatro's path has always been an independent road, and it has served us well," Garcia says. "Clearly if we had waited for a mainstream organization to acknowledge and affirm us, we would still be waiting. Westword has not reviewed Su Teatro in more than 10 years, Enrique's Journey was reviewed by the Los Angeles Times and American Theater Magazine, but not by the Denver Post. So what sense would it make for me to spend my time waiting

for someone in the mainstream in Denver to notice our work? Really what does it say about the awareness and progress in Denver?

"The reality is that we don't need [the institutions] to do our programming, we are quite capable of doing this ourselves. What we need is resources and support in order to build the similar institution that can allow us to pay artists, staff and support sufficiently; to interact with the larger institution on a level playing field so that we can negotiate equally and are not exploited or excluded; and to build the recognition that our work is as much a part of the mainstream and not marginalized exotic work."

**More resources:**

<http://bonfils-stantonfoundation.org/>

<http://www.artreachdenver.org/>

<http://suteatro.org/>

<http://www.cleoparkerdance.org/>

<http://museo.org/>

# **Bringing People to Play in Urban Green Spaces**

Jon Spayde

Thursday, October 01, 2015

The Trust for Public Land is a national nonprofit that, along with other conservation-related activities, purchases land to turn it into parks and similar public spaces. In the Twin Cities, the organization is leading the Green Line Parks and Commons project, an effort to develop public green space along the Green Line, the east-west light rail line that links downtown Minneapolis and downtown Saint Paul. The line's construction had been planned from the beginning as a catalyst for real estate development along University Avenue, a main thoroughfare through Saint Paul, MN.

TPL's goal, working with a host of collaborators from community organizations, government, and the finance, design, and real estate sectors, is to make sure that development includes public parks and privately owned public spaces. To that end, Artist Organizer Soozin Hirschmugl was brought on board to work on animating some of the sites that TPL had its eyes on.

Hirschmugl is a puppeteer, a theatrical director, a visual artist, and a producer of public spectacles who has long been associated with Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theater, a Minneapolis troupe that, along with producing its own shows, takes the leading role in spectacular May Day pageants every year in Minneapolis.

She has also been a company member of the Bread and Puppet Theater, and has toured internationally with that pioneering East Coast troupe. In the Twin Cities, she has worked with the company she founded, Barebones Productions, with noted puppet artist Michael Sommers' Open Eye Figure Theater, and with many other collaborators on local stages. She's also been active in the Art Shanty phenomenon, in which artists create wild variations on the ice-fishing shanties that pop up on Minnesota lakes every winter.

Hirschmugl has a degree in social work too, and experience working on social-justice issues, a mix that she sees as a natural preparation for her AO projects.

## **Find and Hire Community Collaborators**

The first task she tackled for TPL was bringing some life to Little Mekong

Plaza, a big lot partially occupied by an out-of-business meat market slated to come down. The Asian Economic Development Association (AEDA), a nonprofit aimed at helping Southeast Asian immigrants in Saint Paul start and run businesses, had plans to turn the space into a public plaza, the physical center of its Little Mekong Asian Business Cultural District, a planned tourist attraction.

Hirschmugl hired Kao Lee Thao, an artist of Hmong heritage, to design a colorful mural for one of the walls of the meat market. Then, during the September 15, 2013 Open Streets day – an arts-oriented street festival in Saint Paul – Thao and members of the Center for Hmong Arts and Talent (CHAT) helped the public fill in the colors to complete the mural.

The public artwork, Hirschmugl says, was intended to be a focal point for information and discussions about AEDA's plans to market Little Mekong as a destination, and to use the Plaza as a centerpiece. AEDA hosted its first five Night Markets on the site in 2014, and the Asian-style open air bazaars/farmers' markets were a hit.

Hirschmugl went on to animate Dickerman Park, probably the Twin Cities' most unusual public area. It's a long strip of open space on University Avenue, deeded to the city in 1909 by a local family but never developed into a real park. To call attention to a space that most Twin Citians have no idea is actually public, Hirschmugl brought in some of her Art Shanty friends for three "demonstration events." There was a meditation shanty set up as a greenhouse, a "dance shanty," food-tasting events that drew on the nearby YMCA's urban garden, Y-sponsored zumba classes in the open air, garden-related harvest and planting festivals, and more. "My hope was that after these events, the space would get a little more love and attention," Hirschmugl says.

The love was forthcoming. The city of Saint Paul took down a fence around one section of Dickerman Park, and a portion that had been paved over was seeded with grass. "And the YMCA, which had been looking for a new location to move to, decided to buy the land next to their building, stay in that place, and think about Dickerman Park as something connected to what they do," Hirschmugl says.

## **Build Ongoing Projects**

She thinks of her role in these changes as basically that of a conversation-



starter: “My hope is always that what I begin will lead to something more, probably something I won’t be a part of. Good placemaking starts as connecting the right people, who then continue to move something forward after you’re gone.”

Her individual project was the sPARKit. She created this “pop-up park in a trailer” to be able to improvise some public space anywhere. The little teardrop-shaped trailer is equipped with bright red chairs, tables, and camp stools, a battery-operated sound and PA system, bright pennants to advertise its presence, and games and art supplies.

Hirschmugl debuted the sPARKit at a number of sites of interest to TPL, offering it for open air conversations about how people wanted the green spaces used, and how they imagined the parks might look when fully developed.

As the AO project period neared its end, Hirschmugl’s connections in the creative community came to the fore again. TPL needed to create a guidebook for the Green Line Parks and Commons initiative – a document that would advance all the plans the organization had and the solid, development-oriented reasons that green space was a good thing.

Documents like these can be deadly dull, and turn into doorstops, but Jenna Fletcher wanted something that “people wouldn’t put on the shelf and never look at again,” Hirschmugl says. So she contacted Mike Tinchler, with whom she’s worked on the Art Shanties, to be creative director of the project. Tinchler is a broadly experienced designer who shares TPL’s passion for green development, “and he can talk in policy terms, too,” says Hirschmugl. The result was a white paper full of color, visual excitement, and fun.

## **Negotiate Shared Goals**

“One of the things I was able to do best for TPL, I think, was to broaden their network of resources and references – to include some of my funky Art Shanty friends, for example, as well as colleagues like Mike.

“Artists can encourage organizations to take a few more risks, try things – and perhaps apologize afterwards! After all, sometimes you have to see a project, experience it, before you know exactly what it is and what effect it can have.”

At the same time, she counsels artists who work with institutions, especially large institutions like TPL, to understand institutional objectives.

“I think it’s very helpful for artists who want to work with institutions to have at least some institutional experience, because otherwise it could be a culture clash. In any case, artists need to understand that there will be some structures that the organization will set and must abide by.

“For the institution, it’s important that they help the artist understand those structures and where the organization is coming from – but also to allow the artist to work outside those structures.”

Working outside the structures and routines of an organization isn’t about artistic self-indulgence, Hirschmugl says. It’s about taking advantage of opportunities.

“I had a cubicle at TPL, and TPL might have felt that I should spend most of my time in it; but for me, if I’m in a coffee shop on one of the corner where there’s a green space that TPL is interested in, that’s going to be a lot more beneficial. I’m still working with my computer, still doing the things I would be doing in the office, but I can also make great contacts in the process, and learn a lot about the neighborhood.

