

# Re-imagining Revitalization Thoughts on MicroFest: Detroit



by Michael Premo

## Entering the Motor City

On a late August morning our yellow school bus pulled up to what, at first glance, looked like a big lawn or small park on Avis Street in Southwestern Detroit. This little park, with neat, close-cropped grass, sat comfortably between two single family homes on a tree dotted street. A curious neighbor watched through her screen door as the bus gently screeched to a stop, and we eased out onto the sidewalk, wide open to whatever was about to happen.

Many of us were magnetized by colorful mural walls, planted perpendicular to the street, reminding me of a double stack of oversized blackboards from my public elementary school. Rising from the bottom edge of the murals were graffiti style name “pieces” ringing bright in blue, green, purple, and shades of red and pink. Each piece was framed by competing layers of tags that made the pieces stand out, to look like what graffiti writers call “burners.” Above and below the walls, in the wooden frames used to erect the murals, were spray paint cans stacked together on their sides, leaving only the tops visible, forming a kind of three-dimensional mosaic tiling.



MicroFest participants visiting The Alley Project (TAP)

The murals were welcoming, drawing us across the lawn into an alleyway where a “wildstyle” gray-scale shaded piece, accented with red highlighting, stood out in perfectly sharp contrast across the canary yellow background of a two-car garage. Walking toward the mural revealed that it was one of several up and down the alley. The “park” and the alleyway’s row of garages lit up with brush and aerosol murals is home to [The Alley Project](#), a.k.a. the TAP Gallery or TAP for short.

TAP Gallery comprises an empty lot that looks like a manicured public park complete with wooden planters and benches, a garage that has been transformed into an artist studio, and a stretch of alley where neighbors lend their garage facades to be beautified by local artists. It all forms a T-shaped walking gallery. Founded by artist Erik Howard, TAP is a positive force for

collective youth leadership development and an outlet for artists to represent their talents in a nourishing environment.

Growing from an empty lot and alleyway, once an ugly reminder of a city's ills, this little park is reborn as an incubator of possibility. Surging creativity is being pulled to the front by boldly innovative youth rather than forced out of view by fearful criminalization and misunderstanding. It was a perfect stage for our first performance of the day, *Detroit Dreaming* by Matrix Theatre Company [<http://www.matrixtheatre.org>], presented as part of the [Network of Ensemble Theaters' \(NET\) MicroFest USA: Detroit](#).

### **What is Microfest: USA?**

MicroFest: USA is a cycle of four weekend-long events happening in 2012 and 2013 in Detroit, Harlan, KY / Knoxville, TN, New Orleans, and Honolulu. One part art festival, one part open studio, one part learning exchange, and all parts a journey, MicroFest is a NET innovation begun in 2009. NET members expressed an interest in creating forums for the interrogation and exploration of form, function, and discourse surrounding and pertinent to collaborative theater makers, many who are naturally working across disciplines and sectors.

Whether or not a group defines itself as an ensemble is a non-issue for NET. Language and definition are fluid through time, geography, and culture. It is principles and values that unite here. NET is deeply committed to supporting the growing movement of collaborative performance makers, uplifting the values intrinsic to ensemble process: transparency, mutual respect, equity, inclusion, and democratic structures. Partially as a result of the pervasiveness of these values among collaborative art makers, many groups that practice their craft in this style have a deep sense of commitment and connection to their community. Every ensemble is by definition a micro-community. And, obviously, community is a multilayered, fluid concept. But whether geographic, cultural, social or otherwise, ensembles are hung up on place and community. That's a beautiful commonality that led to the genesis of this latest MicroFest cycle. The overarching impetus is to interrogate, through place-based explorations, the impact of art on place and place on art, with the underlying values serving as a compass for navigating the topography.



House transformed by Power House Productions, Banglatown neighborhood of Detroit

In an [article for HowlRound](#), the digital theater journal, NET Executive Director Mark Valdez wrote, “The aim of this new cycle is to boost the national significance of local placemaking efforts by creating opportunities for learning exchange that can strengthen local endeavors while also inspiring similar work in other communities.” There is an abundance of transformative work happening across the country that is often overshadowed by the hyper-commercial and numbers-driven output models of top down commercialism and funding structures. But in places with diminished financial resources and where space is cheaper relative to local incomes and easier to access than

places like New York, Chicago, and the California coast, there is a vibrant ecosystem of interdisciplinary, cross sector, collaborative work, with art and

artists at the core. And it has been happening for decades. In some cases, more visibly abandoned by capitalism’s mythical promise of universal prosperity and the American Dream, these places are innovating strategies for creation and revitalization that defy our industrial logic for how this process should happen. The MicroFest place cycle is walking the tight rope of how to support and celebrate what exists while encouraging the cross pollination that sows the further emergence of more of this old, but seemingly new, way of working. So, given the abundance of model creativity and innovation flowing from a multitude of sectors in Detroit, this made an ideal place to jump off from.

