

INQUIRING – A QUEST TO KNOW by Pam Korza

“Art has more questions than answers. Art starts with a position of not knowing and seeks to know.”
Ngugi wa Thiong'o

Across the four MicroFest sites, we are asking presenters, participants, and writers to consider a set of questions. In their simplicity and breadth, they give us wide open doors to look at, discuss, and reflect. They are:

- What does the work look like?
- What makes the work work?
- How does place impact art?
- How does art impact place?

As we were all exercising our minds (and legs!) on this auspicious journey beginning in Detroit, these basic questions naturally got expressed in more nuanced and complicated ways, and perhaps we came away with more questions than answers. As Elie Wiesel reminds us, “in the word question is a beautiful word—quest,” so our vigorous questioning is, I believe, a good and necessary and healthy thing. As we continue on to Appalachia, New Orleans, and Honolulu, here are just some of the many questions that were on Detroit participants’ minds as well as some that linger in my own. Consider them in reading Eddie Allen’s and Michael Premo’s papers, in experiencing the MicroFests on the horizon, and in your own work in community.

What does the work look like?

MicroFest is shining a light on the spectrum of cultural production that is traditionally under the radar of official creative placemaking strategies. While at one end, the continuum includes the major, recognized, cultural institutions, there is a varied and vast array of creative contributors at all points of the continuum—ensemble theater; youth theater and youth arts/development organizations; single artist projects and artist collaborations; artist-activist groups; DIY (Do It Yourself) arts entrepreneurs; informal unincorporated creative ventures; collaborations between artists and with allied professions (architects, designers, crafts and tradespeople); artists with other fields like science, urban agriculture; and artists engaging with community members making a meal, working the soil, creating art. MicroFest Detroit pointed to these as points of authenticity, innovation, and community collaboration, participation, and decentralized leadership. As such, they are uniquely contributing to revitalize physical spaces, build community, give voice and hope to young people, and activate civic participation.

In revitalizing, renewing, and reaffirming place through creative endeavor, what is the “continuum of cultural production” unique to that place? What work can be elevated and should be nurtured as assets? Related questions that emerged are: What is experimental theater’s relationship to place? What is the difference between urban and rural community-based art?

What is the language of the work? How do we communicate effectively across sectors, finding common language but also respecting and learning different languages? Is language keeping the “intellectuals” from the “people?” Can we challenge ourselves to define emotionally charged terms and give clear examples: i.e. gentrification, hipster, impact? If art holds a unique capacity to “reframe,” how do we find the right and ripe reframe that allows a community to step forward and claim its place in creative revitalization efforts?

Who “gets helped” and why? What is the difference between transactional and transformational community relationships? What does it look like when art directly works toward jobs creation, environmental justice, and other real and specific issues in community?

What is the relationship of aesthetics to engagement? What aesthetic interests matter to artists and community partners and members and how are these to be considered? When does bringing in many

voices enhance or impede the most potent creative work? Who has final say in the artistic decision making?

What makes the work work?

How are ensemble values and practices (collaboration, flexibility, transparency, mutual respect, inclusion) manifesting, contributing to, and being redefined in place-based work? How does “ensemble” translate into non-theater contexts? How do we maintain transparency of intent? How is the notion of “latency” in ensemble practice (as well as complex science theory!) valuable in working in community, i.e. willingness to sit and listen, to be open and curious, to check assumptions?

If understanding context is key to working in place, what are all the contextual factors that should be a deliberate part of effective place-based creative practice?

What are the responsibilities of newcomer artists to the place they now call home? What responsibilities do artists have (as long-time as well as newcomer artists) in relation to our neighbors? What are the dynamics of “transplants” in renewing and revitalizing communities? What are the values and principles critical to protecting local artists, culture, and community authority as outsiders seek to study, relocate, fund, and otherwise intervene? How do local and newcomer artists work together?

What is the role of expertise in collaboration—artist-community collaboration, cross-sector collaboration? How do we most effectively engage, elevate, and honor community knowledge, especially in the context of working across sectors? What can we learn from Detroit’s DIY/Just Do It mentality, i.e. do we sometimes make things too complex? How can art and design schools equip a next generation of artists to do responsible and effective community-based art? (The College for Creative Studies in Detroit combines work in the community with courses such as “Care of the City.”)

How do issues of racial and socio-economic equity get surfaced and worked through in this work? How do we make sure we’re getting at the heart and specificities of race (and in particular white privilege) and class as they relate to place and creative placemaking? Can developers be convinced that economical, racial, cultural diversity is a kind of capital? How do we identify when we are using the “place” instead of “race?”

In cross-sector partnerships, what are ways to not only navigate but shift power dynamics to a more level playing field? Dudley Cocke of Roadside Theater wrote: “It is an axiom of power that who controls the culture, controls the story a nation tells itself. So it is especially important that the arts contribute to a national rededication to creating a level playing field across all sectors of society.” (HowlRound, Sept. 30, 2012) Where does the initiative come from and how does that affect power dynamics? What tactics/strategies can help ensure responsibility and accountability of those with greater power? What is impact of government power/control of art and artists in revitalization efforts? What are some positive models of urban planning for revitalization in which the arts were integral, empowered, and effective?

What are the intersections between public and private, nonprofit and for profit that may both propel innovation or hinder the potential of creative contributions to placemaking? What is the city/region/public sector role in supporting this work? How can commercial industry work with artists and the nonprofit sector to fuel invention, create jobs and opportunity, and solve social problems? (For example, students in the College for Creative Studies excel in automotive and transportation design, but are also developing socially responsible products such as coats that transform into sleeping bags for homeless people now being used by the Red Cross. DETROIT LIVES! employs marketing and branding strategies to rebrand the city while creating opportunity for artists in positive product development and messaging.)

What are models of institutional and philanthropic support and coordination that honor and uphold community authority? The field session focusing on CPAD (community + publicart: DETROIT)

led by the College for Creative Studies (CCS) revealed a continuum of informal to formal organizational infrastructure that supports effective work. CCS's Mikel Bresee described the Skillman Foundation, JPMorgan Chase, and the Kresge Foundation as "fueling" CPAD. However, it is a model of thoughtful, comprehensive, and sustained community development. The concept for CPAD and CCS's own role to administer the program was born out of extensive community process. Skillman's vision was to infuse its 10-year multimillion dollar Good Neighborhoods program with a community arts component that would empower people living in Detroit's six most economically distressed neighborhoods to apply arts and culture to achieve self defined neighborhood development goals. Through CCS's sensitive and skillful coordination, community members are empowered early and throughout in every kind of decision.

How do we get to a place where artists are able to have secure lives and survive financially as they contribute to the transformation of communities? How are artists and arts organizations financially supporting and sustaining the work they are doing?

How does place impact art? How does art impact place? How do we know?

How do we more clearly and specifically define civic or social intentions that are realistic and so that we can track progress or actual change? Can art really reduce crime? What evidence could we look for when we say we want to restore value, transform, save, heal? How do we get beyond the economic impact case-making and articulate, elevate, and gauge social impact of arts-based work?

How does the analysis of impact value process vs. [or in addition to] outcome?

How much traction is the work and its message getting beyond those who are directly involved in creating it? What evidence do we look for that place is revitalized, renewed, reaffirmed in meaningful ways and how do we connect the dots between creative activities and actual outcomes?

Is it revolution or evolution? Can deep change only happen over a long time? How do you understand the effects of art over time on a place? What are reasonable expectations for short- and long-term change as a result of creative projects?

If art has the potential [to have] positive power, then it can also have negative damaging impact. Can we find the language to describe the difference?