“And institutions often work in time frames that are very different from artists’ time frames, she notes. “Creative solutions don’t necessarily come in a nine-to-five routine; they might come as an ‘aha’ moment in a coffee shop that’s quiet at 11 a.m.”

In order to simultaneously maximize the artist’s freedom and the insure that institution’s goals are met, she says, it’s important to set the goals early on – in writing – and then decide how institution and artist will measure success in achieving them.

“You might agree to introduce the institution to twenty artists, then follow up at the end of the project by a memo that indicates who those artists were and how the institution could contact them for further work,” she says.

She feels that the ultimate value of an artist to a public project like the ones she worked on may be that the artist can “go deeper” on questions of interest to the organizations they are working with by careful observation, intuition, and informal, leisurely conversations with people involved –

producing forms and styles of knowledge different from those gathered via staff meetings, charrettes, and written surveys. “This is a concrete way of approaching problems that most policymakers just don’t have time for,” she says.

**More resources:**

<https://www.tpl.org/>

<http://soozinhirschmugl.com/>

# Making Home Where the Community Is

Jon Spayde

Thursday, September 24, 2015

It became official in March of 2013: a long-vacant, run down auto dealership on Saint Paul's University Avenue was finally going to come down. Midway Chevrolet, the sole remaining car lot on what had once been a thriving auto row, was slated to be redeveloped by Project for Pride in Living (PPL), the big Minneapolis-based affordable housing and job training nonprofit, into a brand new affordable housing and retail complex called Hamline Station.

PPL considers its main goal to be helping lower income people become self-sufficient; to that end, building affordable housing is just one component of a mission that includes training for employment, support services for people with special needs, youth programs, and schooling.

Once a building is rehabbed or built, PPL usually adds programming in one or more of its key areas of concern—workshops, classes, and more. So reaching out to neighborhood residents, establishing a helpful presence, and expressing concern for the local community are a priority for the organization.

The teardown of the old buildings wasn't slated to begin until 2014 and PPL wasn't content to let the site stay desolate, decaying, and vandalized until then. Instead, they partnered with Springboard for the Arts to hire an Artist Organizer (AO) to help throw some life into 1389 University and to turn the shell of Midway Chevy into a place people wanted to visit, a lively site connected to its neighborhood, and a sort of celebration of what was to come.

The AO they chose was a young Hmong artist, fashion designer, singer-songwriter, and LGBTQ activist, Oskar Ly. "I was very excited by the prospect of activating a vacant site," she says. "It was like a blank canvas."

## Find a Theme and Build On It

Ly, who has had a leadership role in the Center for Hmong Arts and Talent (CHAT) and helped organize Fresh Traditions, an annual Hmong fashion showcase, while also singing and recording with the R&B/hip-hop-oriented band PosNoSys, is a very networked woman, connected to a wide range of Twin Cities artists and committed to social justice and community building.

She organized by marshaling the aid of some 50 local art makers to turn the Midway site into a locus for all kinds of creative activities involving community members, under the umbrella title Artify and the theme “Home Is...”

One hundred eight wooden structures shaped like houses were assembled by neighborhood young people; each stood for one of the units that PPL planned for Hamline Station. Artists Mischa Keagan and Witt Siasoco held workshops at libraries during which community members traced personal images of “home”—literal and abstract—onto green canvas; these were then displayed at the site. A major mural onsite, Home Is Hamline Midway, was painted during St. Paul’s first Open Streets event in September 2013, and Artify organized art workshops, performances, and games on that day as well.

One of the buildings on the Midway Chevy grounds morphed into The Showroom, a space offered to the community for offices, events, and gatherings; Urban Boat Builders displayed homemade canoes in the space, the Design Center showed off its planning model of the Green Line light-rail corridor there, and Ly brought artists in for workshops.

“And there were lots of other installations and events up and down the avenue,” she says, “some big and very visible, others small-scale. ”

Despite the social justice and community building congruence between Ly’s mode of work and PPL’s mission, there was still plenty of work to be done on both sides of the relationship to define just what an artist organizer would do—and not do. While PPL had artists on its staff and had brought artists in to do workshops as part of its youth-oriented programming, turning a large-scale, year-long project over to Ly to manage meant that some serious groundwork had to be laid.

“I was brought into PPL via the same onboarding process they use for anyone on their staff,” she says. “I did site visits. I was introduced to the various departments that make PPL what it is. I had a lot to learn about the organization, so I did a lot of listening in order to get the lay of the land. We also had monthly meetings with the other artist organizers during which we could compare notes, share different topics and troubleshoot.”

### **Take Advantage of the Temporary to Test Lots of Things**

In addition to planning for Artify under PPL’s housing division, Ly helped other

parts of the organization in a variety of ways. Chris Dettling, PPL's Associate Director of Real Estate Development, who was Ly's immediate supervisor, introduced her to the staffers in the organization's Youth Development division, and she became a resource person for them, offering suggestions for improving PPL's youth programming, especially at their Fort Road Flats development on West Seventh at Snelling in Saint Paul, a facility that opened at about the time Ly came to work with PPL.

"Initially, we weren't sure how to employ Oskar in this new role called artist organizer," says Shannon Siegfried Floe, PPL Youth Program Manager. "But soon she was giving us all kinds of creative ideas—from the best use of our community space to how to help the kids use Polaroid photography to record their experiences—things we probably wouldn't have thought of ourselves." Efforts to get the kids involved with Artify events were only partially successful, says Floe, but "I think she felt that she made a real contribution to our work."

As Ly's contributions became better known within PPL, she got more requests for help. "People weren't necessarily certain what an artist organizer's role was," she says, "so I would get asked to do certain kinds of 'workshopy' things, which wasn't my role. But I did my best to connect people with artists I knew."

Despite these occasional misunderstandings, Ly says that her relationship with PPL was harmonious. She underlines two values that made it work for her: artistic freedom and open communication. "Although nobody knew exactly what Artify would end up being," she says, "everybody was very willing to be in conversation with me about it. I also appreciated the autonomy I had—the ability to guide the project where I wanted it to go, and to choose who was going to be a part of it. I had an umbrella approval and was allowed to experiment.

The fact that Artify was a temporary thing helped too. "This was a site that was going to be demolished," she says. "What we were doing had a short shelf life. I think that helped everyone feel free to try things."

Chris Dettling points out that Ly brought fresh approaches that he appreciated. "The things that she came up with, we would never, ever have thought of—and if we had thought of them, we wouldn't necessarily have done them in the ways she suggested," he says. "For example, we probably would have done something to take part in the Open Streets events, but

having Oskar there to bring artists in to participate really added a dimension.”

### **See The Community As Partners**

Dettling says that he initially thought of Ly’s role in limited terms. “Despite the fact that I had talked with Springboard and Irrigate about this ‘artist organizer’ role, I just didn’t realize what it could be,” he says. “But then, as Oskar brought in more artists, and they in turn attracted more people, I really started to understand what an artist organizer was meant to do.”

And as for what Dettling thinks an AO is meant to do, he describes it this way: “Oskar was really good at reaching out to people who live in the Green Line neighborhoods and who identify as artists. She solicited ideas and input from them, and then turned those ideas into energy that expressed itself in a lot of different forms.”