MicroFest: Detroit took place August 17 to 19, 2012 in a variety of sites throughout the city. The venues and communities packed into the short schedule reflected just a teasing glimpse into the city’s creative ecology. It was as specifically site-specific as I could imagine being possible.

Saturday morning’s program was divided into three separate tracks that took an audience of locals and visiting artists and advocates on a ride to communities throughout the city. The tracks were: Art Impact on a Neighborhood: Southwest Detroit; Art Impact on an Issue: The Justice System; and Art Impact via Organization: College for Creative Studies. Implicit in all three, and the entire weekend, was the impact of place on the form and function of art and

creativity, and the impact of various expressions of cross sector, collaborative art making on place.

### Performing Possibility

To explore art's impact on neighborhood, The Alley Project played host to [Matrix Theatre Company](#), a 20 year-old company based in Southwest Detroit. Headquartered in a once long vacant building, the company describes its mission as using "the transformative power of theatre to change lives, build community, and foster social justice. [They] create opportunities for children, youth, adults and elders, especially those in isolated or challenged communities, to become creators, producers, and audience of original and heritage theatre."

Matrix's *Detroit Dreaming* is a collaboratively devised performance piece that takes on, as though trying to exorcise by confrontation, demoralizing negative perceptions of Detroit that its young creators are navigating. The stereotypes and misrepresentation they have to deal with are revealed through a series of pointed scenes. The situations that provide the conflict are inspired by actual experience or constructed in response to negative or misleading stories found on YouTube and other digital platforms that have become our modern, open-source encyclopedia society.



[Matrix Theatre Company](#) performs *Detroit Dreaming* in The Alley Project

The clear cut structuring was probably a result of a variety of factors including excellent facilitation by the program's instructors. But more acutely, the urgency and frankness of the piece reveals the stark immediacy with which these young people and the city itself are wrapped in a power struggle over participation, identification/self-determination, and representation. These are perennial challenges for young people as well as for so-called marginalized and minority communities, especially those struggling to resist the ravages of the economic violence more broadly known as poverty.

Devised during a two-week summer camp, the teenagers spent two full weekends and one daily, three-hour session, playing constructive theater games and crafting short direct scenes. The lack of needless exposition, unnecessary tangents or story lines that plague writers and theater makers of all ages, impressed one audience member, who remarked that the show completely lacked any "fat." The

This performance was an exercise in positive confrontation. Participation and representation are critical points of resistance and insistence in the process of re-imagining, recreating, and defining the places we call home, not only in theory and image, but in practice.

As visiting participant Hasan Davis put it, “The challenge there is, not just to redefine yourself, but to tell your story in a way that gives people hope and a way out.” Davis who is an artist and youth advocate currently serving as Commissioner of Kentucky’s Department of Juvenile Justice, has spent his career engaged in this process.

What’s fascinating about the work happening in Detroit is that groups like Matrix and TAP are redefining themselves by choosing the affirmative path of nurturing creators and producers, intentionally forging connections among different stakeholders (artist, civic, etc.) in the process and defying the notion of sectors altogether.

Specifically, TAP Gallery is impressive for its core inclusion of youth leaders, in a model taken from community organizing and youth development strategies. A natural example of cross sector collaboration, youth leader [Nyasia Valdez](#) described TAP as a “participatory model.” She and her youth leader peers are equal participants in the process of shaping and creating what TAP is. And that is something that does create the possibility for hope.

### **Art and the Limits of Gentrification**

In order to create a sort of container to hold these enormous quandaries that MicroFest is exploring, NET settled on a series of core questions to frame the inquiry. By no means definitive, they are meant to help shepherd the discussions in each location, and [thread each place-based event together](#). (NET hopes people will attend more than one MicroFest, they even offer discounts for repeat participants.) They are: What does this work look like? What makes the work work? What are we learning about working across disciplines and across sectors? What difference is being made and how do we know?

Diving into these questions, MicroFest kicked off with an opening panel and performance showcase at [Art Effect Gallery](#) in the [Eastern Market](#) section of central Detroit. In continuous operation since 1891, the Eastern Market is a major hub for retail and wholesale food processing and distribution. It is one of the last major open food distribution districts in the country, home to over 300 independent food related merchants. Art Effect Gallery operates out of the 4,000 square foot first floor of the Germack Pistachio Company’s former processing plant. About 10 years after the company moved its operation to another plant in the neighborhood, Elysie Germack developed Art Effect Gallery



Detroit Eastern Market, © Eastern Market Corporation

to showcase the city’s emerging visual artists and offer event rental space to the creative community.

