Dovetail: An interview with Kalima Young from the Baltimore Art + Justice Project

Contributed by:
Stephen Roblin[1]
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In the first installment of *Dovetail*, I interview Kalima Young, project coordinator of Baltimore Art + Justice Project [2], which is a partnership project of MICA's Office of Community Engagement and Animating Democracy [3]. Baltimore Art + Justice Project aims to facilitate dialogue and data collection in a way that enables Baltimore to identify and better understand its art and design-based social justice assets. A major component of the project is a web-based mapping resource that artists, designers, arts organizations, community-based organizations, advocates, and funders can use to advance social justice in Baltimore.

Where did the idea for Baltimore + Justice Project come from?

A project designed by Karen Stults, Director of the Office of Community Engagement at the Maryland Institute College of Art, the Baltimore Art + Justice Project was originally designed to be an asset inventory for the newly minted office. In building the office, there was a distinct and urgent

need to identify and quantify MICA's impact on Baltimore City. This asset inventory was to identify which faculty, students, staff, and alum are engaged in the community and what, how, where, and with whom they are engaged in arts-based social change.

When presented with the opportunity to receive national funding from the Open Society Foundations in New York, the MICA-specific asset inventory expanded to a city-wide initiative. Now, the Baltimore Art + Justice Project is working with Animating Democracy to create a profile of artists, arts organizations, art projects and non-traditional service organizations who are dedicated to using art for social change in Baltimore. It will map the profiles collected and create an interactive website for artists and advocates to share resources and develop collaborations for advocacy. The intent is to create a city-wide tool that will level the playing field by showcasing the wealth of activities happening in the city, assist in curtailing duplication of arts and design based social change projects, and create a space for strategic, well-informed partnerships between and among artists and advocates.

The Baltimore Art + Justice Project presupposes a clear connection between art and social justice organizing. Can you elaborate on this connection? For instance, do you view art and social justice movements as complementary?

The concept of art as a tool for social justice is not novel. Art is a tool that reaches across a number of potential barriers to provoke dialogue and change. Arts lends an emotional voice to the intellectual. Organizers use it all of the time to communicate, activate, and illuminate. A great historical example is the Names Project that shed light on deaths from HIV/AIDS. A quilt helped people who were never organizers in the past embrace activism around an issue they cared about. Additionally, artists do not exist in a vacuum and neither do organizers. Often they are one and the same.

What do you mean by "art and design based social justice assets"? How can these assets be organized and used to enhance the struggle for social justice?

Art and design based social assets refer to projects and initiatives in Baltimore that have used art and design to improve structural barriers in the city. An example would be community design projects like the Whitelock Community Farm that broker neighborhood-supported agriculture. Community gardening is design that improves the quality of life in neighborhoods throughout the city. We believe that if artists, designers, advocates, and organizers are better able to identify one another, more collaboration will occur.

Can you explain the web-based mapping resource? What will it look like? How can users relate to it? And how can it be used to advance social justice causes?

The interactive map will contain profiles of artists, designers, advocates, and non-profits, and these profiles will be overlaid with demographic data to help these groups understand the neighborhoods they are working to impact. Additionally, it will also provide a space to post materials designed to help these groups collaborate, such as up-to-date research findings, sample budgets for working with artists, grant writing tips, funding announcements.

You worked on another community mapping project in the past called "Connect to Protect: Baltimore," which you describe as "a participatory research project that mapped community assets to support coalition-building and advocacy around HIV/AIDS." Can you tell us more about this project? Also, you describe Connect to Protect as "participatory." How was it participatory? Does the Baltimore Art + Justice Project also have a participatory character?

I worked with Connect to Protect: Baltimore back when it was housed at the University of Maryland, School of Medicine. The idea behind community-based participatory research is that research and initiatives are designed and implemented *with* the community, not *on* the community. As such, I directed a coalition of partners from the public health community to create new policies and procedures to curtail HIV infection in young people. As a research project, we did HIV surveillance (interviews, questionnaires) with young people to see if our policies and procedures were having an impact in their lives. This information overlaid with physically mapping the actual infection rates helped to guide our efforts.

Maps can illustrate decreases and increases visually and are a great tool for understanding organic environments. The arts community, like the public health community, is a living, breathing organism. The Baltimore Art + Justice Project is hoping to illustrate the way it moves and grows while also being a tool to help people navigate it.

The project embraces a participatory approach. We not only have diverse Advisory Committees of artists, researchers, funders, and advocates to guide our efforts, we also host Community Dialogues that bring these communities to success and challenges in working together. Upon hiring, I also embarked on an extensive outreach effort to make sure that the design of the Baltimore Art + Justice Project will meet the needs of this group. We also welcome interaction and participation through our Facebook, Twitter, and blog.

You produced a film of a collection of testimonials from LGBT individuals that address topics like teen bullying and suicide prevention ("It Gets Better, Baltimore"). Can you tell us more about this project? Has this experience influenced your work with the Baltimore Art + Justice Project?

I'm a videographer and I've been running Kubla Khan Productions for eight years. It is a gay and lesbian owned company dedicated to making films about gay and lesbian lives. Some of these projects are feature length narrative films and other work we do is for non-profit advocacy groups like the ACLU of MD and Equality Maryland. Its Gets Better Baltimore is a video created for the Den, a project I am a part of that is building an LGBT youth drop-in center for Baltimore.

I've been doing activist work my entire life so helping design the Baltimore Art + Justice Project from a social justice based approach comes naturally. That is the only way to do business in my book. There should be no place for inequity in art or activism. It's is our hope that by identifying, strengthening, and supporting the collaboration between artists, designers, and activists, we'll help level the playing field for justice.

For anyone interested in the project, how can they relate to it now?

We are collecting artists, designer, advocate, and non-profit profiles for our maps right now! We urge any folks working at the intersection of art and social justice to add themselves to the mix by

visiting www.mica.edu/bajp [4] and following the steps to be included in the database and the Baltimore Art + Justice Project map.

Additionally, we urge interested parties to become friends with us on Facebook, Twitter, the blog, and subscribe to our newsletter.

Where do you see the project going in the next few years?

Well, we of course want the map to live and for participants to continue adding themselves to the map. Our collaboration with UMBC's Imaging Research Center will help us build an interface where people will continue to add themselves to the map even when project development funding ends next Fall. We are also documenting this entire project's development in order to build a model that other cities can use to map their social justice based art and design. Hopefully, they'll be art + justice maps everywhere.

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