

# Welcome

**Break It Down | Make It Better is West Michigan's longest-running professional development conference for artists, creatives, and arts administrators. Each year, creatives come together to build skills, form connections, and find inspiration in one another's journeys.**

This year's theme, **The Action of Art**, explores how artists turn ideas into action through practice, collaboration, experimentation, and community building. To help you plan your day(s), check the box next to the sessions you want to attend.

## Session Tracks



Community & Collaboration



Making & Methods



Places & Spaces



Practice & Process



Creative Business & Visibility

# Schedule



## Friday, March 20

10:30am	Registration
11:15am	Opening Remarks & Keynote
12:15pm	<b>Session 1</b>
1:00pm	Lunch*
2:00pm	<b>Session 2</b>
3:00pm	<b>Session 3</b>
3:45pm	Wrap Up

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## Saturday, March 21

10:30am	Registration
11:15am	Opening Remarks & Keynote Panel
12:15pm	<b>Session 4</b>
1:00pm	Lunch*
2:00pm	<b>Session 5</b>
3:00pm	Happy Hour at AllArtWorks and live printing with Jamie John

\*Lunch provided by

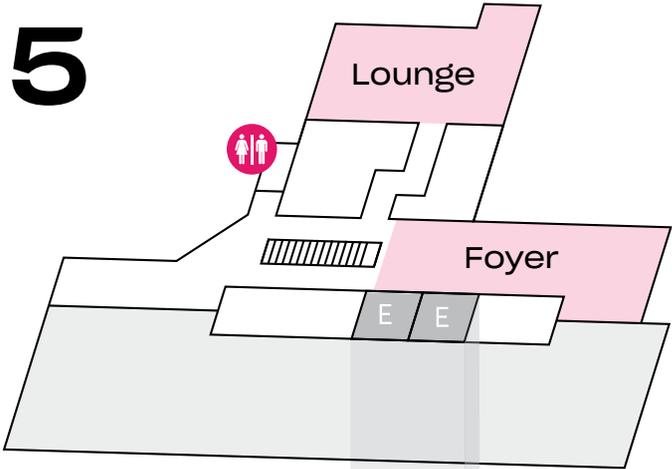


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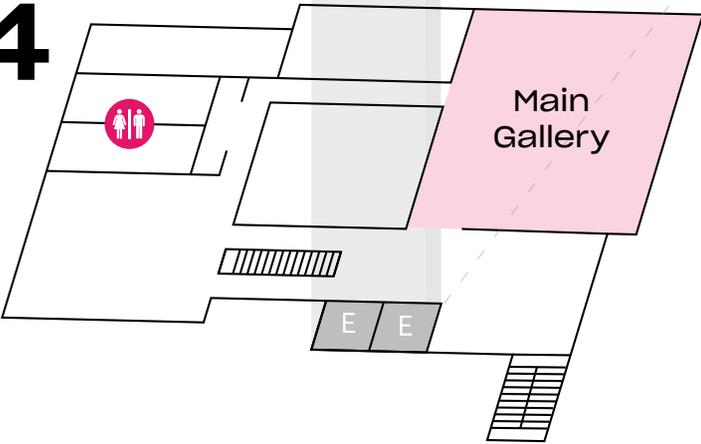