For all the variety in Artify, however, Dettling sees a common thread running through all the projects, a thread he sees as of the essence of the artist organizer role. “She brought in community-based artists to do things that were, for the most part, community-led,” he says. “These things made us engage the community in ways that we had never done in the past.

“Affordable housing issues can be kind of contentious sometimes. The thing that I’m going to keep in my mind is that doing this artist organizing connects with the community in an entirely different way. Now, for this particular project we had all kinds of solid community support, so I don’t think there would have been much opposition to it. But I am definitely keeping the artist organizer role in mind for future projects where we do face opposition. An artist-led initiative like the one Oskar headed up is not about whether you like or don’t like affordable housing—it’s about sharing art, being with people, being truly in community.”

### **More resources:**

<http://www.ppl-inc.org/>

<https://vimeo.com/75781077>

# **Rapping in Vacant Lots, Repping the Neighborhood**

Jon Spayde

Thursday, September 03, 2015

When the Frogtown Neighborhood Association chose Vong Lee as their Artist Organizer, they weren't taking a flyer on an unknown quantity. "I knew Vong and his art through his brother, Tou SaiKo Lee," says Sam Buffington, FNA's Organizing Director. "I'd worked with the hip-hop group the brothers formed, Delicious Venom, on events I'd organized in the past. So in choosing an Artist Organizer, Vong was high on our list from the beginning."

Vong, who uses the name Knowstalgic when he performs with Delicious Venom, grew up in Frogtown and has worked closely with the Saint Paul-based Center for Hmong Arts and Talent (CHAT) for the last decade. With Delicious Venom, he's appeared in many clubs and events, and cut tracks and made videos that range from "30-Year Secret"--a powerful lament for the fate of the Hmong in Laos, who face continued persecution for their role in supporting the CIA's secret war there in the 1970s--to the metaphysical-existential angst of "Tequila Moonrise" ("When the afterlife's a threat, who is gonna be calm? Forced to be paranoid for so damn long.")

## **Start Small, Get Something Going**

Despite the mutual familiarity factor, at the outset of their relationship neither Lee nor the FNA were certain how to define the Artist Organizer position. "We spent the first month just trying to figure out what I was going to do," says Lee. "At first, I was doing a lot of extra office work that needed doing, and I felt sort of like a regular intern. I learned a lot about the organization, but I wasn't really setting myself up as an Artist Organizer."

Lee believes that part of the reason he felt stuck was that his initial idea of his role was too wide-ranging. "At first, I kind of looked at what I would do as one humongous year-long project," he says. "I couldn't decide what to do because there were so many options in my mind. Then I realized that I just needed to pick something that was very current, a first project, and one that was small and doable—to get my feet wet and get things going."

The FNA and its executive director, Caty Royce, were concerned about the many empty spaces in Frogtown—vacant houses, vacant lots, and



foreclosed homes—and wanted to call attention to these post-Great-Recession scars, while at the same time building community. “A lot of what we’re trying to do is find new and creative ways to connect people in Frogtown to the neighborhood, to each other, and to our organization,” says Sam Buffington. “A lot of our discussions centered on what role art and artists could play in doing that.”

### **Bring in Collaborators to Share the Vision**

Lee assembled a group of artist-activists to join FNA in brainstorming a limited, doable, but exciting first project. The group, who dubbed themselves the Creative Thinkers, was made up of public artist Seitu Jones; Vong’s brother, Tou SaiKo Lee; political organizer Leroy Duncan; writer, spoken-word artist, and FNA staffer Sheronda Orridge; community organizer and spoken-word producer Justin James; and hip-hop poet Fres Thao. The project they came up with turned out to be the Lot Squats.

Lee contacted artists in the neighborhood and signed them up to lead small, weekly art-oriented events on city-owned vacant lots in Frogtown. Among the Squats: Sheronda Orridge performed her work at 422 Charles. Poet-playwright Katie Leo, Fres Thao, and spoken-word artist Donte Collins performed at 515 Lafond. Spoken-word artist and activist Chia ‘Chilli’ Lor led a poetry workshop at 540 Sherburne. And CHAT’s Youth Leadership Group sponsored a breakdancing class at 462 Edmund. Lee kicked off each Squat by gathering a crowd at the FNA’s headquarters, the West Minnehaha Recreation Center on Minnehaha near Dale Street. Then The Next Generation drum line led the group to each address with celebratory percussion.

“For the Squats I mainly called on artists who lived in the neighborhood or had some other connection to it,” says Lee. The events were an opportunity for engaging community members in conversations about what they wanted to see built on the vacant lots and, in general, what kind of a future they wanted for Frogtown. A side benefit, according to Lee, was that they helped the artists get better known on their home turf. “The Lot Squats helped to give them a platform in Frogtown,” he says. “There aren’t a lot of places in the neighborhood, currently, where artists can shine.”

Pretty much as Lee had hoped, this cluster of smaller projects led on to a larger one. Since 2012 the FNA had been in discussions with a number of community partners about how to use historic preservation to help revitalize the neighborhood—with an eye to purchasing, rehabbing, and reselling

historically and culturally significant buildings—including working-class dwellings—that were standing vacant. These initiatives led to the formation of Preserve Frogtown LLC, an alliance of the Frogtown Neighborhood Association and Historic Saint Paul.

The Creative Thinkers, the “brain trust” of artists that Lee had put together, joined up with Preserve Frogtown to launch Frogtown Fresh, an artist-led scheme to call attention to, and celebrate, the rehabs. Preserve Frogtown bought 452 Thomas, a small pattern-book Victorian built in 1889. When the house was ready to be shown to potential buyers, Frogtown Fresh held a big event focused on an open house at 452 Thomas.

“But wasn’t the ordinary kind of open house where a sign goes up and people wander through,” says Buffington. Indeed it wasn’t--what Lee set in motion was more of a community celebration. It kicked off with a lunch at the West Minnehaha Recreation Center that included in open mic and spoken-word performances by Tish Jones, Leroy Duncan, and Vong Lee’s brother, Tou SaiKo—plus break dancing by The Crew.

“Then we had a march to the site led by The Next Generation,” says Buffington, “break dancers in the street, spoken word performances, sculptures installed there—including a giant frog! It was all to draw attention to the house, and get people thinking not only about the house as a positive and exciting thing, but the neighborhood around it too. People were coming to Frogtown and seeing all of these creative people, meeting their potential neighbors, and seeing a lot of positivity and excitement.”

Lee’s solo project under the Artist Organizer umbrella was Frogtown Beats, a 12-track anthology CD highlighting aspiring and emerging hip-hop artists from the neighborhood. He brought together top-ranking local talent to help: MC and educator Toki Wright from the celebrated local collective Rhymesayers; BK One, another Rhymesayers member and turntablist for Minneapolis rapper Brother Ali; Medium Zach, who teaches hip-hop production at the McNally Smith music school; and O-D, who produces for Minneapolis-based Ghanaian hip-hop star M.anifest.

## **Be Clear About Expectations and Communication**

What did all of this shifting among project planning, liaison with artists, and dealing with the needs of a community organization teach Lee? First of all, the need for communication.

