

ART & ACTIVISM

A Three-State Case Study



DEMOCRACY & POWER
INNOVATION FUND

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Executive Summary

In the fall of 2020, our research team did a preliminary internal assessment study of the organizational structure and youth artist-capacity building efforts of the [Midwest Culture Lab \(MCL\)](#) and its affiliate organizations engaging in civic engagement through art and vice-versa. We refer to these as “cultural organizing organizations.” At the start, the work was exploratory, an opportunity to learn from principal participants using one-on-one and group interviews.

This is a follow-up deeper study more fully examining the inter-relationships in cultural organizing organizations between audiences, community leaders, and artists. We were interested in understanding:

- In what ways cultural organizing organizations conceive of and execute various culture strategy projects related to art, culture, and politics;
- Which cultural organizing programs impact broader public narratives; and
- Which tactics from artists were effective & could inform future issue-based and electoral-based campaigns?

This two-year exploration with partners unearthed more interesting questions around how cultural organizing programs in political organizations function (e.g., planning, implementation, & evaluation) and how this work is key to the development of political agency in Black communities. This follow-up project builds on the learning community of artists, organizers, artists/organizers, and audiences in the former Midwest Culture Lab and its affiliated organizations like the [Ohio Student Association](#) while also bringing in additional cultural organizing organizations like [Detroit Action](#) and [Mississippi Votes](#).

Through case studies with these organizations, we seek to further refine our understanding of their cultural organizing strategies, learn how Black community-organizing organizations are implementing cultural strategy, and evaluate the impact it is having in key communities. Relatedly, we also sought to deepen our understanding of arts activism effectiveness by identifying impact opportunities with each organization. We started to develop an evaluation framework with them to assess what programming impact their work had from each state in the following areas:

- Policy
- Public Perception / Narrative Change
- Audience / Voter Engagement
- Artist Experience / Engagement

Our research discusses the varied methods and opportunities for art-activist organizations to advance civic engagement and help communities of color exercise their political power. Examples range from giving artists the resources to express themselves to explicit interventions centered around policy issues.

Some of our key findings are:

- the importance of strong, cooperative relationships between artists and cultural organizing entities
- the unique ability of art to shape and strengthen civic engagement
- that artists' works, regardless of the medium, can have lasting impacts on communities by inspiring new and relevant political and social imaginations
- art can be a catalyst for moving people not otherwise moved by traditional political tactics to become more politically engaged
- the ways disruptive art can be effective for inspiring civic mobilization.

The three organizations we researched all leveraged their art-activism to deliver real, tangible impacts for the communities they represent. But the changes were bidirectional – the organizations themselves were also impacted and transformed through their embrace of activist art.

For future research, we encourage additional studies with more depth by having a narrower approach (e.g., one organization) over a longer period of time. We also encourage the development of sentiment analyses to better capture how the attitudes of members and the public changed after communities interacted with art activism. This particular project covered groups in Michigan, Mississippi, and Ohio, but we would also like to examine how art activism is manifesting in other geographic regions throughout the United States.

Ultimately, the goal of this follow-up project is to strengthen the arts and activism movement's power to educate and mobilize its members – who support progressive issues and political leaders but whose civic engagement and advocacy could be strengthened as the movement takes on policy fights at local, state and national levels.

Section 1: Project Goals

This project continues learning from artists and community leaders in the former Midwest Culture Lab and various affiliated organizations, including the [Ohio Student Association](#). In addition, it also brings in art-activism organizations like [Detroit Action](#) and [Mississippi Votes](#) since the focus of this study is specifically on art and civic participation in Black communities. Each of the anchor organizations are Black-led and primarily reach Black constituents. From that orientation, we focused our project on two goals:

- Evaluating *how* cultural organizing programs in political organizations work (i.e., planning, implementation, and evaluation) and engage their members; and
- Deepening our understanding of how this work impacts the development of political agency and activation in black communities.

We set out to achieve these goals by:

- Clearly articulating the models of cultural organizing and their characteristics dominantly at play in art-activist organizing;
- Investigating cultural program designs and strategic choices identified through a combination of one-on-one interviews and site visits;
- Evaluating the effectiveness of cultural strategizing to motivate members to take action during issue campaigns or general matters of politics and social justice with case studies

This report chronicles the activities, triumphs, and challenges through the case studies that each cultural organizing organization experienced while also providing recommendations on what could be next in the field of cultural organizing and power. Our hope is that this paper ultimately strengthens the arts and activism movement's power to educate and mobilize artists and activates audience members who support progressive issues and political leaders but whose civic engagement and advocacy could be strengthened via strong cultural organizing programs as the movement takes on policy fights at local, state and national levels.

Section 2: Methodology



Deliver Black Dreams Forum with artists

This is a comparative case study that employed qualitative research approaches. Over the course of the past year and a half, Dr. Ray Block — with the research assistance of Professor [Christine Slaughter](#), a faculty member at Boston University and analyst at the African American Research Collaborative, used a [purposeful sampling strategy](#) to gain initial interview participants. Participants were recruited via email and text-message communications describing the research and the need to hear from a diverse array of perspectives. From there, we either reached out to individuals directly to schedule interviews or were contacted by people who were interested in participating. After the interviews were completed, we asked participants if they could put us in contact with other individuals in their network who fit our recruitment criteria. This method allowed the research team to use their second sampling technique, which was a [snowball sampling](#) method.

Overall, Christine and Ray scheduled more than a dozen interviews with people in or affiliated with the organizations participating in the project. Christine and Ray obtained lists of participants by contacting representatives from the previously mentioned organizations. Most of the interviews happened online by telephone or Zoom. We used the interviews to

explore what artists-activists and community leaders believe about relevant political issues and the messages that can create concern and action on those issues.

In addition to the interviews, Tova, Prentiss, and Ray were also able to add a component of “ethnographic” research to the case study by visiting each organization in person to have discussions with their members and representatives and, more importantly, to see the progress the organizations had made toward their specific cultural organizing program goals. These site visits proved to be essential. Not only did the research team learn more and appreciate more fully what was happening, but the organizations themselves gained better clarity on their own goals and how best to pursue them.

Finally, the research team was able to supplement interview and site-visit data with additional source materials such as artifacts from past art activism events, background documentation about the organizations, news articles highlighting art activism, and so on.

Section 3: Cultural Organizing and Its Models

Cultural organizing is the process of activating and leveraging culture, artist-cultural works, and their audience for a demonstration of political power. Cultural organizing often entails mobilizing people – sometimes called the “audience” – and broader communities through cultural activities, expressions, and traditions or by educating audiences on issues via engagement platforms in order to build collective power, resist oppression, and advance social justice movements. It also involves using the unique cultural assets and practices of a community to engage, educate, and empower its members to become active participants in shaping their own communities as agents in a political formation and wider society.

Cultural organizing is the process of activating and leveraging culture, artist-cultural works, and their audience for a demonstration of political power.

Cultural organizing organizations (also called art-activist organizations in this paper) are social justice organizations that have explicitly political missions, engage in base-building advocacy, and deploy cultural strategies to educate, activate, and mobilize their members and constituents. Cultural organizing organizations use culture organizing as a tactic to advance their power-building mission.