# Bamboo Map

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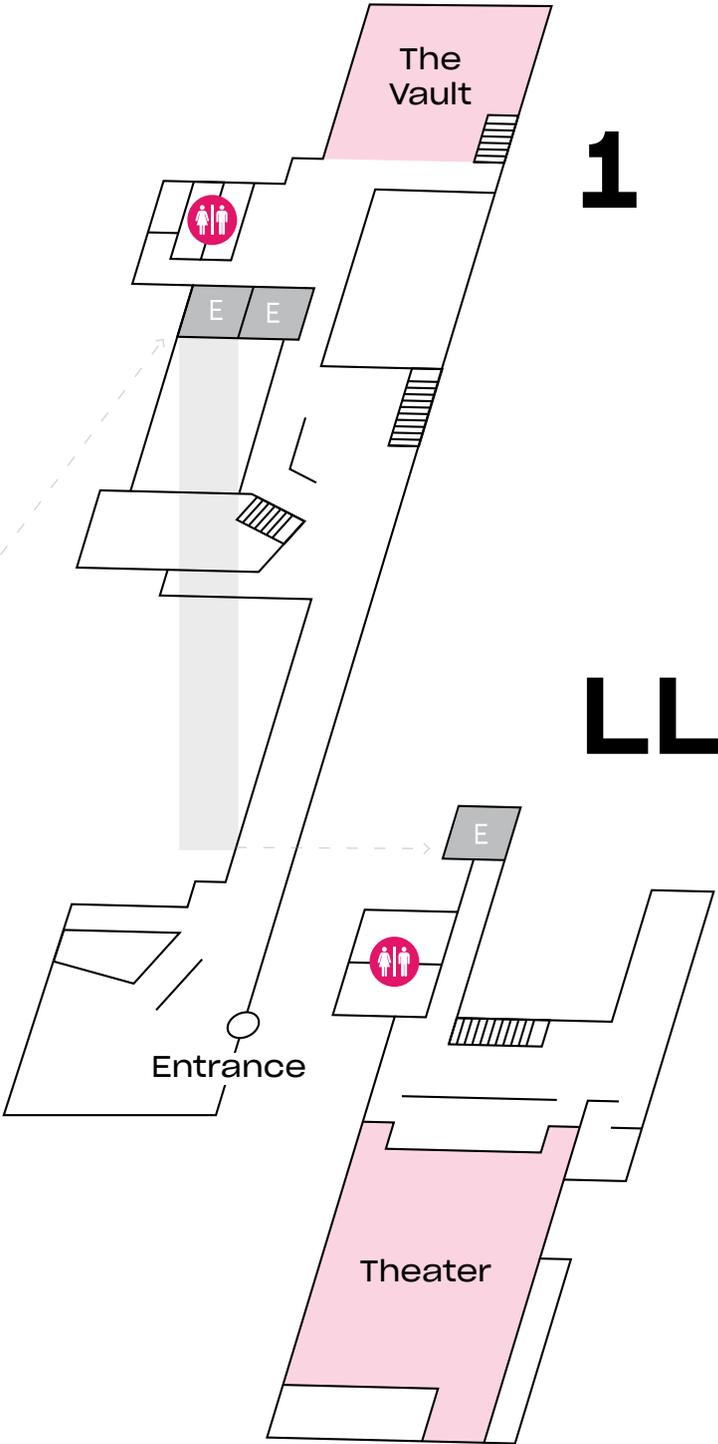


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Closed to Offices

-  Session Room
-  Elevator
-  Bathrooms
-  Staircase

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# Keynote Speakers

Theater

Friday, March 20

11:15am

*The Action of Art:  
When Creativity Becomes  
Collective Power*



## Nafeesah Symonette

Drawing on experiences in arts education, cultural leadership, and advocacy, Nafeesah Symonette reflects on how individual creative sparks can grow into collective power that strengthens communities and advances the arts ecosystem. This keynote invites artists and arts leaders to consider how their work can move beyond inspiration and into meaningful action.

Nafeesah Symonette is the co-founder and Executive Director of *Detroit Excellence in Youth Arts (DEYA)*, she leads efforts to build platforms that create high-impact, equitable arts experiences for Detroit youth. Previously, she spent 13 years as a high school visual arts teacher in Maryland and Washington, D.C., earning the Mayor's Arts Award for Excellence in Visual Art Secondary Teaching. Appointed to the Michigan Arts & Cultural Council by Governor Gretchen Whitmer, she chairs the Arts Education Committee, advocating for statewide arts policies. Through her consulting work, she supports education initiatives and collaborates with national organizations to strengthen arts education across the country.

Saturday, March 21

11:15am

*Art and Activism*



## Rachel Winter

Winter is the Assistant Curator at the *Ellie and Edythe Broad Art Museum* at Michigan State University in East Lansing and holds a Ph.D. in the History of Art & Architecture from the University of California, Santa Barbara. She co-edited the monograph *Samia Halaby: Centers of Energy* with Elliot Josephine Leila Reichert, which was named outstanding monograph by the Midwest Art History Society. Winter writes broadly about modern and contemporary art from the SWANA region, American art, and has published her research in forums such as *Woman's Art Journal*, *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, and *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art*.



## Troy DeShanto

DeShano is the Executive Director of the *Northwest Michigan Arts & Culture Network*, working to strengthen the regional arts ecosystem through connection. With more than 25 years in the nonprofit sector, he has focused on culture-building, program development, and strategic growth. A multidisciplinary artist himself, Troy believes creativity is fundamental to the human experience, a pathway to meaning and participation in the unfolding universe.



## Annamarie Buller

Buller has 24 years of experience in community organizing, particularly in the arts. Her early work with the Free Radical Gallery was driven by a commitment to revitalizing neglected spaces and promoting local artists. As a curator at *106 Gallery*, Buller has continued to cultivate artistic expression by mounting innovative exhibitions that highlight the community's diversity and creativity. Her work exemplifies the vital role of independent curators and community organizers in nurturing a vibrant arts culture and facilitating dialogue within the community.