“At the beginning there should be a lot of conversation between the organization and the artist,” he says. “A lot of conversation! But once there’s basic agreement, the organization really should let the artist go out and be creative—and avoid micromanaging, because the beauty of this kind of arrangement is that if the artist has an opportunity to really get his or her creative juices flowing, something fresh will emerge.”

Lee adds, however, that there has to be precise accountability on the artist’s part too. “The organization needs to be informed about what the artist is doing,” he says, “and there needs to be a clear time line, with deadlines. Deadlines are benchmarks: if the artist doesn’t do what he or she has committed to by a certain point, what’s going on? Is the project going in the wrong direction, or is it just that the artist isn’t giving it enough effort and time? Some artists are kind of new to the practice of meeting deadlines.”

And what about handling serious differences of opinion between the organization and the artist? Lee recommends finding a mediator, “someone who’s neutral and can communicate each side’s ideas to the other side—and remind each side of things that they may have overlooked in the course of the disagreement. Then the task is to move toward agreement, in good faith.”

Lee had never managed projects—or groups of artists—before, and it wasn’t always an easy juggling act.

“There can be a lot of different schedules that you have to manage,” he says “and a lot of different egos to contend with as well. I think I was able to show that if, as artists, we get out of the mindset of just fending for ourselves and join together to help our community, it makes all of us more visible as artists and helps us as well as the people of the neighborhood or the city. I tried to balance artists’ self-interest and their interest in helping the community every time I appealed to them.

“There were times when I really struggled to figure out what to do next. But I think it’s the role of the artist organizer to face situations like that squarely and just get creative—just try something. That’s where our experience as artists comes in; we do that all the time.”

**More resources:**

<http://www.frogtownmn.org/>

# Collaboration at the Heart of Real Estate and Community Development

Jon Spayde

Thursday, August 27, 2015

Molly Van Avery, Artist Organizer with the Cornerstone Group, calls the real estate development company “a for-profit organization with the heart of a nonprofit.” And Cornerstone, founded in 1993 by Colleen Carey and based in Richfield, Minnesota, just south of Minneapolis, makes no bones about the fact that it nurtures a set of beyond-the-bottom-line values, which include a commitment to affordable housing, sustainability, and the role of the arts in placemaking.

Cornerstone has not only put together major developments like the Great Northern Lofts, the conversion of a huge railway office building in downtown Saint Paul, and The Mist, a lakeside condo-and-retail community in suburban Minnetonka, Minnesota, but it’s also sparked smaller experiments on the cutting edge of eco-friendly urbanism, such as Cornerstone Rooftop Farms in Richfield.

So when the company tackled a big project in Richfield – the creation of an urban village on the expansive site of a former retail garden center – they wanted, in the words of Cornerstone’s director of development, Beth Pfeiffer, “to incorporate art and artists from the very beginning of the project.”

Lyndale Gardens, as the project was dubbed, is an ambitious redevelopment of the former Lyndale Garden Center site into a complex of market rate and affordable housing, retail, and amenities like a community center, a performance stage, and gardens. In 2014 a large retail tenant, Lakewinds Food Co-op, moved in. The rest of the site is still in development.

Van Avery, a widely experienced performance artist, poet, and activist, has a long track record of both artistic experimentation and community involvement. Her performance work has appeared on many Twin Cities stages and at the Walker Art Center, and she directs Naked Stages, a project of the Pillsbury House social service center that gives young performers, mainly men and women of color, a seven-month mentorship to develop new work for the stage.

She’s also on the faculty of HECUA (Higher Education Consortium for Urban

Affairs), a Saint Paul-based organization of 17 affiliated colleges and universities around the world that create off-campus study programs addressing social justice issues. And she's the creator of the Poetry Mobile Project, a writers' studio on wheels in which Avery and her neighbors write poems on door hangers, then leave them on front door knobs around the community.

### **Start Working Together to Get Comfortable**

"Cornerstone knew they wanted somebody to create community engagement so people could get to know what the vision was for Lyndale Gardens," Van Avery says of her role. "They also knew that they wanted the arts moving around the property in small and large ways, so they wanted someone to coordinate those efforts."

The company had no major experience working with artists before, says Van Avery, "but art and creativity are important values for them, particularly for the women I mainly worked with, Colleen and Beth. So I think they wanted this position to help them figure out what that could mean."

Van Avery embedded herself on the daily work of Cornerstone for a full two months before she, Carey, and Pfeiffer had any conversations about what the AO position would involve. She attended many meetings along with the Cornerstone leaders, shadowing them as they discussed the big-picture aspect of their projects as well as the more nitty-gritty issues of architecture, engineering, and, Van Avery says, "something else we spend a lot of time on – funding."

And funding, she adds, soon revealed itself to be one of the biggest challenges, and headaches, in real estate development.

"We've had a series of setbacks and challenges in finding funding to get the projects under construction – there are so many components in Cornerstone's vision, including green space for the whole city of Richfield, a community room that would not just be for the residents, plus housing and retail. It's an amazing vision, but people don't want to take the risk of funding it."

### **Adapt to the Audience You're Trying to Reach**

With funding for the whole project an issue, Van Avery found that she was

spending most of her time as an event planner, organizing events in the former Lyndale Garden Center parking lot in order to animate the site and, as she puts it, “to stay connected to like-minded partners in the community and keep Cornerstone on people’s radar.”

Van Avery worked with Minneapolis-based choreographer and multidisciplinary theater artist Emily Johnson to create a solstice festival that included a “winter market” under a heated tent, plus food trucks, a “snow gun,” and an ice labyrinth. Johnson also led a meditative night walk around Richfield Lake, at whose edge the development is located.

Another event Van Avery put together was a community discussion about the future of Richfield, held in Cornerstone’s offices. And she reunited with Johnson to set up a “parking lot picnic” in which visitors lunched on blankets and Johnson’s dance company and choir previewed a performance they were getting ready to give at Northrop Auditorium, a large dance venue on the campus of the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

“That evolved into a beautiful movement-and-sound sequence, and the performers invited the audience to follow them to the shore for a lake cleanup, Van Avery says. “And we followed it with an even where we invited Richfield artists to set up interactive art stations where people could do weaving or make art out of junk, and so on.

‘If we’d held it in Minneapolis, we might have had a thousand people. But Richfield just doesn’t have the arts infrastructure, or the familiarity with arts, that Minneapolis does, and Emily’s work isn’t well known there – so we got about forty people. But I had a wonderful time, I think Emily enjoyed it, and we learned a lot about how much more education we need to do in Richfield around all the different ways that art can show up in a community.”

Instead of advertising it as “Emily Johnson,” she says, they might have done better to title it a “Free, Family-Friendly Art Festival.”

“Colleen and Beth also had a ‘wish list’ of people in the community who are doing exciting things they feel a kinship with, people they may have met once or twice and become very excited about, and it became my job to follow up on that list and get in touch with those people,” Van Avery says.

One such connection was with Kristy Allen of Beez Kneez, a local honey purveyor that’s also committed to sustainability, the promotion of backyard

beekeeping, and educating people about the current decline of bee populations and bees' role in the food system.

Beez Kneez took part in another event that Van Avery catalyzed. Cornerstone had purchased an old industrial site in Minneapolis' Prospect Park neighborhood, adjacent to one of the stops in the city's then-new light-rail system. Faced with the by-now-familiar prospect of having to wait two to five years for funding to come through, Cornerstone's leaders and Van Avery decided they wanted to animate this site as well.