Undergirding this project and the work of cultural organizing is an art-activist centered theory of social and political change. Since 2017, we have been experimenting with cultural organizing strategies and learning how to engage artists in social movements. Prentiss Haney, who spearheaded this work, has identified and coined two overarching models of cultural organizing. Each of these approaches offers a different engagement with artists, bringing new opportunities and challenges.

To understand the models of cultural organizing, the first thing you must know is the *primary identity of belonging* that artists choose for themselves in this context. Through Prentiss’s 5-years of experimentation with cultural organizing, he has seen two dominant primary identities of belonging:

- **Worker:** an artist person who primarily sees themselves as a cultural worker, a “creative for hire,” and/or as someone who is looking to grow and advance their career as an artist.
- **Member:** an artist person whose primary identity and sense of belonging is as a member of a political organization; this person has a unique gift or talent of creative practice that can be put to use in service of the political mission of the organization.

The primary identity of belonging of the individual artist is the key indicator that will convey a clearer sense of the cultural organizing model that is being deployed, the characteristics of that model, and the opportunities and challenges of working inside that model.

Our two identity models—worker and member—assume that there are different ways that *organizing* and *art* and *activism* come together. On one hand, there is a school of thought in which artists who see themselves as workers function as participants — and even strategists — in a politicized workforce. Another school of thought has structures and practices in a political vehicle that treats artists as members of a political organization. The differences between these schools of thought are often seen as subtle but are vitally important. In the next section, we discuss those distinctions in detail.

Artist As Worker: Worker-Power Model

The most common model of cultural organizing is artist as worker or the worker-power model. The artist tends to see themselves as a culture worker looking to partner with social justice organizations to advance their mission or as a worker trying to build collective power to change industry standards. The worker-power model of cultural organizing generally presents two options:

- Worker justice organizing
- Contractor-based partnership

The **worker justice organizing** option is mainly focused on growing the economic power of the artist. Under the “Worker-Power” model, these formations are deeply rooted in supporting artists’ financial literacy, industry navigation, and professional development. The artists tend to have strong relational ties with one another and a clear self-interest in growing their profession and its positionality. These spaces can be deeply transformational for artists who may not be in community with others — especially emerging artists who often feel isolated, unsupported, and unable to break into the industry. These programs focus strongly on artist development, community-building, and collective bargaining. While these formations are not unions per se, they tend to feel like trade associations with a deeper

sense of belonging. Additionally, these programs can be more broadly social justice oriented but tend to focus on the immediate needs of artists – such as client development, securing contracts, and platform development.

Some of the characteristics of worker justice organizing in this model:

- Tends to work as artist collective (i.e., the [Artist Distributors Fellowship](#) hosted at the Center for Cultural Power)
- Focused on shared services, collective bargaining for goods and services, professional development, and artist development
- Tends to be strongly focused on the development of the artist
- Supports movement but is primarily focused on growing the artists' professional craft
- Growing access and resources to the means of production in arts and culture spaces (i.e. museums, Hollywood, arts councils, media companies, etc.) is their main goal

The most common option under the worker-power model is the **contractor-based partnership** program. This type of cultural organizing tends to view the relationship between artists and activist organizations in transactional terms. These programs are often between individual artists and organizations who are focused on achieving a campaign goal. In its purest sense, this model sees artists as politically empowered workers and vital participants who relate to the organization in a manner outlined via an employer/employee contract. Oftentimes, the contractual agreement reached between artists and organizations is focused on achieving a finite, well-defined goal (e.g., leveraging the efforts of visual and performing artists to help increase voter registration in a community, communicating support for a particular political candidate or political cause, etc.).

Organizations will work with an artist to create a product that could spur community engagement on an issue or move a particular narrative. These can be powerful partnerships, especially in short-term campaign opportunities. The artist mostly acts as a contractor to deliver goods and services to an organization. This program design can have the artists play a major role in strategy development in a clear campaign.

Some of the characteristics of contractor-based partnership option:

- Tend to be more transactional and more focused on short-term opportunities (i.e., PSAs from high-profile artists or the commissioned work of Kendrick Daye for the [Human Rights Campaign](#))
- Organizations tend to have individual relationships with artists they commission rather than relationships with artist communities

- Tends to be focused on partnerships and leveraging the artist’s audience
- The main goal usually is a narrative change toward a campaign outcome

In the artists-as-worker relationship, one could characterize the role of the artists as that of empowered participants, even strategists in some cases, in a non-traditional, yet political, workforce. In this transactional relationship, “organizing” makes it possible for artists to come together and use their talents to create strategic and useful creative products, but the unifying theme connecting the artists and the organization is the political objective that likely exists independently of the artists themselves. For example, entities like the [Center](#)

[for Cultural Power](#) are made of organizations that have politics as their mission and offer resources, political education, and encouragement for their recruits to become activists that can contribute to many tangible things, one of which is narrative change, through art-inspired messaging.



Darsheel Kaur, former Project Manager at the Midwest Culture Lab

It is hard to discuss transactions without talking candidly about economic motives, forces, and challenges. Because the primary identity of belonging in this model is that of a worker, the need for artists to reconcile “financial” and “creative” considerations becomes particularly clear.

Darsheel Kaur, former Project Manager at the Midwest Culture Lab who is currently enrolled at [Eastern Mennonite University](#) and primarily identifies as an artist-worker, had this to say during a past conversation:

“... for the artists, that’s a profession for a lot of [them], or they’re hoping that it will be. And so artists want to be engaged on that professional level of: ‘I’m creating something and I want to get paid for it.’”

DARSHEEL KAUR, FORMER PROJECT MANAGER AT MIDWEST CULTURE LAB

Specifically, Darsheel discusses the challenge of negotiating the very real economic needs of aspiring professional artists and creatives and the purity of cultural work. Words like “profession” are clear indicators of the artist’s orientation and, therefore, the model that

they would likely be operating from. To be clear, the distinction of understanding the artist as a worker is not to say that compensation is or is not deserved for services. Compensation can be a part of any model of cultural organizing either in direct remuneration to the artist for their labor, coverage of artist professional development and training costs, and/or payment for the materials needed to produce cultural products.

Compensation itself is not an indicator of the cultural organizing model; rather, it is the relationship of the artists to the compensation based on their primary identity of belonging that indicates the model. Workers see the compensation as a part of the consideration, while members see the compensation as a part of the political programming.

In their attempt to address these important issues, many art-activism organizations use a worker-justice approach that prioritizes maximizing artists' economic power while providing them with opportunities to advance their business literacy. Again, the important thing about this model is that the "politics" is a post-contractual artifact rather than a central pre-existing feature of the relationship: artists may participate in politics, but politics may or may not be central to the artists' creative identity.

