Hello, my name is Kalima Young and I direct the Baltimore Art + Justice Project. I’d like to begin this discussion with a quote by actress and acting teacher, Stella Adler. There is an essential truth to this statement that very few people can dismiss.

Life beats down and crushes the soul, and art reminds you that you have one – Stella Adler
The Baltimore Art + Justice Project is based in the Office of Community Engagement at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Our office works to build and strengthen community/campus partnerships. BA+JP is our attempt to address structural challenges in Baltimore through an arts-based framework.
Art and design provides creative solutions to structural issues.

Our project exists because we believe artists and designers can often see around corners. Art does not just beautify. It is not just a tack on. It is a real, communicative avenue for combating structural oppressions.

For example, our office was called by a member of the Mayor’s office for help. The shops in Lexington Market have been run historically by legal vendors for a number of years but in the last several years, illegal, non-permitted vendors have been selling products throughout the market and in the areas surrounding them. This has affected their businesses and has spurred increased open air drug selling. The Mayor’s office was considering bringing in a stronger police presence to arrest illegal vendors but instead, one official believed a carceral strategy would not be effective or helpful. Instead, he called on our office to link him to students who could create new branding, and prominent displays to UPLIFT the legal vendors and promote their work instead of arresting an already troubled population.

This is just one way that arts based strategies work from an assets building approach to address structural issues.
I’ve lived in Baltimore for most of my life and as a native, this is how I see my city. Vibrant, architecturally attractive, busy, creative and as football champions.
That reality lives in harmony and discord with this version of Baltimore. The one most people see, make jokes about and perpetuate through media. Violent, impoverished, gritty, racist and built around neighborhoods that are geographic silos. They are both true realities.

Because of this, artists often see Baltimore neighborhoods as blank canvasses. A place where they can come in, create some sort of art and design based intervention, uplift “the people” – who often do not look like the artists and designers, and then move on to the next community in need of saving.

This approach does not work in any setting, not in urban development, not in public health research and not in art-based intervention.
But our city is bursting with cultural vibrancy. With artists who see both sides of Baltimore and work to address issues of health care, teen violence, equity and race through art and design.

This project is called Cycles and it was developed by a local artist and African American young women to demystify women’s reproduction. Through a series of meetings, health education discussions, arts workshops and conversations, the artist, Whitney Frazier, was able to develop this booklet for young women that speaks to their sensibilities around sex, pregnancy and radical self care in a way that was engaged and respectful.
Baltimore is also filled with designers who make statements about these issues when they happen – to spark dialogue when it is hard for us to speak. Several large scale and poignant pieces of art were created spontaneously in the city in the wake of the Zimmerman verdict. This is just one.
Art is Baltimore is also being used to call out inequity and prompt action. This is a project of the Baltimore Wall Hunters. Anybody who watched, “The Wire”, knows about Baltimore’s problems with vacant buildings. For years, a local activist, Carol Ott has been running Baltimore Slumlord Watch, a blog that takes pictures of vacant buildings and supplies the names of the derelict owners so people can call them and hold them accountable.

In recent months, Ms. Ott has partnered with Baltimore street artist community to help launch Wall Hunters. Street artists paint murals on the sides of vacant buildings with a QRS code that leads to information about the derelict owners and helps citizens in those neighborhoods can take action.

These are just some ways that art and design is currently used in Baltimore to prompt action, bring communities together and contribute to the cultural vibrancy of our neighborhoods.

However – art/design based social justice strategies suffer from a number of challenges.
Income Gaps Exist:

Some artist/designers receive the majority of the dollars and some artists are obscure and do not. There are barriers set up in funding initiatives where artists are not encouraged to work together and pool their resources. There are long time, neighborhood based artists/designers who remain on the margins even as the Mayor and other agency have begun tapping into art/design to improve the city.
Barriers Exist:

We have a very real inability to see art as a viable tool for justice. For example, you can have a community theatre artist working with incarcerated populations for self-advocacy who receives $5,000 and a nonprofit who receives $50,000. We believe that needs to change and we need to make the case for why an artistic/design intervention is just as powerful as a behavioral one.

There is no shared language between artist and advocates to be able to work together outside of superficial brokering. You design our social marketing flyer, we give you money. The very real notion that every non-profit and city agency should have a relationship with an artist or have an artist on staff just makes sense.
The Baltimore Art + Justice Project

Data-Collection
Community Dialogues
Workshops

Resulting in....
Website with an Interactive Map, Resources, Forums and Networking Capabilities
Theory of Change

If we identify, strengthen and support the collaboration between art and design and advocacy, we will have a better, more just Baltimore.
The Baltimore Art + Justice Project:

Help individuals identify areas in Baltimore for socially engaged art and design. Provide a mechanism for communities to request art/design interventions. Broker relationships between artists and designers through online forums and resource sharing. Provide capacity building by curating best practices research and holding community forums that bring multiple communities together to discuss their needs. Help college and university faculty and students become socially-engaged in Baltimore communities.
Users can search by a variety of categories to tailor their search.
Signing up is easy.
You are mapped.
www.artplusjustice.org

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