# Session 1

Friday • 12:15pm



Theater  
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## □ **Collaboration as Resistance** *Merima Smajlovic and Mary Jane Pories*

In an era shaped by fragmentation, competition, and creative isolation, collaboration has emerged as a quiet but powerful form of resistance. Artists Merima and Mary Jane will share their collaborative practice born not only from intention, but from necessity, the need to break silence, isolation, and the enduring myth of the lone artist. Rather than idealizing collaboration, this presentation breaks it down: vulnerability, tension, doubt, and the unlearning required when multiple voices share a single creative space. Through lived experience, they explore how collaboration disrupts hierarchy, challenges authorship, and opens new possibilities for meaning-making.



The  
Vault  
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## □ **Pixels to Performance: Video Games as the New Interactive Art Form** *Casey Ward*

Casey is the founder of *Astroforma Design LLC*, a studio specializing in gaming-inspired graphics, custom merchandise, and interactive storytelling with certificates from Epic Games. Video games have evolved into a profound medium of artistic expression, blending visuals, narrative, sound, and interactivity in ways that extend beyond traditional arts. Using *DayZ* as a versatile example, this presentation explores emergent storytelling: how open-world survival mechanics spark unscripted roleplay epics of alliance, betrayal, and resilience; rivaling theater or literature but with player agency at the core. This talk bridges digital and traditional practices, inspiring artists to see interactivity as a powerful tool for emotional depth and creative action in the modern era.



Main  
Gallery  
4

## □ **Convert Big Ideas into Community Impact** *Shayna Velasquez*

Collaboration is key to turning creative ideas into real impact—but knowing where to start can be overwhelming. In this roundtable, Shayna Velasquez, Manager of Community Engagement at the *Grand Rapids Art Museum* will guide participants through practical strategies for building creative communities, forming partnerships, and launching collaborative projects. Attendees will leave with practical strategies to turn their ideas into projects, events, or collectives that engage and connect communities.



Foyer  
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## □ **Selling Your Work** *Anna Donahue*

Anna started *Artist Entrepreneurs*, an established 501(c)(3), that helps teach artists the business side of art. In this session you'll learn how to market and sell your work. Whether it's reaching your financial goals or navigating the challenge of self-promotion, Anna will teach you how to transform the way you approach your art and reach your goals.



Lounge  
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## □ **The Action of Joy** *Andrea Napierkowski*

This presentation shares the story of rebuilding a creative life through intentional daily practice during a season of early sobriety, anxiety, and depression. When traditional definitions of productivity and success felt out of reach, the act of creating—starting small and returning to it each day—became a lifeline. Andrea will talk about how committing a few hours a day to “developing joy” gradually became the foundation for *More Joy*—a creative business rooted in color, upcycling, and human connection. It's time to reconsider action not as hustle, but as devotion: a steady, compassionate return to making. Permission to start where you are, use what you already own, and let creativity be restorative rather than extractive.

# Session 2

Friday • 2:00pm



Theater  
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## □ **From Pitch to Projection**

**Spencer Everhart & The GR Film Society**

In this moderated panel, members of the **Grand Rapids Film Society** will discuss how Michigan connected filmmakers are celebrated through the curatorial efforts of Open Projector Night as a showcase for local independent productions. The discussion will explore how Pitch Night and Rough Cut Night serve as incubators for filmmakers to brainstorm concepts, share work-in-progress cuts of films, and find collaborators. Open Projector Night serves as an opportunity for filmmakers to exhibit their work to an audience in a theatrical setting. This network comprises a filmmaking “pipeline” that provides resources to help make projects a reality.



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## □ **First In, Not Pushed Out: How Artists Shape Districts, and How to Own the Outcome**

**Hannah Greening**

Founder and Broker of **Fancy Real Estate**, Hannah will break down how arts and small business districts actually form, why creative communities and their surrounding neighborhoods are especially vulnerable to displacement, and how isolation and lack of collective advocacy weaken their ability to stay rooted. We'll explore the critical role of third spaces; like coffee shops, cafes, and informal gathering places. Most importantly, we'll talk about how artists can organize, advocate for themselves, and engage the development process early so they can stay, thrive, and enjoy the value their energy and labor create. This session is part reality check, part strategy guide, and part invitation for artists to claim ownership and protection over the places they help bring to life.