Artist As Member: Membership-Based Model

Our contribution to theorizing about artists and activism is what we call the **membership-based** model. Membership-based cultural organizing is focused on the ideal role of the artist being part of a membership body of the political organization. In this model, artists see themselves as members who take responsibility for engaging and politicizing their audience and creating art serving the mission. The organization should have a clear role for these members who want to use their artistic gifts in service to the mission of the organization. Inside the membership-based model of cultural organizing, we see it most clearly through structures and practices such as:

- Artist / Visual & Cultural Strategy Committees ("AVC")
- Campaign teams

AVC Strategy Committees tend to be volunteer formations inside a political organization where the artist members get to receive artist development, leadership development, and execute the visual strategy for a particular organizational mission or program. Similarly, campaign teams are usually spaces where artist members shape and decide on the political strategy of a campaign and then leverage their artistry and audience to advance those goals.

In this sense, “politics” is not some external factor that gives the organization and its members a common cause. Rather, all the people involved are political agents. They are taking responsibility for political outcomes in their communities. What they create is inherently rooted in politics, the organization’s work is inherently political, and one part of this relationship does not need to politicize the other.

Artists in these formations tend to have a sense of agency both as an **organizing principle** and as a **value system** that clarifies the work’s goals, drives them to believe in the cultural strategy, and inspires them to take responsibility for the audience that follows them.

Some of the characteristics of a membership-based program are:

- Tends to be a team or committee embedded within a political organization (i.e., The [Art Action Network](#) of Sunrise Movement or the [Black Joy Experience](#) with [Black Youth Project 100](#))
- Focused on creating art and culture in service to the membership and campaigns of the political organization
- Artists’ primary identity is that of a member of the political organization first and their artistry is the contribution to the membership
- The main goal is leadership development and to grow the power of the membership and political organization in the public arena by leveraging art and culture as a tool

In this sense, worker-power models that focus on contractual relationships are not wholly incompatible with membership-based models in which artists co-serve as participants of a membership body of a political organization. In fact, both “worker-power” and “membership-based” models share significant overlap — for example, when it comes to the challenges of resourcing and compensating artists for their political work.

Our point here is that the membership model celebrates — rather than relegates — the agency that artists have. Instead of them being “creatives for hire,” our conceptualization allows for the possibility that artists can see themselves as a primary member of the organizations to which they bring their artistry. In other words, the artists see themselves primarily as **activists who do art**, not **artists who do activism**. The focus of our model is on the ideal role of artists or creatives who, in addition to having particular gifts they bring to the arena, see themselves as part of a membership body of a political organization.

In a worker-power model, the organization recruits the artist to leverage art as a tool toward their political goal(s). The membership model is about how artists leverage their participation in and contributions to organizations to advance their own political agenda.

Rather than pit models against each other, we think it makes sense to characterize these two general perspectives (i.e., artists-as-workers and artists-as-members) as an evolution in what the relationship between “organizing” and “art” can be. Worker-power models are needed to impact larger-systems issues when it comes to artists, their power in the creative industries, and their ability to collectively bargain for fair compensation. Also, worker-power models allow for lots of electoral opportunities when campaigns need to leverage an artist’s community or their artistry itself for short-term gains. However, the work to cultivate power and agency in artists is no small feat. Because over the long-term, it affords more agency to the artists themselves, the membership model is both more difficult to implement and potentially more impactful because the artist’s orientation is one of a person who is a political agent, owning their own power and building power in a public arena. Our belief is that the membership model allows for more longevity in political involvement as opposed to some worker-power models, especially contract-based approaches, which tend to characterize artist-organization relationships as short-term.

Section 4: Overall Description of the Organizations

Having outlined some theories of the relationship between artists and political organizations, we now talk about the three organizations that were involved in this case study. Each of these organizations uniquely embodies the tenets of the artists-as-members relational model. The organizations also exist within important geographic and political contexts (i.e., two are in the Midwest, and one is in the Deep South).

Below, we discuss the vision, mission, and activities of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative (the OOC), an organization far along in its cultural productivity and political awareness. We also discuss Detroit Action, which, despite being less far along, has a strong sense of itself as a proponent of the membership-model, and Mississippi Votes, an organization that is starting out and is relatively early on its journey toward solidifying its institutional identity with regard to cultural organizing. To learn more about the organization's priorities and to help co-identify impact opportunities, Ray and Christine Slaughter scheduled interviews with various people in or affiliated with the aforementioned organizations. We will say more about the content of those interviews later in the report. For now, we discuss the organizations themselves.

Spotlighting the Ohio Organizing Collaborative



Deliver Black Dreams, an initiative led by Marshall Shorts

The [Ohio Organizing Collaborative \(OOC\)](#) is a grassroots, people-centered power organization committed to “[building] transformative relational power with everyday Ohioans for statewide social, racial, and economic justice.”

Our main points of contact at the OOC were [Marshall Shorts](#) (Creative Director) and Maki Somosot (Communications & Narrative Director). When asked about the organization’s priorities, we learned that OOC’s cultural organizing program had as its main general focus recruiting, training, and developing emerging artists and creatives from the OOC’s membership base and campaigns — and African American creatives in particular. This is a broad goal that can be accomplished in many ways.

Because of how far along he and the OOC were in their progress toward their art activism goals, this organization served as an exemplar from which the other organizations could receive inspiration and guidance.

Spotlighting Detroit Action

Also located in the Midwest, [Detroit Action](#) expresses its vision as seeking to “[build] power for Black and Brown working-class Detroiters.”

Our [main points of contact](#) at Detroit Action were Branden Snyder (Executive Director), Kenneth Williams (Communications), Joanna Velasquez (Campaign Director), and Anthony Barber (Cultural Director). Detroit Action seeks to connect politics, policies, and issues while meeting people where they are. As Branden notes: “We’re trying to build a people’s organization that connects Detroit’s culture, the art, the policy, and politics.”

“We’re trying to build a people’s organization that connects Detroit’s culture, the art, the policy, and politics.”

BRANDEN SNYDER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF DETROIT ACTION

This organization approaches this broad goal in several ways. In the arena of electoral politics, Detroit Action endorses candidates for city council and city clerk races via door-to-door canvassing and digital campaigning, event planning, etc. The organization also works hard to shape policy narratives, with the ultimate objective being to push Detroit Action to be a major political player in the state of Michigan. Finally, and this was a theme mentioned by practically everyone we interviewed, Detroit Action seemed particularly



Branden Snyder, Executive Director of Detroit Action

aware of how their organization prioritizes mutual aid: As Joanna wisely noted, “You can’t ask people to commit to save their communities while they are struggling to make it day-to-day...you have to meet people’s immediate needs first and they are then free to serve later.”

In a similar vein, Detroit Action incorporates the artists’ experiences as part of its organizational vision, for they want to help empower creatives to do activist work. Creativity is the throughline for making things happen. Joy is particularly important to the artists’ experience.

In his capacity as Executive Director, Branden very much wants the people involved to have the resources to take care of themselves so that they can enjoy their communities and stay energized for the work. Likewise, Anthony was hired to curate spaces for these enriched artist experiences to happen. One such example of this is an event called “Vote Freaky Friday,” which brings in artists to engage their community about various political programs such as voter registration.