The opening panel, Art, The Avant Garde, and the Realities of Resurrecting an American City, brought together people whose work intersects with artmaking, or so-called creative production, along various trajectories including development, community empowerment, film, design, and branding. The panel was moderated by Dan Kinkead of [rogueHAA](#), which describes itself as “a design, architecture and urban advocacy collaborative.” Kinkead framed the discussion around the presumption that:

Historically, the role of art within the development of revitalization of cities can be seen cynically as one of unwitting accomplice to gentrification

and complicit partner to the exploitation of creative capacity. . . But what if art and other creative forces in Detroit could overcome this seemingly predetermined path? (Kinkead’s full introduction can be read [here](#).)

The case studies presented by panelists, as well as showcased by groups throughout the weekend, were firmly guided by the intentionality of definition, representation, participation, and less explicitly, power. The primary points of divergence were the relationships of each organization to what can be described as a more market-based approach versus a creative values-based approach.

The values-based approach underlies the endeavors of Phillip Lauri and filmmaker Oya Amakisi. Amakisi, who coordinated arts and culture for the 2010 U.S. Social Forum in Detroit, presented her relationship to art as a holistic lifestyle that sees creative expression fully integrated into a forward posture of healing and building power. Lauri started a creative agency called [DETROIT LIVES!](#) to help shift negative perceptions about his hometown, through diverse creative content that ranges from movies, murals, a toy car race track, and positive branding.

On the market-based end of the spectrum was Jela Ellefson, a representative of [Eastern Market Corporation \(EMC\)](#), which is responsible for managing and promoting the Eastern Market district. From her own and EMC's vantage point, she defined gentrification as the "displacement of uses." For EMC, art is a tool that adds value to a business objective to maintain the district as primarily a food processing and distribution center. Art is seen as a purely utilitarian pursuit. The consequences of this outlook can be positive depending on where you sit. For example, due to the futility of trying to dissuade graffiti artists from "getting up" around the neighborhood, they've embraced it and hire artists to create murals that add color and contribute to the marketable character of the district.

Certainly maintaining such a vital economic resource is important for numerous reasons, not least of which is Detroit's many food deserts and its soaring 19 percent plus unemployment rate. Yet, although Ellefson acknowledged the area as one of the country's last old school food districts, she was unclear about what impact EMC's development of luxury apartments would have on the area. Certainly, that is a concern for the maintenance of this unique district.

To complicate the usual reaction to artists and condos, it must be pointed out that the demise of other areas similar to Eastern Market in cities across the country is not always strictly a result of gentrification. These transitions are often symptoms of larger shifting economic and social cycles. New York City's "gentrified" Meatpacking District, for example, declined in part because of the innovations of containerized shipping and supermarkets which replaced local supply chains with global networks. Certainly gentrification is itself a discrete economic and social cycle, but it is only one gear in a multifaceted system, the complexity and nuances of which are too often obscured in emotional conversations charged with the weighty realities of class, race, and the depression of loss.

We are experiencing a huge shift in our economic system that is most apparent in more readily observed economic cycles such as gentrification, and the tech and housing bubbles. The core of this shift is at the crux of Detroit's well documented troubles.

I can think of no other city that so boldly represents the fundamental transition of modern society, as Detroit does, literally and metaphorically. The Olds Motor Vehicle Company's first application of the modern assembly line, and Henry Ford's perfection of that process, created mass production, a process that reshaped the world in the image of consumerism, perfecting modern capitalism. Two hundred years earlier, Adam Smith had been one of the first to make a strong case for the division of labor in *The Wealth of Nations*. This was a centuries in the making innovation that greatly furthered the ability of the new

American corporations to inherit the reigns of Colonial empires and their global resource extraction systems. For capitalists, Detroit perfected and exemplified the brilliance and success of this system, redefining life as we know it.

For me, it is a small mystery why the decline is so exoticized. The racial critique posits that the fascination with the decay is loudly colored by the residue of white supremacy. Look, a great American city left to Black and Brown people, and look what they did with the place! That is definitely a large part of the picture, as it has been with other cities, like [Cincinnati](#) where racial tension has boiled over in the recent past. But also in the frame is the glimmer of how we are dealing with the heart-breaking awakening to the brittle myths that construct the way we see our society. The late great George Carlin famously once said, “It’s called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it.”