So, working with the community development nonprofit LISC, the Prospect Park Neighborhood Association, and other partners, they created a temporary community garden on the site – and Van Avery organized an arts-rich afternoon event to kick it off. Beez Kneez now keep some of their hives, and teach classes, in the new garden.

### **Find the Connections and Opportunities in Different Sectors**

“The coolest thing about this position,” says Van Avery, “is that it’s been about connections: connections between growing food, eating food, art, creativity, and learning.”

That spirit of connection endeared Van Avery to her Cornerstone colleagues. “We were drawn to Molly for her amazing energy and spirit,” says Beth Pfeiffer, “and because her theater and community work showed that she had been a great collaborator in all stages of her career. But we were also grateful to her because she was always, cheerfully, reminding us of our values and helping us keep them foremost.”

In fact, in coming to terms with the “organizer” part of the AO mission, Van Avery found herself departing from the community-organizing paradigm, and redefining “organizing” as “organizing Cornerstone’s dreams about their mission. And I also felt that I was organizing connections between somewhat separated, siloed ideas: learning, access to nature, food, art. I believe I helped Cornerstone see those connections, and I was really gratified that I could be part of that.”

For her part, however, Van Avery found that the networking and project management element of the job so overshadowed the artistic that her artist side felt under-employed. “I loved working with Colleen and Beth, and I very much admire Cornerstone and its amazing vision,” she says. “At the same

time, I found that I was mainly planning events and contacting other artists, and I ended up yearning to do more art myself.

"I found myself wishing, for example, that I could have explored what I learned about the real estate business artistically – I would love to write a spreadsheet poem! Or a real estate development play.

'Nobody told me I couldn't do those things. But in general, I feel like I would have liked to open up this real-estate world more for others to see, through art. Or follow the Cornerstone people around, and love them through art. Give them art therapy sessions! Because what they do is difficult."

**More resources:**

<http://thecornerstonegroup.com/>

<http://www.artsonchicago.org/portfolio/molly-van-avery/>



# TOOLKITS FOR CHANGE

*Practical resources from proven,  
artist-centered, community-engaged  
projects*

# The Joy of Toolkits

Carl Atiya Swanson

April 08, 2014

When I was a kid I loved getting a new box of Legos. There was a great rush of satisfaction in making all the little pieces come together to look like the thing that was on the box, to make Robin Hood's hideout, the intergalactic spaceship, or the hidden pirate cove. Even more than that first rush, though, was the joy of taking apart all those carefully designed models and building a new world where knights charged pirates, castles and skyscrapers existed side-by-side, and the multi-colored mess of blocks became something invested with my own imagination.

I think that is why I am so excited about these toolkits and resources that we are able to offer through Creative Exchange. The toolkits all come from a place of having been created from practical experience – we know it's possible to build the thing that's on the box. At Springboard for the Arts we've created our own Artists' Health Fairs, and are entering our fifth year of Community Supported Art. The Center for Urban & Regional Affairs' toolkits – The Road To The Community Plan and Your Idea Here: A Toolkit for Unlocking the Community Potential of Vacant Storefronts – come out of research and community planning in neighborhoods in Saint Paul, MN. Block Party in a Box comes from a city planner in London, Ontario, working with neighbors to build something together. The Pop Up Museum has become an integral part of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History's programming. Our newest toolkit addition, the Neighborhood Postcard Project, started in San Francisco at the Mayor's Office of Civic Innovation as a project for the Bayview neighborhood, and then spread citywide.

But that's just the starting point for these toolkits and the potential projects they represent. Each toolkit has been designed to be adapted, like the dismantling of the box-cover model into something new and from the local imagination. The Pop Up Museum website has a full page of adaptations of subject matter, from surfing to African-American history to Missed Connections, each with a different presenting partner. Each CSA replication, and there were 27 active ones in 2013, has been adapted to local markets, aesthetics and communities. The Pittsburgh Arts Council recognized a need in their community and used the Artists' Health Fair toolkit, combined it with a housing fair, and created the Health & Housing Fair for Artists, or HE-HO. How can you not love something called HE-HO?

That adaptation points out another integral part of these toolkits, which is that none of them can be executed alone. Just like building Lego worlds was more fun with my family or friends, these toolkits can be used to support and activate artists in communities and build something together. Artists, our creativity, and the potential projects represented in these toolkits help us get to a place where we can build not just something that meets our needs, but articulates a changing vision of our world. We need to do something about these vacant storefronts and we have a vision of vibrant and engaged spaces in our community. We need to change the perception of our neighborhood and we have a vision of an interconnected city. We need to get to know our neighbors and we have a vision of joyful relationships. Artists and their work can help make those visions tangible.

It is, of course, work. No Creative Exchange toolkit is going to address all the issues in a community, and building something together, as you know if you ever had siblings who took all the best blocks, can be trying and emotional. That doesn't mean it isn't worth doing. Trenton, NJ just launched a CSA project, and a story about the launch quotes artist Tamara Torres, saying, "Art definitely saved my life. It cleared up my head. I think it does that for a lot of kids...I didn't feel out of place here. I feel like I'm really part of the art community." The Artists' Health Fairs have created a healthier artist population, who in turn create a healthier community.

So go ahead and get a toolkit. Ask a question. Be in touch. Creative Exchange is the place where we can share, adapt, build and imagine together.

**More resources:**

<http://www.springboardexchange.org>

# Community Supported Art

Over the last 20 years, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has become a popular way for consumers to buy seasonal food directly from local farms. With the same buy-direct, buy-local spirit in mind, mnartists.org and Springboard for the Arts created a similar endeavor to support local art, artists, and collectors.

Community Supported Art is an exciting new model of art support and distribution that supports artists in the creation of new work and establishes relationships with local collectors and patrons. Selected artists receive a commission to create “shares” for the program. Interested collectors will purchase a share and, in return, receive boxes or portfolios of locally produced artwork at intervals during the season.

Springboard for the Arts and mnartists.org organized the first Community Supported Arts program in the Twin Cities in 2010 and created a toolkit for the program in 2011. The toolkit offers template budgets, communications and timelines for your own CSA. More than 50 communities in the US (and a few worldwide) have started their own CSA program with the toolkit. This toolkit is also available in a Spanish translation.



*Community Supported Art pick-up party. Photo credit: Sean Smuda*

## **Artists' Health Fair**

Access to healthcare is one of the biggest career threats to making a life as an individual artist. However, no matter which state you live in, there are public healthcare programs, low-cost health clinics and reliable health insurance brokers. And chances are, there are non-profit organizations and social workers that know the healthcare system and resources inside and out.

Luckily, there is also an easily accessible format for reaching out to these resources. Health Fairs have been, and continue to be, the healthcare industry's standard for outreach and education. Most importantly, all of your work culminates in an event that brings the arts community in direct contact with these resources. This toolkit, created by Springboard for the Arts and Leveraging Investments in Creativity, will walk you step-by-step through the process of creating an Artists' Health Fair and Guide to Healthcare for Artists, complete with logistical pointers and lessons we've learned from our program in the Twin Cities.