Spotlighting Mississippi Votes

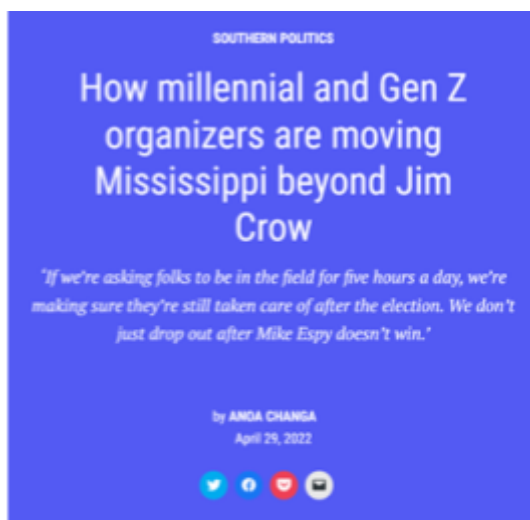


Mississippi Votes Staff

Headquartered in Jackson, MS, [Mississippi Votes](#) is a “millennial-led, youth civic engagement movement seeking to engage and empower young and first time voters to

become civically engaged.” This is the organization’s self-description from their [Facebook page](#), and they elaborate on these ideas on their [website](#).¹

Mississippi Votes is an organization of intergenerational synergy centering and led by young people invested in the progression of Mississippi. We do this through our programming and outreach strategies that empower young people, encourages civic engagement, and educate communities on voting rights through place-based grassroots organizing.



"How millennial and Gen Z organizers are moving Mississippi beyond Jim Crow", an article in Scalawag Magazine about Mississippi Votes

We communicated most frequently with Arekia Bennett (the Executive Director who is now affiliated with Rutgers University’s Center for American Women in Politics as part of their [New Leadership National Network](#)), Hannah Williams (their Policy & Research Analyst), Velvet Johnson (Programs Manager), and Timothy Young (who is in charge of digital content creation).

Mississippi Votes has an interesting origin story. Arekia and her colleagues started it when they were in college at Jackson State. At the time, the initial priority of the organization was to cultivate a safe and supportive space on campus for women and girls to talk about body autonomy, women’s rights, and political empowerment. However, Arekia said that she and her colleagues discussed

how to restructure the organization so that it could properly reflect the moment. She recalls 2020 being a tumultuous time on many fronts. Not everyone was paying attention to what was going on in her home state, which had suffered through weather-related disasters, police officers killing unarmed Black people, policy debates over medical marijuana, and

¹ Also, check out this [write up](#) in *Swag Magazine* about the work they are doing.

more. Her organization made a commitment to students and residents in the Jackson community to push forward with a progressive social and political agenda. Doing so was particularly challenging because they were a Black-led campus community that was growing an organization that they inherited from white students who had mismanaged the organization prior to them getting control of it.

Now that they have moved beyond the university and are an independent and autonomous organization, Mississippi Votes has a statewide focus, maintaining its progressive agenda with the goal of getting young people politically involved. The organization accomplishes this via poetry slams, game nights, and other social events that appeal to undergraduates. During our first interview in August of 2021, Arekia joked that, while her job title might sound fancy, most of what she does starts with her “buying pizza for young people.”

When it comes to their relational-model approach, the organization, while inherently political, puts the art and the artist first. As Arekia noted in one of our interviews, art was what engaged people back when they were at Jackson State, so they continued to let art be the thing that fueled the movement. For example, the demand of young people after the 2020 election inspired Mississippi Votes to step up to be a place where young Mississippinans (particularly those in high school and college throughout the state) could receive political training and eventually take ownership over the political issues they cared about.



Dolla Black, a local, Jackson-area rapper

A great example of this is how BDE Music Group recording artist [Dolla Black](#), a local, Jackson-area rapper, was politicized through his collaboration with Mississippi Votes. Dolla Black was not a politically conscious rapper initially, but the process of doing a song for the organization heightened his awareness of political issues. Dolla Black’s producer, who was not a registered voter at the time, went out and registered to vote because of this cultural experience and the end product that came from it. From a relational standpoint, this is a mutually-empowering moment. Both the organization and its members are realizing their potential together. Prentiss had become aware of the great program happening in Mississippi and saw the potential of the organization; this is how we ultimately connected with Mississippi Votes.

Returning to the idea of relational models, Mississippi Votes is closer to a membership model than they describe themselves currently, and their gift as an organization is youth development. Since many of Mississippi Votes' members came from ties to universities across the state, the members of the organization use political issues, like reproductive justice, to aid recruitment. Their participants are "members" who take responsibility for activities in their "chapters" which are high schools and universities. The fellowship programs at Mississippi Votes train artists, and there is an opportunity for the artists to invest in the organization while the organization invests in the artists. In the case of Dolla Black, the organization took the rapper through a leadership development process where they learned about the laws, history, and implications surrounding their potential artistic project. He and his producer got registered to vote and Dolla Black became more involved in the process and joined Mississippi Votes and created a song to share his experience. When the artists involved with this organization authentically agree to become members, they create art in service to the membership rather than merely fulfilling the terms of a contract.

Section 5: Projects the Organizations Developed

The Art/Activist Projects of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative

Ohio Organizing Collaborative (OOC) is a grassroots people-centered power organization. We unite base-building community organizing groups, student associations, and faith organizations with labor unions and policy institutes throughout Ohio. It is our mission to organize everyday Ohioans, building transformative power organizations for racial, social, and economic justice. Our vision is to build a democratic, multi-racial populist governing coalition in Ohio.

During the period of this project, the OOC put its efforts into the field of decriminalization. Specifically, they concentrated on messaging & cultural campaigns meant to counteract the stigmatizing, dehumanizing, and criminalizing narratives around drug dealers and drug users while resourcing artists and activists to fight against predatory drug policies across the board. One such campaign was [Lift OH](#), which was designed to support artists, creatives, and activists in Lima, OH, via grants whose work seeks to destigmatize and decriminalize marijuana and other drugs that should not carry criminal penalties.

The focus on Lima for the Lift OH campaign is strategic. Lima is an ideal case study because it is a smaller city in the state of Ohio that has a sizable Black population. As a political battleground, the issue of drug decriminalization had not yet taken hold in the discourse, which made it easy to shape policy narratives about drugs and drug use. In bigger cities like Columbus, Cincinnati, and Cleveland, conversations about drugs and policy interventions were already heavily politicized, which limited the OOC's ability to share narratives in those cities.

Given the need for a targeted messaging and cultural campaign, the OOC sought to shape the discourse in Lima by strategically delivering race and class narratives. This included



LiftOH mini-grant initiative landing page created by The Ohio Organizing Collaborative

universal concepts about how harsh drug-punishment policies disproportionately harm resource-poor, racial minority communities while also pointing out the certain politicians who profit from our racial division and polarization while not meeting our multi-racial coalition's needs.

When viewed from the lens of the theories discussed above, the OOC's efforts reflect both the workforce- and membership-based relational models. While there are definitely "contractual" elements to the Lift OH campaign, with artists being recruited and resourced, the artists are thought partners and campaign leaders in the process by working with the OOC to help spread narratives throughout the community organically. In this sense, the people

involved in this campaign are members of a political organization. Political needs being addressed through the art represent shared values with which the organizers at OOC and the creatives who join the OOC find common cause.