During the Art Impact via Organization session, the group made a stop at [The Illuminated Mural](#), a 100-foot painting pouring down a nine-story building on East Grand Boulevard and Beaubien Street. The vibrantly arresting abstract mural looks like either a wonderful melting rainbow or bleeding rust stains made “magically delicious” by the Lucky Charms leprechaun. It was created by artists Katie Craig and Brandon Dougerty with local input through [community + public Arts: DETROIT! \(CPAD\)](#), a project coordinated by the College for Creative Studies (CCS). It is one of CPAD’s 23 collaborative public art projects in six



[Illuminated Mural](#) by Katie Craig. A project of community + public art: DETROIT. Image: detroitfunk.com

painful vestiges of a fallen era, photos that romanticize this “blight” are extremely controversial.

Detroit neighborhoods. As MicroFest participants discussed CPAD’s community engagement process, the conversation turned naturally to gentrification which led to the contentious topic of “ruin porn.” Ruin porn refers to photography depicting urban and industrial decay. For residents fighting for honest representation in a city littered with the

In a January 2012 article for *The Atlantic Cities* titled, [“The Psychology of Ruin Porn,”](#) photographer Matthew Christopher described his initial interest in an abandoned Philadelphia mental asylum as “curiosity.” If only curiosity could be so simple. As the article notes, artists (and people in general) have been fascinated since at least the Renaissance with the ruins of previous grander periods. Contemporary curiosity with our decline from the heights of the Golden Age of Industry can be likened to the curiosity that engendered Modernism’s reaction to the rise of that same era. But because we sit at the seeming height of consumerism, this curiosity is justifiably perceived as “branded” exploitation. Participant and Flint, MI resident Phillip Barnhart expressed, “What bothers me about ruin porn is the idea that . . . they are commodifying what it is that we have to deal with everyday. They’re commodifying our struggle.”

The limits of the term gentrification become starkly evident taking into account this complexity. Gentrification plays itself out in slightly different ways in various regions, but there are some strong similarities, as well as some questionable symptoms routinely lumped into the diagnosis. I’m sure people have argued endlessly about the meaning of gentrification since Ruth Glass coined the term 60 years ago. But its most common use refers to physical and cultural displacement of a lower income group by a more affluent group, often but not always of a different race or culture. (For further complication, gentrification in Boston’s North End is displacing white working class Italians.)

And certainly gentrification is happening in parts of Detroit. The strategists of the traditional market-based approaches to revitalization are trying to engineer it. Detroit artist, educator, and MC, Invincible, referenced a marquee example in her collaborative work-in-process performance, [Complex Movements](#). In the show she confronts the current attempt to rename the Cass Corridor and push out its residents to make it “desirable” for hipster youth. This is certainly gentrification. Even its central location follows the textbook pattern of where this process typically begins.

But the weekend’s discussion proved the limits of the term gentrification to adequately characterize or even begin to frame all that’s happening in Detroit. Given the decades-long hemorrhage of population, on the surface it would appear that the physical and cultural displacement is no more a result of local and migrant artists as it is a result of migrants from Central America or any other place or sector. Yet displacement and change are happening. The process, though, is far deeper than just a shift in surface cycles. The very foundation of the system upon which gentrification is predicated is being splintered by the flowers pushing through its cracks. And all the transformation occurring is not and will not happen with the Kool-Aid sip of a [Richard Florida blueprint](#).

So how do we talk about it? MicroFest discussion acknowledged that part of the answer might be found in examining power—who has it to do what and why. I'd say we need more discussion, not only on the limits of art and gentrification, but the limits of capitalism itself. Either way, Detroit is proving that our linear industrial logic is no longer adequate.

### Beyond Sectors and Across Generations

Perhaps because of the failings of this old logic, the groups that aroused the most excitement seemed to have cross-sector collaboration ingrained in their practice or organizational DNA. It wasn't always apparent or explicit, because it was viewed as a natural way of working.

What seems to make the most provocative work is collaboration that doesn't just use art as a tool for some other end, but embraces the holistic integration of creativity as a core part of any civic or social endeavor. This outlook realizes the collaborative creative process as an open air incubator that could result in a site-specific performance like [The Hinterlands'](#) and [Power House Production's](#)



*Earth & Sky Repose* by Tom Davis and Karen Sepanski at the North End Community Garden. A project of community + public art: DETROIT, this creative landscape provides a place to sit and contemplate beauty in the midst of a community garden that includes greenhouses, a farmer's market, and other art and landscaping elements. All of the elements of *Earth & Sky Repose* act as a passive water collection system feeding into a 600-gallon underground cistern providing water for the garden

redefine and re-spirit the city from the ground up. Creativity is integral to

*Boom Town, Bust Town, Bangtown!* just as easily as it could an urban farm or a remote control race car track, like the one being developed by [DETROIT LIVES!](#) Responding to a tour of the North End Community Garden, the site of another CPAD community project created by stone mason Tom Davis and glass artist [Karen Sepanski](#), visiting theater artist Laurie McCant beamed, "There was sculpture in the garden, but the real art was the care of the land."