Main  
Gallery  
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## □ **Building Alternative Art Spaces** **Hailey Johnson**

This workshop invites artists to stop waiting for permission and begin creating the spaces they wish existed. Drawing from her own experience founding an artist-run gallery and from the long history of DIY and alternative art spaces, Hailey shares how meaningful, legitimate art spaces have always emerged from necessity not institutional invitation. Participants will be introduced to a wide range of possibilities from living-room and garage exhibitions to pop-ups, outdoor installations and mobile or temporary spaces. Group discussion is encouraged.



Foyer  
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## □ **Foundry and Fabrication** **Gabrielle Egnate**

Gabrielle has previously worked as a Foundry and Metal Shop Technician at the **College for Creative Studies**, coordinated public iron pours for residencies and higher education, and now teaches foundry at **Grand Valley State University**. Through her experiences in foundry and fabrication, Gabrielle will explore the many ways it can be navigated—as an integral part of artistic practice, as a mode for public engagement and community building, and as a business or program centered on large-scale production.



Lounge  
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## □ **Making Small Things Big** **Dania Grevengoed**

Dania is a full-time muralist and artist based in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In this talk she will dive into all the big and small things related to mural making. From beyond the big wall, to applying for grants in the winter season, to mural fest summers, and how to gain new clients and handle rejection. Dania will also teach you how to market yourself and the months of prep before each wall install.

# Session 3

Friday • 3:00pm



Theater  
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## □ **People, Places, Process: Lessons from the Marquette Shoreline Cultural Trail**

**Amelia Pruiett**

What does it look like to “go with the flow” in large, collaborative community projects? *The City of Marquette Office of Arts and Culture* will share how the city’s Shoreline Cultural Trail is a living example of maintaining momentum, staying anchored in a shared vision, and embracing beautiful interruptions. Participants will be inspired to rethink success and remain flexible in their own collaborative journeys. The City of Marquette’s Shoreline Cultural Trail is a grant-funded storytelling project that uses public spaces, Anishinaabemowin language, narrative, artwork, and history to connect us more deeply to the water, land, and one another. The sites are designed to inspire curiosity, and public art anchors the interpretive experience of the storymarkers. The trail is an ongoing project for the City of Marquette that will expand this summer with a public trailhead building, new public art installations, and future sites planned in the years to come.



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## □ **RSVP to IRL: What Participation Actually Changes**

**Derek Mohr**

This presentation explores how creativity extends beyond making things and into how we show up, literally. Through Derek’s experience hosting *CreativeMornings* Grand Rapids, he will share how participation turns events into communities and hang outs, why community itself can be a creative medium, and how starting or joining *CreativeMornings* Clubs could be the link you’ve been looking for.



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## □ **From Magic to Misalignment: The Signals and Shifts That Prevent Crisis**

**Jill Vyn**

Every creative career has moments that feel like magic; the projects that align, the teams that click, the work that flows. But what happens when that alignment starts to break down? In this talk, Jill shares the warning signs of misalignment and how recognizing them early can be the difference between navigating change on your own terms and being caught in a crisis.



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## □ **Live Screen Printing** **Carlos Rivera**

In this workshop Carlos will talk about his progression as an artist through collaborating and community building through live printing events. Screen printing has allowed Carlos to use different mediums like fabric, paper, and even glass. Participants will see his work in action.



Foyer 5

## □ **From Idea to Action** **Dorelle Brock**

Rather than focusing on finished work, participants will actively break down one of their own ideas into a clear, testable action they can use in the real world. This workshop introduces a simple framework that uses constraint, iteration, and feedback to help artists move forward without waiting for perfect conditions. Participants will work individually and collaboratively to map ideas and create an action plan.



Lounge  
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## □ **Leveraging Artist Documentation: Tips and Tricks** **Eric Souther**

In this talk, Eric will share tips, techniques, and practical advice for creating video documentation of visual artworks, installations, and performance. He will also cover how to leverage this documentation for grants and other applications.

# Session 4

Saturday • 12:15pm



Theater  
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## □ ***If You Can Dream It, You Can Build It***

***Paulina Petkoski***

This moderated panel examines how creative entrepreneurs build cultural infrastructure that supports both community and economic impact within the creative economy. Led by Paulina Petkoski, founder of **PLAYGROUND DETROIT**, the session explores how design thinking and creative problem-solving can be used to address community challenges and create platforms where artists thrive collectively and individually. Working artists, who actively contribute to the **PLAYGROUND DETROIT** ecosystem, will discuss how creative entrepreneurs and artists can work in tandem to build systems that support individual growth, shared impact, and long-term community resilience.