Underlying the OOC's decision to implement this decriminalization and stigmatization campaign is a genuine sense of *responsibility* among artists to weigh into this important policy arena. Artists understand that, because of their unique perspectives and skill sets, they are ideally suited to *respond* innovatively and effectively in this policy area. As we demonstrate throughout this report, these two underlying themes — the artist's responsibility and the creative's response — guide the efforts of all three art-activist organizations.

The Art/Activist Projects of Detroit Action

During the project period, Detroit Action undertook a large-scale mural project in their city connected to their Agenda for a New Economy.² The agenda is summarized in their [mission statement](#):

Our mission is to build the power of individuals and families to challenge the root cause of poverty, advance justice, and promote human development through neighborhood-driven community organizing and civic engagement. We believe in creating a just world where everyone has housing, healthcare, quality education, and a live-able environment.



Flyer for Detroit Action event, Agenda for a New Economy Press Conference

Specifically, the organization seeks to develop programs for artists on their Agenda for a New Economy that highlight the importance of these campaigns and what they would mean for Detroit. There are multiple components to each part of the campaign, including visioning and brainstorming sessions that lead to a kickoff community event for the mural(s) to be painted. Murals focused on what the Agenda for a New Economy could do for their community. The project event included food trucks, music, political one-pagers, membership sign-ups, speakers, and artists working on mural(s). We discuss this event later when describing what we learned from our site visit to Detroit.

Detroit Action is transparent about their approach to connecting the “art” to the organization. Rather than encourage contractual/transactional interactions, Detroit Action

² Detroit Action [hosted an event](#) in the spring of 2022 to articulate this agenda and generate community support for it.

states explicitly on their [website](#) that they seek to “build an organization that serves as our members and staff’s political home.” The idea of a *political home* is a powerful one. It is something that was recently discussed in an [article from the Democracy & Power Innovation Fund](#), and it is an [underlying theme in theories of organizing and collective action](#). It is, therefore, not surprising that Detroit Action crafts its organization in a way that maximizes the building of political homes. The anchor of their organizational design is cultural events for artists and community members to engage.

One of the programs that Detroit Action undertook during the project period was “Black August,” an event that took place within Detroit’s [2022 Southwest Fest](#), combining musical performances, interactive art creations and exhibitions, and politically-themed carnival games. The goal of Black August was to provide a space for Detroiters to network and enjoy themselves. Joy was an important component of their work as organizers raised awareness about issues impacting their communities. One such issue was a recent attempt by local officials to increase the costs of utilities.

By educating people on this issue and reminding residents that their voices of opposition might help prevent this rate hike from happening, Detroit Action was able to win this utilities campaign and prevent the rent increases.

Again, the projects undertaken by Detroit Action — particularly their ability to intervene successfully to prevent the rent increase — reflect the underlying themes of art activists taking *responsibility* in their communities to *respond* in creative ways to pressing policy concerns.

The Art/Activist Project of Mississippi Votes

Over this past year, Mississippi Votes has focused its energy on a restoration mixtape project in conjunction with their rights restoration campaign, which raises awareness about voter disenfranchisement in the state. This is their signature project we will focus on in later parts of this report. While participating in a site visit, representatives at Mississippi Votes mentioned a major project titled, *The Future: #Up2Us Mixtape*, which will take place in the Fall of 2023 ahead of Mississippi’s Gubernatorial Elections. The mixtape project entails

Mississippi Votes engaging with Dolla Black to create three new songs and music videos and will have additional artists create one additional song. The project schedule for the mixtape includes six weeks of political education for the recording artists, two weeks for them to write and craft their music, and one month of studio production time. The artists are also required to participate in at least two Mississippi Votes events as volunteers. In addition, the organization will curate a creative fellowship program geared towards videographers who will create a documentary that captures important moments of this project.

Like their colleague organizations in the Midwest, the activities of Mississippi Votes are guided by a strong sense of civic *responsibility*, one that motivates the art activist organization to maximize their community's voting power as a *response* to entrenched racial and political marginalization. Below, we explore the overall themes of artists' responsibility and creative response in fuller detail.

Section 6: What we learned

At the core of cultural organizing is the desire to move from simply imagining a better world to actually building a better world.



Marshall Shorts, Creative Director, Ohio Organizing Collaborative (OOC)

Overall Themes

When asked to define how he approached the work, Marshall Shorts of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative says, “My role is kinda like this hybrid of creative director/designer.” He agreed when Ray mused that his intersectional position was “part inspiration” and “part implementation.” The “implementation” element is critical here because the artists we interviewed all mentioned that their work was directly tied to social and political events in their communities. As Marshall notes:

“Ohio was really active in the John Crawford situation in Dayton when he was killed in the Walmart. We had Tamir Rice happening here. All of this was sort of happening at the same time, and so we were trying to figure out, what is the artist's responsibility? What is the creative's response in this moment? Because these were times where we just felt like, man, what can we do? I have this skill. I have this thing, but I don't necessarily know how it makes sense.”

MARSHALL SHORTS, OHIO ORGANIZING COLLABORATIVE

The two central questions that Marshall posed: “i. what is the artist's responsibility?, and ii. what is the creative’s response in this moment?” are recurring themes throughout this case study, and they serve as the foundation of our discussion of the role of cultural organizers & creative directors.



Arekia Bennett,
Executive Director of
Mississippi Votes

What Is The Artist's Responsibility?

Each of the people we interviewed expressed a need to assume more responsibility for bettering their communities. For example, Arekia does a podcast in which she discusses, among other things, what the 1890 Constitution in the state did to Black Mississippians and how that is relevant today. She and her colleague Hannah have fun and provide quality content. Arekia had this to say when Ray asked her about the podcast.

“...Mississippi's constitution was written in 1890. It is a hot ass mess...It is the reason that so many southern states are as screwed up as they are. But also, [the state constitution] is the reason for our felony disenfranchisement laws...Felony disenfranchisement is a big thing. 11% of our population are disenfranchised, that's 230 something thousand votes that could flip an election upside down in Mississippi.”

AREKIA BENNETT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF MISSISSIPPI VOTES



As an art activism organization focused on electoral power, Mississippi Votes has identified access to voting, voting rights, and the need for increased Black turnout as key priorities, and she and her colleagues feel duty-bound to improve conditions in her state.

Kenneth Williams, Detroit Action, captured this sentiment nicely in an email exchange with Ray when discussing the work he does with Detroit Action: “This is our community, our home... if we don't do something, who will?” Kenneth also lamented the fact that, while artists have always been stewards of their communities, they are often not acknowledged for what they do.

“It's not always a group of white men in suits sitting, making decisions. It is that most of the time. But to actually bring those things to life, I feel like it's creativity. And I feel like creatives don't get the respect that we really deserve. You know what I'm saying? You don't have to be in a suit or be all formal and stuffy, to be taken seriously. You should be taken seriously because you are a human.”

KENNETH WILLIAMS, DETROIT ACTION

For Kenneth, the credit should go to the artists who are the change-agents working from within their communities, not the corporate types who often “parachute” into these communities. Beyond the fact that these “parachute” situations are often transactional, Kenneth wants to shine a light on the unique and innovative role that art can play in community change.