## **Your Idea Here**

Empty storefront retail space is an issue facing many neighborhoods across the country, and one that often requires collaboration between neighborhood councils, commercial property owners and community members to address. Your Idea Here: A Toolkit for Unlocking the Community Potential of Vacant Storefronts was a study conducted on behalf of Saint Anthony Park Community Council in Saint Paul, MN and supported by Neighborhood Partnerships for Community Research (NPCR), a program of the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) at the University of Minnesota

The toolkit details the "Saint Anthony Pop-Up Shop," a project which entailed creative partnerships used a vacant storefront to express the identity and vision of the neighborhood. Included in the toolkit are FAQs for all parties in a rental or lease situation, a proposed timeline and workflow for a successful pop-up shop, a sample annotated leases and potential renter profiles.

## **The Road To A Community Plan**

Creating a community plan that is strategic about engagement & provides opportunities for underrepresented groups to be involved can be a daunting proposal, but is critical to effective engagement. This research, conducted on behalf of Macalester-Groveland Community Council and the City of Saint Paul, MN, and supported by the Kris Nelson Community-Based Research Program, a program of the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) at the University of Minnesota, outlines a path towards that strategic engagement.

The toolkit includes resources that are intended to offer best practices & insights to guide the conversation between district councils & their respective communities as they develop their own unique approaches to the community plan. This includes suggestions for verbal, creative, media-based and experiential tools that can be used as part of a community planning process, or part of any process that seeks to draw out local insights and knowledge.

## **Block Party In A Box**

Created by urbanist Kevin van Lierop, the Block Party In A Box resource kit helps people to plan & execute block parties without breaking a sweat. The ebook includes a step-by-step manual and a dozen printable resources that take care of the mundane and time-consuming work required to plan street parties, leaving citizens with more time to enjoy the company of their neighbors.

## **Neighborhood Postcard Project**

Perceptions of marginalized communities often form from single media sources. All you see on the news is the violence, drugs, and poverty. But, there are many positive stories that exist in these communities. Stories that need to be heard. The Neighborhood Postcard Project collects personal positive neighborhood stories from residents in marginalized communities and sends them out to random people in the same city to break down stereotypes and foster community connection.

The project began in San Francisco in 2013 and has since been adopted in cities around the world to help break down negative stereotypes and build community. The Neighborhood Postcard Project toolkit contains tips,

resources, and downloadable high resolution postcard template files to make it quick, easy, and fun to start this unique storytelling exchange in your community.

**More resources:**

<http://www.neighborhoodpostcardproject.com/>

## **[freespace]**

[freespace] began in San Francisco in June 2013, inspired by the National Day of Civic Hacking and a landlord who gifted a 14,000 square foot warehouse to a group of organizers for \$1. These organizers turned the building over to the community with the invitation to fill the blank walls with art, and the empty rooms with activities. Over the course of the next 30 days, thousands of people – young, old, teachers, students, techies, creatives, and the curious – came through the doors of the original [freespace] at 1131 Mission St. in San Francisco.

The location at 1131 Mission St. shut its doors on October 31, 2013, but not before the [freespace] team won a grant from the San Francisco Mayor's Office of Economic and Workforce Development to continue its activities in a way that would positively impact the Central Market and Tenderloin neighborhoods as well as its low-income residents.[freespace] has also been spreading around the globe – with teams planning [freespaces] from LA to Paris to the UK.

**More resources:**

<http://freespace.io/>

## **Pop Up Museum**

We've all got fascinating things, but not everyone gets to show them off in a museum. Thanks to the Pop Up Museum, that all changes. Created by Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, the Pop Up Museum is a temporary exhibit created by the people who show up to participate. It works by choosing a theme and venue and then inviting people to bring an object on-topic to share. Participants write a label for their object and leave it on display. A Pop Up Museum usually lasts a few hours on one day. Popping up in unorthodox arts spaces, like libraries or arboretums, Pop Up Museums focus on bringing people together in conversation through stories, art, and objects. They can

happen anytime, anywhere, and with any community.

**More resources:**

<http://popupmuseum.org/>

## **IRRIGATE: Artist-Led Community Development**

Cities and neighborhoods need creative thinking. Particularly when communities are facing big challenges, artists see opportunity in challenge, beauty in chaos and have practical skills and creative thinking that can draw people and attention to an issue or a place.

Irrigate was a 3-year creative placemaking initiative designed in response to the disruption of a major construction project through the heart of Saint Paul, MN. Created in partnership with Springboard for the Arts, the City of Saint Paul and Twin Cities Local Initiatives Support Corporation, and funded by ArtPlace, Irrigate trained artists as community organizers and leaders,



*Irrigate interns at the Saint Anthony Pop-Up Shop.  
Photo credit: Peter Haakon Thompson*



facilitated partnerships between artists and businesses, and funded small scale arts projects that created surprise, joy and delight.

600 local artists participated in the workshops and generated over 150 projects in partnerships with small businesses and neighborhood groups across St. Paul. Irrigate projects generated over 51 million positive media impressions of an area that otherwise would have had a predominantly negative narrative.

This toolkit provides step-by-step guidance in creating partnerships, connecting with local artists, training workshops and evaluation, as well as templates for budgets and timelines for projects at different scales. This toolkit is included in the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's Resilient Cities Initiative.

**More resources:**

<http://bit.ly/IrrigateVideos>

<http://bit.ly/TunheimIrrigateMediaAuditFINAL>

## **Healthcare Voucher Program and Free Healthcare Days Toolkit**

Finding a place to get healthcare— medical clinics, dental clinics, fitness centers, et. al— can be a daunting task. Although more people are getting insured, many still avoid care because of factors like insurance deductibles or lack of coverage for all of their healthcare needs (e.g. lots of medical insurance plans have free preventive care, but aren't required to cover dental or eye care services for adults).

This toolkit takes some unease out of finding that care. Here's how it works: An organization/group, who specializes in working with a particular community teams up with a healthcare provider that is high quality, committed to helping that community get care, and low-cost (typically, the cost of services are dependent on income). Once a year, members of that community can apply for a voucher to use, like a gift certificate, towards the cost of a visit. The organization/group and healthcare provider may also team up on events, such as free dental screening days and flu vaccination clinics.

By lessening the emotional and monetary risk of the first experience at the

healthcare provider, your community members get an extra nudge in the door so that they realize they can afford the care they need and have a place to go for their ongoing health needs.

This toolkit was created by Springboard for the Arts and modeled on their successful Artists' Access to Healthcare (AAH) program. It will walk you step-by-step through the process of creating a Voucher program and Free Healthcare Days, complete with logistical pointers and lessons we've learned from our program in the Twin Cities.

## **Open-air Social Dance Series**

"How come there is no public dancing in Chicago?" That was the question in 1997 that prompted the creation of the first SummerDance, an outdoor, public, free dance series in parks in Chicago. Since that first year with 150 participants, SummerDance has grown to a 3 month event, with 44 public dances and of upwards of 3,500 participants on any given evening.

Dancing is a great attractor - it brings people into a space, offers the opportunity for economic activity, creates social bonds, promotes health and fitness, and is an accessible form of cultural exchange. This toolkit, created by ArtPlace America, walks through the logistics and timelines of creating an event like SummerDance, and can be scaled for individuals and community groups looking to start something local that shares their identity, artists seeking to organize an event that brings audiences together, or cities looking to change perceptions and fill an underutilized area.