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## □ ***The Art of “Yes”***

***Eirann Betkah-Pope***

As the co-owner of **Betka-Pope Productions** and teacher at **The Grand Rapids Civic Theatre School for Theatre Arts**, Eirann invites participants to step out of their comfort zones and embrace the transformative power of saying “yes”. Creativity thrives in an environment where curiosity, spontaneity, and collaboration are celebrated. Through playful exercises and improvisational games, attendees will explore how openness, risk-taking, and active listening can spark new ideas, strengthen collaboration, and fuel the creative process.



Main  
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## □ ***What I’ve Learned While Running a Wildly Successful Art Club***

***Chelsea Roberts***

If you’ve ever thought about starting an art club you probably asked yourself, what will I do if no shows up? Well, this presentation is about the thing you’re actually afraid of: what if it’s a raving success? Last year, Chelsea started a free, unprogrammed collage club at a coffee shop in Lansing. From the very first meeting she knew it would take on a life of its own. In this presentation, she will walk the audience through her journey over the past 10 months in embracing success, dealing with jerks, protecting her peace, and curating a club art show. Chelsea will cover things like: choosing space, considerations on safety and accessibility, how to not overwork yourself, finances, volunteerism, and pros and cons of involving your own friends.



Foyer 5

## □ ***How Music Influences Creativity***

***Della Marie Levi***

Also known as DJ Della Soul, Della fell in love with vinyl while learning to DJ and began collecting records in 2021. Opening the first Black female owned record shop in Grand Rapids, **Della Soul Records**, Della will talk about how music influences creativity.



Lounge  
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## □ ***Concept Over Medium***

***Jeffrey Augustine Songco***

Many artists feel confined in the medium they know best and have been working with for years. This session explores how to break out of that trap by focusing on concept first and letting the idea guide the medium. Sharing examples from his own practice across photography, video, sculpture, installation, and public art, Jeffrey will provide strategies for expanding your creative practice, building confidence to explore new materials, and finding continuity and voice across media.

# Session 5

Saturday • 2:00pm



Theater  
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## □ **Media Management**

**Matt Patulski**

In this workshop Matt will enable artists, curators, and arts organizations to better manage their digital media as part of their professional practice. Structured into three segments, participants will be invited to share their real world challenges and work through possible options and solutions as a group.

**Secure:** Protecting and retaining your digital media using documented best practices.

**Organize:** Bringing order to your practice through metadata, formats, authoring tools, and workflows.

**Share:** How can your media be applied to web, social, application portals, presentations, and other professional contexts.



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## □ **Vending Like A Pro**

**Jenny Hearn & Shyle Lyons**

Have you ever wondered how you can start selling your work at art markets? Join artist Jenny Hearn and event organizer Shyle Lyons, from *Merchants and Makers*, in an open discussion regarding everything from how to apply, what you'll need, and what to expect while vending at markets.



Foyer 5

## □ **12 Lessons From 12 Years of Daily Art**

**John Jurries**

What happens when you commit to making art every single day for 12 years? Painter John Jurries shares the hard-won lessons, unexpected breakthroughs, and honest struggles that come with showing up to the canvas daily.



Main  
Gallery  
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## □ **Creating Community Impact**

**Pamela Alderman**

This workshop invites participants into an interactive exploration of collaborative art as a catalyst for connection, inclusion, and public engagement. Through real-world examples and a hands-on "From Idea to Exhibit" design exercise, attendees learn practical approaches to organizing, exhibiting, and sustaining community-based art projects in parks, libraries, shelters, and festivals. This session equips artists and organizers with actionable tools to turn creative ideas into meaningful experiences.



Lounge  
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## □ **Art as Action: Building Community Through Creative Engagement**

**Erika Collin**

A panel bringing together artists, organizers, and creatives to explore how creative practices can build community, lower barriers to participation, and reimagine who belongs in shared spaces. Panelists will share how art can spark dialogue, educate, and transform public space into a site of belonging rather than exclusion.

As part of the conversation, *Pleasant Peninsula* will share its work collaborating with over 100 Michigan artists and makers, as well as environmental experts to celebrate and showcase local talent, foster national and local artistic connections, and build lasting ties between artists, environmentalists, and community members. Centered in the belief that lack of representation, financial barriers, and limited accessibility cause many people to feel unwelcome in nature, the organization uses public art to spark interest in the natural world.

## Happy Hour

AllArtWorks • 3-6pm

Join us for free drinks, make your own poster prints, and view the gallery show featuring work from our speakers.