“I would love for there to be more respect for creatives, specifically Black creatives. I think the pandemic, I think it's illuminated what many of us already know, that Black creativity, it fuels a whole lot...I think it's a trend for other organizations that have cultural organizing departments...But I want there to be more of an emphasis on how creativity is written in culture. How there are really the through-lines to making things happen.”

KENNETH WILLIAMS, DETROIT ACTION

Communities of art activists already exist, and they are waiting for the opportunity to engage. “White men in suits” may not be as willing or as able to tap into these communities, which is why community-indigenous organizations are so important. Arekia echoes this sentiment when she talks about how past work on reproductive justice created the momentum needed for Mississippi Votes to broaden its focus from being a college-level organization to one that intervenes in state-wide electoral issues.

“What made it powerful was that people were connected to the original piece or work (that was the Black feminist collective and the Graduate Student Association we had started, and other things) that it was easy for us to make room in Oxford and make room in Starkville [...] it was just organic.”

AREKIA BENNETT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF MISSISSIPPI VOTES



Kamau Clark, a singer and rap artist who works as a community organizer, who goes by the stage name “Srchengn”

What Is The Creative’s Response?

As our case study demonstrates, art activism organizations take action for social change in many ways. One way for organizations to respond to social issues is simply to give art activists the space and support to be their authentic selves. This was on full display at our site visit to Detroit for the Black August event, during the performance by [Kamau Clark](#), a singer and rap artist who works as a community organizer. Clark, who goes by the stage name “Srchengn” (i.e., portmanteau of “search engine”) and had up to this point kept his identities as “organizer” and “performer” separate, revealed that he was a performer to people while on stage. His coworkers did not know this about him, and we witnessed him navigating these two identities in real-time. He was initially nervous while singing and rapping, and as the performance

went on, Clark became more comfortable and confident about being on stage. By the time he had finished, he had everyone’s attention.

To us, the process of Clark revealing his abilities as an artist and performer is a great example of the nurturing spaces that art activist organizations provide. Clark, while bearing his soul to strangers and coworkers on stage, was becoming more comfortable in his role as someone who sits at the intersection of *organizer* and *artist*. Clark’s transformation during the Black August event, and the fact that it represents a microcosm of Detroit Action’s leadership culture, makes clear the individual and organizational impact of art and activism. Artists are community leaders. They know how to move people. Successful cultural organizers & creative directors know this, and they cultivate spaces for this to happen organically.

Beyond thriving in spaces where they can be their authentic selves, art activists also intervene in policy spaces. The organizers we worked with took aggressive approaches to foster these policy interventions. When discussing the Ohio Organizing Collaborative's campaign to decriminalize marijuana, Marshall remarks that

“We decided...that a part of that initiative...is a mini-grant program to develop projects and artists and creatives that would sort of seek to humanize the people impacted by these things because before we can move people to policy, we have to paint a picture that these are people in need.”

MARSHALL SHORTS, OHIO ORGANIZING COLLABORATIVE

When talking about the importance of registering Black voters statewide and encouraging turnout for both local and presidential elections, Arekia noted that the key to success for Mississippi Votes is a consistent presence and sustained mobilizing efforts.

“...if we are in the community and we have satellite offices in these places strategically [across the state] and build year-round with them, then the outcome of the election could be different.”

AREKIA BENNETT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF MISSISSIPPI VOTES

While she is not an artist per se, the story of Cynthia Bell, one of Detroit Action's ambassadors, is relevant here. Specifically, she shared her story about how overcoming addiction, assuming more responsibility for bettering her community, and becoming politically involved led her to ultimately empower others in her neighborhood to be politically engaged too. Cynthia is known for her persistent efforts to help Detroiters who are homelessness, low-income, elderly, and/or returning from prison. One of her passion projects is the [Capuchin Soup Kitchen](#), where she often volunteers.

Art can communicate ideas in ways that resonate intensely with audiences, art activists can be particularly effective as information sources and opinion leaders in a community.

Another way that art activism organizations respond to community concerns is through civic education. Because art can communicate ideas in ways that resonate intensely with audiences, art activists can be particularly effective as information sources and opinion leaders in a community. Art can also be the “entry point” from which people become politically mobilized.³ Arekia recalls how she and her colleagues at Mississippi Votes would “crash” parties on campus to spread the word about how important it was for women and girls to fight for their bodily autonomy and reproductive freedoms.

³ This echoes something that Marshall of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative said: “Art is the entry point, it’s not the end.”

“My peers and I researched Issue 26 [an anti-abortion ballot initiative that would declare that human life starts at fertilization], what it was and what it would mean, and we started registering people to vote on campus, and we started talking about sex it in a way that... was probably not appropriate to my Baptist preacher grandfather’s approval... kinda out-loud kinda way. And that was the start of me organizing. And, from the very beginning, I understood the importance of connecting the dots between what’s happening at the local ‘hot spots’ (on Wednesdays there would be music and different people on campus playing whatever music you wanted to hear)...and I understood the importance of interrupting that moment and saying: ‘Yo! Initiative 26 is horrible! It’s trash! We don’t want to get pregnant, and if we do get pregnant we want options.’”

AREKIA BENNETT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF MISSISSIPPI VOTES

Here, Arekia describes how she would inject political awareness into social events. In this case, the events are artist endeavors, and she knew early on how vital it was to disrupt them and utilize the venue to communicate progressive political messages to those who might otherwise not receive them. At that moment, as a young person, Arekia knew that other young people were less likely to listen to her talk about voting. An audience of college students might not think voting had much to do with them without Arekia connecting it to their lives using platforms that they are already using to get information.

Without strong relationships between artists and cultural organizers, such responses are not likely to succeed. Kenneth from Detroit Action acknowledges the importance of building these deep artist/organization relationships, and he cherishes these relationships too.

“We have a cultural organizing department that we're constantly revamping. And that we're constantly tapping into different ways on how to engage with creatives, whether that's on a national level or a local level. But it's really cool that we're able to do that. Because I feel like that's the trend. I feel like that's a step in the new millennium, organizations like ours. So I'm excited. I'm happy to be here.”

AREKIA BENNETT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF MISSISSIPPI VOTES

Section 7: Assessing Impact

This should go without saying, but we will say it nonetheless: The fact that political art exists is itself a signifier of political impact. The things that artists create make the world different by virtue of their very existence.

Having said that, several recurring questions emerged over the course of this project. Did the many great things done by the Ohio Organizing Collaborative, Detroit Action, and Mississippi Votes make a difference? If so, how would we know? If not, why not? We take an eclectic and inclusive approach to exploring impact. This is out of necessity; pilot programs are preliminary by definition, and results, if any, can take time to materialize. Additionally, the very notion of assessing impact evokes thoughts of scientific experimentation which goes against the spirit of what happened over the past year or so. And while Ray is a statistical researcher, he views the world through a more multi-disciplined lens since he started working with creatives and community organizers.

Below, we celebrate the impact that we observed (either directly or indirectly) of art/activism on the artists and organizers. The site visits are great in this regard. By visiting each of the organizations, having meetings with members and affiliates, and assessing progress, milestones, and opportunities, we were able to witness firsthand how transformative this work can be to the people who undertake it. Specifically, the site visits provided excellent examples of how political projects can be clarifying — if not self-actualizing — for the artists involved and the organizations themselves.