Echoing this approach to holistic creativity, I've heard renowned author, philosopher and influential social activist Grace Lee Boggs, say more than once, blight can mean opportunity. She says we've got to rebuild,

evolutionary transformation and all of its beautiful emergent possibilities. Over the last year, I've endlessly cited the role artists played in Occupy Wall Street. All successes and shortcomings of this complicated movement aside, artists were not just making fliers or providing entertainment for a fundraiser. We were an integral part of the initial process. There are people around the country, like those associated with [Alternate ROOTS](#), who have been making a case for this approach for decades.

Boggs made a significant contribution to creative placemaking and movement building by founding [Detroit Summer](#), "a multi-racial, intergenerational collective in Detroit that has been working to transform communities through youth leadership, creativity, and collective action since 1992." Founded with her late husband, activist Jimmy Boggs, a year before his death, Detroit Summer was partially a response to the industrial logic of city officials who thought that a casino or one giant new employer would dramatically address the city's problems. (It didn't.) In small part inspired by how Freedom Summer re-energized the civil rights movement in 1964, Grace and Jimmy Boggs engaged young people in the equal participation of building their city, stoking the movement for social transformation. Unfettered creativity empowered people to create and problem solve, in whatever place or sector they felt compelled to manifest change.

On Saturday, Detroit Summer shared a glimpse of its programming by offering a youth-led workshop called Come With A Question, Leave With A Print. Cracking a window into their process, the workshop introduced the techniques they use to guide community members through identifying and exploring an issue, then producing media, which, in this case, was a screen print. Judging by their integration of art, activism, media literacy, and interviewing, among other skill sets, it draws inspiration from many different practices, fields, and sectors. The program has used this process to produce a [number of creative products](#) from t-shirts to large-scale screen prints to a hip-hop audio documentary CDs.



Detroit Summer youth and their graphics

The young leaders shared their 12-step guide to media-based youth organizing, that also comes as a slick illustrated comic. The steps are: 1) Identify your issue, 2) Assemble your team, 3) Articulate your vision, 4) Choose your media, 5) Learn your media, 6) Develop your questions, 7) Reflect on the answers you gather, 8) Share

your footage with your community, 9) Edit, edit, edit, 10) Produce a gorgeous final product, 11) Create a distribution strategy that is also an organizing strategy, and 12) Build relationships.

The workshop's modules were well developed and fun. I learned a circle question game that I'm probably going to use during my own storytelling workshops. As a sign of their pedagogical rigor and resourcefulness they offer this workshop for sale to spread these provocative educational tools and help sustain their programs. It's available, as part of Detroit Future Youth's (DFY) [Curriculum Mixtape](#), a smartly designed book and USB drive that DYF's website describes as "a compilation of workshops and media developed by each of the 12 DFY partner organizations," one of which is Detroit Summer.

On top of the critical pedagogy and entrepreneurial vigor, most impressive was, as a visiting participant noted, the ease with which leadership sat on the shoulders of these young people. That was what was really on display during the workshop.

Key to the program, and much of how I understand Boggs' theory of change, is the importance of inter-generational learning and leadership. It's just one of the many inter-, cross-, multi- prefixes that speak to the natural cycle of ideas and exchange that inform the politics of many people influenced by Grace Lee and Jimmy Boggs. And as they've shown us, if we look to the examples that science reveals are proliferating in the natural world, we realize we're surrounded by cycles and processes that are anything but linear. This holism seems to ground the city's most insurgent artistic, civic, and social efforts.

This perspective has a definite influence on the creators of MicroFest's final performance, the work-in-process presentation of *Complex Movements*. Expressed through the aesthetic vocabulary of Hip-Hop, which is a distinct language of reinvention and self-definition, the show is being developed by one of the many (former) young people whom Grace Lee Boggs has mentored over the years, educator and artist Invincible, who has also worked with Detroit Summer for better part of a decade. With collaborators at Emergence Media—educator and Hip-Hop producer Wajeed and artist-designer Wesley Taylor—Invincible is developing a dynamic performance exploring the relationship between complex science and social movements.