## **The People's Creative Toolkit**

Your story has to be told, and a lot of people have to listen. But how do you tell your story to get them to listen? And who is "them," anyway? These are questions we have to address with every important story, every labor campaign, every grassroots effort to change the way we work and live for the better. And the solutions are different every time. However, there are creative and strategic tools that can help take those solutions from conversation to reality.

Presented by the Arts & Democracy Project, and created by artist collective Rogue Citizen with Line Break Media through a campaign for the Service Employees International Union Local 26 in Minneapolis, MN, The People's

Creative Toolkit is a guide to effective creative and visual strategies. This toolkit shares insight on how to identify the target audience for your message, generate striking visual identities that serve as a rallying point, create inclusive, powerful messages, and practically make effective signs and large visual elements

The People's Creative Toolkit is available in both English and in Spanish for free via Rogue Citizen.

**More resources:**

<http://www.roguecitizen.com/>

## **World Dance Party**

Are you looking to build connections between elders and young people? Do you want to strengthen ties between neighbors of different ethnicities? Do you want people to have a space to have fun and express their community identity? You need a World Dance Party!

The idea is simple: It's a big party lasting about three or four hours, usually held at a community, cultural, or senior center. Eight to ten volunteer dance instructors teach mini-lessons of about 15 minutes each, and everyone gets up and dances. It's a potluck, so everyone brings a dish to share. There is no fundraising, campaigning, or lectures. Just food, dance, and fun- that's it! Different neighborhoods around Seattle have now had several World Dance Parties, each one attended by 150 to 250 people! They are always fun and bring diverse neighbors together to build community like nothing else can.

This toolkit is designed to help you put together a World Dance Party in your city/neighborhood. We would love to see World Dance Party spread all over the world. Please feel free to use the templates and suggestions in here. There are sample budgets, press release, program schedule, sign-in sheet, donation solicitation letter, and ways to outreach.

**More resources:**

<http://worlddancepartyseattle.org/>

# **Work of Art: Business Skills for Artists**

Developed by Springboard for the Arts, Work of Art: Business Skills for Artists is based on a series of professional development and entrepreneurship workshops that have been taught to more than 5,000 artists at arts organizations, colleges, and libraries in over 80 communities in Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Iowa since 2010.

Work of Art is a 12-part workbook and video series that guides artists of all disciplines through every facet of building a successful and sustainable career – from career planning, time management, marketing, and social media to pricing, recordkeeping, funding, and developing a business plan.

Designed to help new artists learn the ropes, as well as more experienced artists grow and expand, each section provides a step-by-step guide to tackling the topic, including easy-to-digest tips, best practices, useable case studies, hands-on exercises, analytical tools, checklists, and worksheets. A series of videos brings each topic to life with empowering insights and advice from artists on how they incorporate Work of Art strategies into their everyday work.

Work of Art can be used cover-to-cover or as a build-your-own lesson plan by mixing and matching the section that address specific challenges. It can be used by individual artists or groups in a self-directed way, or by organizations looking to provide professional development resources to their community.

## **More resources:**

<http://springboardforthearts.org/woa/>

# **CREATIVE EXCHANGE ARTISTS**

*The people who power the work*

The preceding field notes have been a selection of the over 220 profiles and special features published on Creative Exchange over the past 2 years. We would love to have been able to include all of them, but we would have had a 1,200 page tome on our hands then. You can find all the profiles and features online at [www.springboardexchange.org](http://www.springboardexchange.org). Here are the artists featured from March 2014 to February 2016.

## **Akron, OH**

Brian Friedman, Northeast Shores Development Corporation  
<http://welcometocollinwood.com/>

Bobby Wesner, Neos Dance Theater  
<http://www.neosdancetheatre.org/>

Steve Felix, Akron Film+Pixel  
<http://akronfilm.com/>

Ismail Al-Amin, Keepers of the Art  
<http://www.keepersoftheartinc.com/>

Beth Rutkowski, GroundWorks Dance Theatre  
<http://groundworksdance.org/>

Erik Urycki, The Speedbumps  
<http://www.thespeedbumps.com/>

David Swirsky, Akron League of Creative Interventionists  
<http://www.creativeinterventionists.com/akron/>

Karen Walters, Voices in the Valley  
<http://www.peninsulahistory.org/voices-in-the-valley/>

Alexandra Wright, Youth Excellence Performing Arts Workshop  
<http://www.yepaw.org/>

Jen Garlando, Verb Ballets  
<http://www.verbballets.org/>

Tony Troppe, BLU Jazz+  
<http://blujazzakron.com/>

## **Charlotte, NC**

Annabel Manning

<http://www.annabelmanning.com/>

Laura Alma McCarthy, Swaraj Yoga

<http://swarajyoga.org/>

Lisa Hoffman, McColl Center for Art + Innovation

<http://mccollcenter.org/>

April Denée, BUSK!

<http://buskmovie.com/>

Scott Galloway, 100 Words Film Festival

<http://www.100wordsfilmfestival.com/>

Alex Cruz, Charlotte Arts Center

<http://www.umarinfo.com/>

Neely Verano, LaCa Projects

<http://www.lacaprojects.com/>

## **Cincinnati, OH**

Jonathan Sears, Professional Artistic Research Projects

<http://parprojects.com/>

Nat Chaitkin, Bach and Boombox

<http://bachandboombox.com/>

Joi Sears, Theater for the Free People

<http://www.freepeopleinternational.com/>

Aaron Kent, DIY Printing

<http://www.diyprintingshop.com/>

ArtsWave Cincinnati

<http://www.theartswave.org/>

## **Cody, NE**

Kyle Rosfeld, Sandhills Boot Company  
<http://www.sandhillsboots.com/>

## **Denver, CO**

Viviane Le Courtois, Processus  
<http://www.vivianelecourtois.com/>

Kirsten Stoltz, M12  
<http://m12studio.org/>

Adam Buehler, Reach Studio  
<http://redlineart.org/>

Jami Duffy, Youth on Record  
<http://www.youthonrecord.org/>

Shannon Spurlock, Denver Urban Gardens  
<http://dug.org/>

Ivar Zeile, Denver Digerati  
<http://www.denverdigerati.com/>

## **Detroit, MI**

Flaco Shalom, The Untitled Bottega  
<https://www.facebook.com/TheUntitledBottega>

Liza Bielby and Richard Newman, The Hinterlands  
<http://thehinterlandsensemble.org/>

Terry Blackhawk, InsideOut Literary Arts Project  
<http://insideoutdetroit.org/>

Mitch Cope and Gina Reichert, Power House Productions  
<http://www.powerhouseproductions.org/>



Erik Howard, The Alley Project  
<http://www.facebook.com/tapgallery>

Sam White, Shakespeare in Detroit  
<http://www.shakespeareindetroit.com/>

Haleem Rasul  
<http://www.hardcoredetroit.biz/>

Morgan Willis, Allied Media Conference  
<https://www.alliedmedia.org/amc>

Devon Akmon, Arab American National Museum  
<http://www.arabamericanmuseum.org/>