Evidence of Impact from the Artist's Perspective

The Ohio Organizing Collaborative Site Visit

The first trip we took was to Columbus in the spring of 2022. Prentiss, Tova, and Ray attended some activities in Central OH based on the activities taking place with the OOC. Specifically, we were present for the Deliver Black Dreams Artist Meet-up in Columbus, OH and the Lift Ohio Mini-Grant Artists & Activist Summit in Lima, OH. To memorialize the events that transpired during the meet-up and to collect data, we took advantage of the visit to conduct focus group interviews. Here is the footage from the [meet-up/focus group interviews](#).



Deliver Black Dreams Mastermind Meeting on 4/25/22

Because it represents an important case study that functions as a model for other organizations while also providing us with a more immediate vehicle for exploring impacts, Ray has been working with Marshall Shorts to do more archival research on the organization and one of its signature initiatives: “Deliver Black Dreams.” Those exchanges yielded files that enriched this project. Specifically, here is the footage from the [Deliver Black Dreams Mastermind Videos](#). You can view both parts of this video footage separately here: [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

In terms of impact, some of the greatest contributions of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative were in the area of narrative shifting. This was evident in the past, when, as Marshall recalled, his organization was able to successfully execute its Deliver Black Dreams project in Columbus, OH, while also getting [support for the project from the city’s mayor](#).

“Deliver Black Dreams is about creating a city for ALL of US, where ALL can live abundantly. Deliver Black Dreams is more than a campaign. It is a commitment. It is about connecting cultural products such as public art to tangible systemic change that reimagines a world where all of us can thrive.”

MARSHALL SHORTS, OHIO ORGANIZING COLLABORATIVE



Deliver Black Dreams Mural by Columbus-based artists Lisa McLymont (mural designer), Marcus William Billingsley, Hakim Callwood, Shelbi Harris, Francesca Miller, and April Sunami in Columbus, Ohio

It is, therefore, not surprising that the Lift OH campaign produced tangible community benefits. There was an article in [HomeStations.com](https://www.homestations.com), the website of a local news organization, about how the campaign to decriminalize and destigmatize drugs was making a difference. As the article notes, “The Ohio Organizing Collaborative is trying to shift the public perception of drug users in Lima through the arts.” As someone who studies public policy, Ray notes that such efforts to influence perception are valuable because shifting the narrative about drugs in Lima, OH is the first step to affecting a city’s policy agenda. This, in a real way, is how art can make a difference when it is directed in a focused manner toward social issues.

What is also interesting about the Ohio site visit is that the clarifying/self-actualizing impact was also on the research team, not only the organization. We traveled to Ohio to help the OOC hammer out the details of their art/activism work, and, in the process, they helped us more fully understand our objectives as researchers. While meeting in Ohio during the weekend of April 22, 2022, Prentiss, Tova, and Ray had a breakthrough when it came to the work and how to structure reporting it out. Specifically, we realized that everything – from the nature of the art activism work to the specific efforts of the organizations participating in our project to our way of thinking about everything – hinges upon the threshold concepts of agency, collective action, and taking responsibility. We call these “threshold” concepts because it is difficult to truly understand and appreciate art activism work unless you experience it from the perspective of a sense of *agency* fueling social change (via *action*) and that action being nurtured by an agent’s heightened social accountability (via a sense of

shared *responsibility*). When these concepts work together, they can overcome many of the emotional and psychological barriers to civic involvement. Agents (e.g., the creatives, activists, community leaders, etc.) can use the momentum produced by cultivating agency, action, and responsibility to strengthen their abilities to enact the change they want to see. Because of this framework for understanding and appreciating the work, we gained a firmer sense of what projects organizations are undertaking.

We call these “threshold” concepts because it is difficult to truly understand and appreciate art activism work unless you experience it from the perspective of a sense of *agency* fueling social change (via *action*) and that action being nurtured by an agent’s heightened social accountability (via a sense of shared *responsibility*). When these concepts work together, they can overcome many of the emotional and psychological barriers to civic involvement.



Southwest Fest 2022 flyer

The Detroit Action Site Visit

There was a similar dynamic for Detroit Action as to the OOC in the sense that some of the greatest impact we observed happened among the artists themselves and at the organizational level.

On August 27, 2022, Prentiss, Marshall, and Ray attended Black August in Detroit, MI. The event was hosted by [Southwest Fest](#), an annual event that merges culture and politics in one of the most demographically diverse areas of the city. The weather was warm and sunny. The vibe was upbeat. The people were welcoming. The day was one to remember.

Detroit Action had a space in the festival, and the organization set up its tent amidst a rich array of great food, even better music, and outstanding company. One concern was that because Detroit Action was folding its Black August event into the broader slate of events falling under “Southwest Fest,” Detroit

Action's efforts would be somehow diluted in the process. Fortunately, as an event within an event, Black August was a resounding success!

As we noted above, members of Detroit Action were canvassing while they were hosting their event, handing out fliers that raised awareness of a recent attempt by DTE, a Detroit-based energy company, to raise the costs of utilities. This canvassing campaign ultimately helped to [prevent the rent hike](#). Moreover, the canvassing efforts served as a recruitment tool. Detroit Action was making important political issues known to passersby, and many people stopped by Detroit Action's tent to learn more about the organization and the many other things it is involved in.

The Mississippi Votes Site Visit

While most visitors got into Jackson on Sunday, October 9th, 2022, for an evening dinner with the Mississippi Votes team, The big day was Monday, October 10th. It started with breakfast and coffee. Then there was devoted time in the mid-morning and early afternoon to connect with members of the team and talk about current and future projects. We spent time connecting with Arekia, Velvet, and Jessica, celebrating them for the good work they are doing, asking questions to learn more about the projects and the organization generally, and figuring out how we can help them on their journey. Future projects included a trip to the [Smith Robertson Museum](#) in Jackson to set up for the [Moral Monday Rally](#), a program started by Rev. William Barber. There was also a Voter Registration drive for Moral Monday that took place later in the day.

While at the site visit, Prentiss (in-person) and Ray (virtually) asked artists who were present to think about how their involvement affected them. In general, they described the experience as being transformative for several reasons. The artists are being engaged and politicized. The organization gets to deepen its community bonds. It can positively influence the audiences who are part of its ecosystem and who need the change that is being fought for, like the young people who will not be reached otherwise because of campaign microtargeting. Electoral outcomes can also be positively influenced by this, which might build momentum.

In addition to being transformative to the artists, the political work the organizations engaged in altered the organizations themselves. Arekia provided a great example of how this happened to her and her colleagues at Mississippi Votes. Prentiss asked her: If you wanted impact, what type of impact would you have? Arekia immediately thought of the impact on the members of the organization with respect to how they interact in the world. To appreciate what Mississippi Votes has done, one needs to consider their leadership

development efforts. We are impressed with the process by which they trained young people to become eventual change-agents as well as the future leaders of their organizations. While discussing the leadership pipeline, or as they call it, the “ecosystem of leadership,” Arekia had this to say:

“Yesterday, I had a real ‘oh shit’ moment because we were taking staff pictures, and we had just done a whole lot of hiring. ... [referring to the group of new hires], it felt like high school [giggles]. There was a whole lot of playing in the hallway while we were getting ready to take pictures. And I was like: “What is happening?!” And my friend Hanna (who is our policy and research analyst), she was like: ‘This is the ecosystem!’ ...So I am really grateful and hopeful and passionate about their leadership and that I had a little bit to do with it.”