Complex science studies the nuanced mechanics of group behavior by examining how discrete or individual actions manifest themselves as collective behavior and vice-versa. It is an umbrella term referencing the investigation of complex systems through a variety of interrelated lines of inquiry including, among others, systems thinking, network theory, game theory, emergence, evolution, and biological adaptation.

The show was inspired, in part, by how Grace Boggs characterizes Detroit's "emergent grassroots organizing networks" using a scientific framework referenced by Margaret Wheatley in her book, *Leadership and the New Science*. Wheatley is a force in a field of people who have written and practiced the application of complex systems science to illuminate our understanding of social organization and the process of systemic social transformation.

Though *Complex Movements* draws on several approaches in the big tent of systems science, the creators anchored their line of thought in the concept of "emergence." As the audience and the makers settled into the post-show discussion, Invincible distributed a short essay called "[Lifecycle of Emergence: Using Emergence to Take Social Innovations to Scale](#)," co-authored by Wheatley and Deborah Frieze. The article offers an accessible and clear introduction to the concept, explaining:

In nature, change never happens as a result of top-down, pre-conceived strategic plans, or from the mandate of any single individual or boss. Change begins as local actions spring up simultaneously in many different areas. If these changes remain disconnected, nothing happens beyond each locale. However, when they become connected, local actions can emerge as a powerful system with influence at a more global or comprehensive level. (Global here means a larger scale, not necessarily the entire planet.)

To further illustrate this phenomenon, Invincible used the example of synchronous fireflies. Found only in Southeast Asia and Tennessee's Great Smokey Mountains National Park, large groups of these unique species of lightning bugs flash their bioluminescence in perfect rhythm with each other. Scientists have struggled to understand why this happens. Yet, the principles related to the simultaneous illumination of thousands of fireflies can help demystify how social movements take shape, in turn offering insight on how we may be able to nurture the emergent potential of system-wide socio-political change.

The show interrogates and translates these dense ideas into digestible context through a succession of head-nodding songs written by Invincible. Each song is given full dimension by the compliment of beats built for prophecy by Wajeed. Rounding out the full, sensory, multimedia exploration of science's relevance to the positive (r)evolution of society are intricate video productions, a light reactive drum box (a tall cube that responds with bursts of



Music box, *Complex Movements*,  
Emergence Media

color light when tapped), and one of the most interesting aspects of the performance, music boxes. Taylor designed and the team helped craft beautiful wooden boxes that play a song when opened. Dating back to the 18th century, the music box might be one of the earliest mechanical forms of portable music or “home entertainment.” On stage they suggest the influence of craftsmanship, history, and technology in a way that taunts our linear, assembly line-trained perspective on the process of change.

The team has so far finished three or four of the dozen or so total songs they intend to create. Invincible’s nuanced and intellectual rhyme style, which has a natural storytelling cadence, is well suited to a theatrical venue where you can hear every word ring with the clarity it deserves. They intend to tour this boundary ignoring performance to science museums and community spaces involved in social change and scientific engagement.

### **Moving Forward with Transformational Intention**

In MicroFest’s closing session, artist Jerry Stropnick gave form to a thought that had been stumbling around throughout our discussions, “. . . art has the potential for positive transformative power, but it can also have negative damaging impact. Can we find language to define the difference?” This is a “priceless” dilemma wrapped into the most elusive of MicroFest’s big questions: What difference is being made and how do we know?

As all of the work presented during the well curated MicroFest: Detroit revealed, we have to first use our imaginations to move beyond the industrialized logic that has us hemmed up. This requires stepping away from the assembly line thinking of capitalism that demands we be consumers rather than dynamic co-creator-participants in our social and civic lives. (I know we’re trying!) Our predicament is further complicated by the paternalism and transactional nature of much of the way we interact with the civic structures of our representative democracy. Too often experts speak for us when we are already fluent in the matters that impact us most deeply. (But I’m happy for the experts to handle traffic patterns and other such vital matters.)

Next we have to consider that sometimes the answer is staring at us from the question itself. To distinguish positive transformation from negative damage, MicroFest artists demonstrated that what needs to be uplifted is transformational intention. Using art as a blunt instrument to transact a bit of more important business may not necessarily manifest the transformative change we’re looking for here. If we want community engaged co-creation to be positive and transformative, power is a key determinate in how that shakes out. How is power balanced; how are key decisions made; who really sets the terms; what is influencing the agenda and who allocates resources? Power is the key

part of this equation that deserves more discussion. And it is more complicated than who; power (and privilege) is a nuanced dynamic that deeply affects our sensibilities and attitudes.