Chelsea Radgens, ARTLAB J  
<http://www.artlabj.com/>

Jesse Cory and Dan Armand, 1xRUN  
<http://www.1xrun.com/>

## **Macon, GA**

Yolanda Latimore, Poetic Peace Arts  
<https://www.facebook.com/poeticpeacearts>

Betsy Fitzgerald  
<http://www.maconharp.com/>

Joey Stuckey  
<http://www.joeystuckey.com/>

Floco Torres  
<http://www.flocotorres.com/>

Charles Ladson  
<http://www.charlesladson.com/>

Jonathan Harwell-Dye, Macon Arts Alliance  
<http://www.maconartsalliance.org/>

Vinson Muhammed, Allah's Apprentice  
<http://www.allahsapprentice.com/>

Chris Nylund and Jared Wright, Field Note Stenographers  
<http://www.fieldnotestenographers.com/>

Deonna Belcher, Macon Roving Listeners  
<http://maconrovinglisteners.tumblr.com/>

Andrew Eck and George Murray, Corner Concerts  
<http://www.cornerconcerts.com/>

## **Miami, FL**

Teo Castellanos  
<http://www.teocastellanos.com/>

Daniel Fila, Krave Art  
<http://www.kraveart.com/>

Lucas Leyva, The Borscht Corp.  
<http://www.borshtcorp.com/>

Lauren Reskin, Sweat Records  
<http://sweatrecordsmiami.com/>

Ruth Wiesen, Thomas Armor Youth Ballet  
<http://taybballet.org/>

Ariana Hernandez-Reguant, Hialeah Contemporary Culture Project  
<http://thehiccup.org/>

Hattie Mae Williams, The Tattooed Ballerinas  
<http://tattooedballerinas.blogspot.com/>

Sheila Womble, Art for Learning  
<http://a4lmiami.org/>

Susan Caraballo, FEAST Miami  
<http://www.feastmiami.org/>

## **Nashville, TN**

Bryce McCloud, Isle of Printing  
<http://www.isleofprinting.com/>

Stephanie Pruitt  
<http://www.stephaniepruitt.com/>

## **New York City, NY**

Katy Rubin, Theater of the Oppressed NYC  
<http://www.theatreoftheoppressednyc.org/>

Katie Pearl, PearlDamour  
<http://pearldamour.com/>

## **Philadelphia, PA**

Nichole Canuso, Nichole Canuso Dance Company  
<http://www.nicholecanusodance.org/>

Cindy Stockton Moore, Grizzly Grizzly  
<http://www.grizzlygrizzly.com/>

Sara Ansell, Porch Light Program  
<http://muralarts.org/programs/porch-light>

Andrew Simonet, Artists U  
<http://www.artistsu.org/>

Gayle Isa, Asian Arts Initiative  
<http://asianartsinitiative.org/>

Renny Molenaar and Rocio Cabello, iMPeRFeCT Gallery  
<http://imperfectgallery.squarespace.com/>

Lindsay Tucker So, Write Your Block, Creative Philadelphia  
<http://writeyourblock.tumblr.com/>

Mark Strandquist, People's Paper Co-op  
<http://peoplespaperco-op.weebly.com/>

Adrienne Mackey, Swim Pony  
<http://swimpony.org/>

Alex Gilliam, Public Workshop  
<http://publicworkshop.us/>

Colette Fu  
<http://www.colettefu.com/>

## **Pittsburgh, PA**

D.S. Kinsel, Boom Concepts  
<http://www.boomconcepts.com/>

Jessie Rommelt, Bunker Projects  
<http://www.bunkerprojects.org/>

Michael Olijnyk, The Mattress Factory  
<http://www.mattress.org/>

Lenka Clayton  
<http://www.lenkaclayton.com/>

janera solomon, Kelly Strayhorn Theater  
<http://kelly-strayhorn.org/>

Ralph Henry Reese, City of Asylum/Pittsburgh  
<http://cityofasylum.org/>

Ryan Lammie, Radiant Hall  
<http://www.radianthall.com/>

## **Portland, ME**

Marty Pottenger, Thin Blue Lines  
<http://martypottenger.com/>

## **San Jose, CA**

Jai Tanju, Seeing Things Gallery  
<http://www.seeingthingsgallery.com/>

Sarah Beth Nesbit, ZERO1  
<http://www.zero1.org/>

Yvonne Escalante  
<http://www.yvonneescalante.com/>

Nikiko Masumoto  
<http://www.masumoto.com/>

Pilar Agüero-Esparza  
<http://pilaraguero.com/>

Sam Rodriguez  
<http://samrodriguezart.com/>

Juan Carlos Araujo, Empire Seven Studios  
<http://www.empiresevenstudios.com/>

Elisa Marina Alvarado, Teatro Visión  
<http://www.teatrovision.org/>

Cado Dos Santos  
<http://www.cadomusica.com/>

Verónica Meza, Teatro Nahuatl  
<http://www.teatronahuatl.org/>

## **Saint Paul, MN**

Oskar Ly  
<http://artifynow.wordpress.com/>

Guante  
<http://www.guante.info/>

Ta-coumba Aiken  
<http://ta-coumbaaiken.com/>

Joan Vorderbruggen, Made Here  
<http://madeheremn.org/>

Toni Pierce-Sands and Uri Sands, TU Dance  
<http://www.tudance.org/>

Liz Miller  
<http://www.lizmiller.com/>

Ashley Hanson, PlaceBase Productions  
<http://placebaseproductions.com/>

Theresa Madaus, Tara King, and Monica Thomas, Mad King Thomas  
<http://madkingthomas.com/>

Witt Siasoco  
<http://wittsiasoco.com/>

## **Washington D.C.**

Mia L. Carey  
<http://yarrowmamoutarchaeology.weebly.com/>

## **Whitesburg, KY**

John Haywood  
<http://www.haywoodarts.com/>

# CONCLUSION

If you've read this far, hopefully you are inspired. Hopefully your head is swimming with your own ideas. Hopefully you are asking yourself, "What happens next?"

The short answer is that it's in your hands. If you were inspired by an artist you read about in this collection, reach out to them. If you are an artist working on a community-engaged project or creative partnership that is shaping the world around you, let us know about it. If you are a decision-maker about to embark on a new project, hire an artist as part of your team. If you are looking for a project to start, get a spark with one of the toolkits hosted on Creative Exchange.

The longer answer is that it is all about sharing. The creative process is about sharing talents and ideas, and culminates by sharing with audiences, patrons, and participants. The world is too big, too complex, with too many issues for us to think and act in a closed or siloed manner anymore. We need as many people as possible to be dreaming big dreams and finding creative solutions, and art can make that happen. The movement of the power of local art and artists is a movement of sharing our knowledge, projects and resources to inspire us and move us forward.

Hopefully you share this collection and the Creative Exchange platform. Use it as a hub of information and conversation to inform your own practice. Reference it in the classroom as text to inspire and challenge students. Share it with colleagues and potential partners to show what is possible when we bring our creative powers together.

And in all this sharing, be in touch. Find Creative Exchange on the web at [www.springboardexchange.org](http://www.springboardexchange.org), let us know about your projects, ideas and toolkits at [creativeexchange@springboardforthearts.org](mailto:creativeexchange@springboardforthearts.org). Follow us on Twitter at @CreateExchange, find us on Facebook, and join in the conversation. Join the movement.