AREKIA BENNETT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF MISSISSIPPI VOTES

This effect on future leaders cannot be overstated. Obviously, this helps the organization to remain strong and relevant for years to come. But this is also Mississippi Vote’s way of saying to young people that there is a political home for them in the organization — a home they will eventually inherit and ultimately improve.

This is also Mississippi Vote’s way of saying to young people that there is a political home for them in the organization — a home they will eventually inherit and ultimately improve.

Section 8: Policy, Power, and Implications

An obvious implication of this project is the fact that “politics” and “art,” while clearly connected, are not in close enough communication with each other. [Art has the power to change the world](#); however, art is, unfortunately, seldom the centerpiece of political dialogue in the United States. All of this needs to change if we seek to realize the full potential of art activism.

Part of this problem is the lack of political scholars lending their effort and expertise to projects like this. This issue reflects a tendency in academia to overlook the political power of art. We would be remiss if we did not mention that this issue also reflects the [racism, sexism, and homophobia that pervades universities](#). Academics from disciplines like Black Studies, Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, are often very comfortable collaborating with artists and activists, but these disciplines are often heavily marginalized, underfunded, and underappreciated on campus.



Renee Fazzari, former
Director for Strategic
Partnerships for the Center
for Cultural Power

A related issue is that, because of such marginalization, academia needs to grow its numbers when it comes to scholars who want to do community-engaged work. Ray and several scholars like him currently have a project that is partially funded by the [Democracy and Power Innovation Fund](#) that seeks to train the next generation of public-facing scholars so that they are prepared to collaborate with community organizations, generally, and art activism organizations, especially.

Additionally, when Ray wrote the self-study report for the Midwest Culture Lab back in 2021, he talked at length about funding issues with [Renee Fazzari](#), who was at the time the Director for Strategic Partnerships for the Center for Cultural Power. Ray recalls Renee discussing struggles she encountered as an administrator when it came to securing funding for work at the intersection of art and politics.

“One way we are swimming upstream... is that funding is not organized for this. So philanthropy funds in two separate silos... [one is] philanthropy supports arts in one camp; and art that is for art's sake. And it's very much like getting you (as an individual to create what you really envision and want... promising artists the tools to do that. That's one camp. But then there's another camp: the social justice work, you know, and the systemic change work. And those two things [camps] are funded very separately. ...And especially in the states, that all goes to grassroots organizations who are trying to shift power for their communities. So, what we're saying is that there is an intersection between these two, and we're asking people to stretch their portfolios, either from one direction or the other. ... We've only been able to secure funds thus far (for the Midwest Culture Lab) from social justice funders that want to stretch towards arts. We have not secured arts funding that would want to have this much of a radical agenda.”

RENEE FAZZARI, CENTER FOR CULTURAL POWER

These are all big problems. But they are not impossible to overcome. As mentioned above, the work that Ray, Tova, and Prentiss are doing raises awareness of the need for more work in the area of art and activism and empowers people to take on this work. This was the overarching goal of this large project, and the case studies we report on here take us a small step toward building the relationships needed between those who study and teach about politics and the artists and organizations that push for community change.

We are swimming upstream. Funding is not organized for this. So philanthropy funds in two separate silos, arts in one camp and social justice in the other.

Section 9: Suggestions for Further Research

This project represents an initial step in our support of the development of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative, Detroit Action, and Mississippi Votes. While this report continues a conversation about art and activism, it certainly does not complete it. There are many more things to learn. We divided our discussion about future paths this project could take into two parts. We start by discussing how a deeper engagement with the current art/activist organizations could add depth to our understanding. Increasing *depth* is a logical next step for this project. We acknowledge that if we are dreaming big, then this project could also grow in *breadth* by bringing in additional organizations to celebrate and learn from.

Going for Depth

The finite timeline of this project means that we are exploring only a specific snapshot of the evolution of these organizations. We welcome the opportunity to follow up with the organizations, re-interviewing current members, talking to new members, observing future activities, etc. It would be informative to witness these organizations refine their membership models of art activism and apply these refinements to future art activism projects in their communities.

Moreover, the overall project would benefit from an alternative focus. Although some evidence in our case studies points to clear possibilities for the impact of political art on receptive audiences, we can only, at the moment, consider those possibilities indirectly. Future work could compare what we learned at the organizational level with future discoveries from analyses of the *consumers*, rather than *creators*, of political art. Two audience-level measurement approaches come immediately to mind. The first would be a form of [sentiment analysis](#). Because each of the organizations we worked with has a strong online and social media presence, we could gauge audience support for their creative artifacts by thematically coding the text from the comments sections, counting likes vs. dislikes, judging exposure via “follows,” “shares,” and so on. Another way to explore audience impact is with a survey. We envision a poll based on a sample of residents in the communities that are exposed to the artifacts created by the art activism organizations. Such a survey could also include general questions about the importance of art, the need for grassroots community uplift, and the current state and potential future of politics.

Going for Breadth

An additional avenue for future research would be to expand the geographic representation of this project. A feature of this project is that it includes art-activist organizations from different parts of the country. As noted earlier, we had representation from the Midwest and Deep South — two vastly different socio-political contexts. We envision future versions of this project that incorporate additional parts of the country, particularly the Northeast, Southwest, and West Coast.

A related and additional opportunity for expansion would broaden the identity groups we consider. While the organizations we worked with have inclusive missions and serve multiracial and multicultural communities, we were intentional in our decision to showcase art-activist organizations that are led by Black people. An expansion of this project would, for instance, bring in representatives from the [Fuerte Arts Movement](#) and the [Asian American Arts Alliance](#), which are organizations headquartered in Phoenix and New York City, respectively.

“Art is the entry point, it’s not the end.”

MARSHALL SHORTS, OHIO ORGANIZING COLLABORATIVE

Conclusion

Promoting art within a cultural organizing program can provide immense value to political organizations and the communities they seek to influence. The most effective relationship dynamics between artists and political organizations should feature strong inter-cooperation and inter-coordination. Broadly speaking, political organizations should also allow artists to help frame and contour their organization's civic engagement strategies. Art has the power to overcome the feelings of boredom and indifference sometimes felt when traditional organizing tactics are used. Art has the power to inspire social-political imaginations — both new and old — and inspires political action with creative agency and purpose. The three organizations spotlighted here are all quite different in their day-to-day focus, yet they all managed to benefit greatly from the promotion of art and healthy, cooperative relationships with artists.

Political organizations looking for new, dynamic strategies to mobilize communities and reach the unmoved should consider developing and implementing cultural organizing programs featuring the promotion of art — particularly from local artists. It can spur powerful transformations for communities' material realities and further empower artists and their partner organizations.

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