Our intentions can be helped along by language that assists in clarifying and distinguishing the ways that we work. As my creative practice evolved from performance to include visual and media arts, I discovered that I was involved in what the fine art sector calls “social practice,” an amorphous term so big some people give it its own “field.”

So, as we search for language to discern transformation from transaction, negative from positive, and the nature of impact, I am not alone in thinking that it is useful to further distinguish between *social* practice and *civic* practice. Informal conversations in Detroit touched on artists’ experiences of the power dynamics inherent in many relationships with funders or establishment sponsors and the blatant question of whose interests are really at the root of creative and neighborhood development projects. MicroFest participants noted that there can be significant tension as artists and other-sector collaborators try to challenge the status quo while many establishment bodies (consciously or unconsciously) are positioned, by design, to maintain it. These conversations touched on a distinction between social and civic practice that parallels what [Michael Rohd of Sojourn Theatre articulates in HowlRound](#).

Social practice is artist-led social inquiry and creative expression with an explicit commitment to the greater good. The creative process and product may or may not include collaboration and/or input from community members or institutions. The work may be erected to allow the intrinsic aesthetic value to be unraveled and interpreted over time or have a specific educational or instructional goal for a particular historical moment. And it may be concerned with any manner of impacts including, but not limited to, awareness, policy, community building, fostering dialogue, building social capital, affecting attitudes, challenging values, etc. But in social practice, the artist is a leader in the endeavor and often, but not always, initiates the project. This leadership can certainly be shared in some lateral, equitable way with arts or non-arts partners, but maintaining the balance of meaningful artistic leadership through all stages of the process is key.

On the other hand, civic practice employs the creative capacity of artists to respond to the needs of civic institutions or municipalities. The non-arts institutional partners often, but not always initiate the process, and in all cases are leaders with final say. There are countless artists who have the skill and privilege to develop the trust to negotiate conditions favorable to producing meaningful outcomes that have a positive impact on communities, institutions and municipalities. And while the artist may maintain some type of leadership

and control, in civic practice, I have either experienced personally or observed that the balance of power ultimately remains in the hands of the non-arts civic institutions and municipalities. To this category of partners I would also add some of the behemoth traditional arts institutions which are intertwined in the same power structures as government and municipalities.

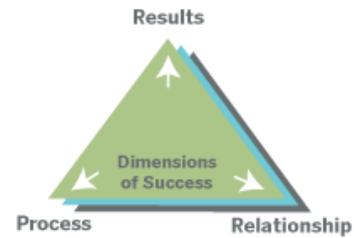
These ideas are still in process, but I think the difference between social and civic practice rests in power—who is allowed to meaningfully share power and how different constituencies are impacted by the endeavor. This also helps break down the dichotomy of negative and positive, asking us to consider more precisely: negative and positive for whom? For a slightly indirect example we can look to how *Complex Movements* confronts the renaming of the Cass Corridor to Midtown. From the perspective of people, businesses and organizations in the area that may face displacement in the process, this is negative. But from the perspective of the City and interests that perceive they can benefit, this change is positive. And there are people and institutions that are unwittingly complicit without fully understanding the implications or the dynamics of power at play. For example being based in a community like this, what neighborhood does your organization advertise you are located in - do you list Cass Corridor or Midtown - and why?

In the sectors of grassroots community organizing and up-from-below community building, many people look at power not simply as a positive or negative but a force to be negotiated, confronted in the systems that organize society and our sense of self and developed among those who are often denied it, or at least socialized to believe they do not have it. It is not necessarily a dirty word, it is just a complicated, less visible force that permeates every facet of our lives that we must force ourselves to understand and overcome (like patriarchy, for example). In some sectors, such as the arts or even white middle class activist circles, an analysis of power can be shunned and shied away from. If arts and cultural practice is to move forward with transformational intention, then we as artists and cultural workers must also confront the role power plays in privilege, race, class, gender, sexuality, and how that manifests in our work and our relationships as artists, citizens, and human beings. For example, even the most well meaning artist should consider the manifestations of power and privilege that even allows them the access to negotiate with a municipality or particular community and seek to uncover its implications in every facet of our endeavors.

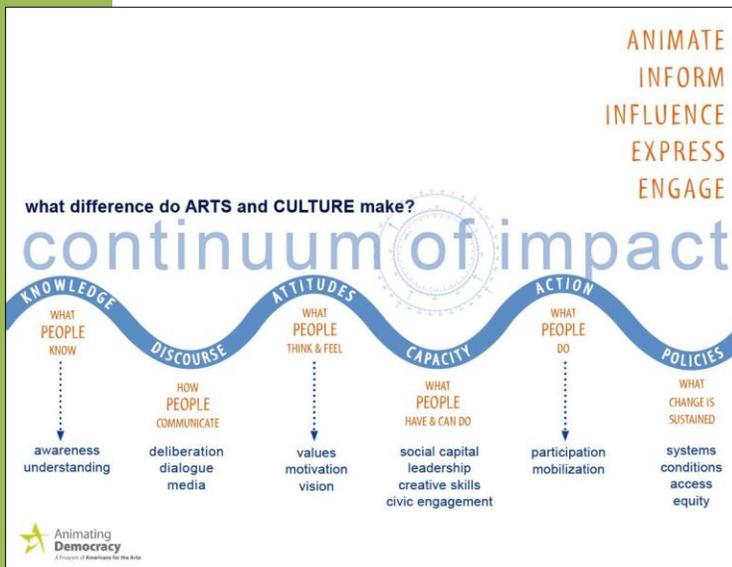
### **Re-Imagining Impact**

The next step in this ongoing journey toward finding new language is continuing to re-imagine the nature of impact. TAP Gallery, Detroit Future Youth (DFY) Network, and many others, describe impact as a multilayered analysis. DFY

explains that the Curriculum Mixtape is designed to have effect on personal, community-wide and social change levels. Most of the MicroFest artists aspire to a more holistic view of impact, placing strong emphasis on relationships and process. This makes me think of Interaction Associates' triangle diagram of the ["Dimensions of Success"](#) which I have heard described by cultural organizers and social justice activists. At each corner of an equilateral triangle are: *results* (desired output), *process* (how you get there), and *relationships* (quality of experiences). We can consider each point of the triangle to better understand the cycle of consequences that occurs through and throughout a project's activities. It also offers a rubric that can help practitioners and leaders balance these dimensions of a project's efficacy.



To further understand how diverse outcomes might relate, I could imagine moving the impact triangle, like the heart-shaped Ouija board pointer, along the [Continuum of Impact](#) developed by [Animating Democracy](#), a program of [Americans for the Arts](#), and offered to MicroFest participants to prompt thinking about the range of social outcomes. The Continuum suggests a range of outcomes along a spectrum to which creative activity can contribute: enhance awareness, knowledge, and discourse around issues; clarify values and confirm



or shift attitudes; increase capacity-skills, resources, status-to engage in civic concerns; promote effective participation; and improve systems and policies that ensure social justice. The impact triangle could be positioned above one or any number of combinations of outcomes to consider the nature and dimensions of impact.

All of this is highly fluid and impressionistic, but it's what

comes to mind reflecting on the question of impact and all of the groups, artists, and individuals encountered at MicroFest: Detroit. One of several outliers that begs to be considered as well (but I don't know how yet) is *time*. Ashley Sparks, a key compassionate force who is producing MicroFest, underscored this challenge in revealing impact. "We have to know and be grounded in the reality of time in process, time in relationships, time in results.

And as with ensemble process, it is all long term. There may be seeds or catalytic events, but as dreamers/artists, how can we be realistic about time as it relates to knowing the impact?"

\*\*\*

There are many artists who have long debated these nuances in theory and in their practice. The Network of Ensemble Theaters has invited long-time artists, new artists, cultural workers, advocates, and audience members to continue this dialogue in the communities where this work is happening, which is part of what makes MicroFest so intriguing.

As I look forward to Appalachia, New Orleans and Honolulu, I'm excited to discover what time and artists will uncover.

[MICHAEL PREMIO](#) is an artist, cultural worker, and organizer based in Brooklyn. Some of the people he has been blessed to work with include Hip-Hop Theater Festival, The Foundry Theater, The Civilians, Penny Arcade, Company One, EarSay, Inc., and the national oral history project, StoryCorps. He co-created and collaborates on the multimedia storytelling project [Housing is a Human Right](#). Michael is active in several movement building and organizing efforts, locally and nationally, including [Organizing for Occupation](#), an organization created in early 2011 to actualize the human right to housing through direct action, nonviolent civil disobedience, and community empowerment. His radio documentaries have been broadcast internationally and his photography has appeared in numerous outlets including *Left Turn*, *The Village Voice*, *The New York Times*, *Narratively*, and *Het Parool* (Holland). He is on the Board of the Network of Ensemble Theaters and is a member of the [Organization for a Free Society](#). Most recent publications include an essay reflecting on his participation in the first phase of Occupy Wall Street. It is entitled "Unlocking the Radical Imagination" and is included in *We Are Many: Reflections on Movement Strategy from Occupation to Liberation*, published by AK Press.

©2012 Network of Ensemble Theaters