Shanna Merola and Kate Levy on involving other people in your work

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As told to Daniel Sharp, 3717 words.

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Shanna and Kate were interviewed separately but asked the same questions. Read and compare their responses below.

You've started working with each other recently and I wanted to get a little bit of history on how you decided to start collaborating.

Shanna Merola: Kate and I met through mutual friends at the Boggs Center. A friend of mine reached out and said, "I've got a person who is moving back to Michigan and they're interested in grassroots organizing in art and photography." They were like, "I naturally thought of you." We got together, realized that we had a lot in common, and started hanging out—the rest, I think, came naturally.

Kate Levy: In 2014, I met Shanna through a guy named Scott at the Boggs Center in Detroit, which is named after Grace Lee Boggs. My girlfriend introduced me, and Scott was like, "You should meet up with Shanna Merola." I was like, "Okay."

In my studio loft I'd rented, the wall was about 15 feet wide. I'd written in pencil all the names of people I wanted to contact. I didn't have a whiteboard, so I just wrote it right on the wall. Shanna's name was up there. I wasn't planning on staying in this apartment for very long, so I had makeshift solutions to everyday life. Like my shower curtain was like a black trash bag, and Shanna walked in, and I was like, "oh my god." My first thought was, she's so attractive. I was like, "oh my god. I think I have a crush on her," like immediately. She goes over to my wall, and she's like, "Oh, there's my name. Huh." Then she went and used the bathroom, and months later, she told me that she thought I was a serial killer.

We got the opportunity to first collaborate on a project when we were given a grant—myself and Shanna and our dear friend, Bryce—to be the media team for the Midwest Environmental Justice Network. We got to travel to different cities and do capacity building and documentation work and narrative development with organizations that were fighting for environmental justice. Fighting against the environmental justice violations and for quality of life in their communities.

When do you think you two rely on each other the most?

SM: During the process of editing. I think we both really enjoy critiquing and deconstructing the work. Not just conceptually, but in every aspect. Aesthetically, conceptually, and with photojournalism, ethically. That process keeps me honest. It keeps it genuine.

KL: I rely on Shanna for a lot of things besides collaboration, artistically. I rely on Shanna because she's my dear friend, so that's first and foremost. I then rely on Shanna because the photographs I make are often a lot more pulled back. I take photographs that are sort of layered, sociological landscapes that try to elucidate power structures. You can't see what people are thinking, or you can't see the expressions on people's faces. You just see how people relate in space, for the most part. [With] Shanna's, you get a sense that the people we're depicting have agency. I'm not human the way that Shanna is human. I don't humanize the subjects. Shanna humanizes her subjects. The collaboration for me is essential because of that.

Your upcoming publication collects photographs, essays, legal letters, data, and poems from the ongoing Flint water crisis. It's also titled *Bill of Rights*, which orients the work in a pointed and political direction. I'm interested in where that name came from.

SM: My background is in art and social justice doing legal work with the National Lawyers Guild, which is a progressive legal organization. Mostly, we defend activists from the streets to the courts. We defend activists who are engaging in First Amendment rights situations, protests and demonstrations. Then we also defend activists who are doing civil disobedience because they feel like it's their moral obligation to challenge something that they feel is wrong. Kate works with the Guild, too.

Starting with bankruptcy and emergency management in 2013, we've documented quite a few of the historic court cases that have happened in Detroit. We got our hands on these court transcripts. I've got my legal observer

notes and we started thinking about, “Okay, well, how does photography and photojournalism intersect with the law? What does it even mean to have rights in this age? In the age of Trump, in the age of emergency management, when people’s civil rights have been essentially stripped from them with public private partnerships and militarized police departments? What does it mean to have rights?”

KL: That name came from a lot of different angles. I feel like that’s what a good title does, it can be applied from different vantage points. Yes, you’re dead-on in terms of the medium, like poems and photographs and writings of other people and documents. But it’s not just about Flint. It’s about how the framework of revoking certain rights in the name of profit manifests. It manifests in Flint and it also manifests in Detroit. And it manifests all over the state of Michigan and all over the country. But we’re focusing it on Detroit and in extension, Flint. That’s the first way it applies. The second way that this is a “Bill of Rights” is the cost. Literally the bill that you pay, the cost a population pays for actually revoking the rights of people. Water isn’t a right. It costs something. The last way is because we have so many conversations with community organizers and have, throughout this whole process, gotten feedback not just in this project but as a way of working in general. We always hear that the system of emergency management needs to be exposed. We couldn’t agree more.

We had a great conversation with this academic, actually, who’s sort of an academic-activist. His name is Josiah Rector. He told us this idea of contextualizing emergency management in a longer history, rather than emergency management being the reason for all the fucked up shit you see happening in Michigan. The housing crisis leads to taxation and municipal bond red-lining, then predatory municipal debt leads to emergency management. There’s this concept that large banks and corporations have the rights of people, which sort of underlies the problem of emergency management, which I’ll define. It’s a system where, if a city or public, local government entity is struggling financially, they get their local, democratic rights usurped by an emergency manager.

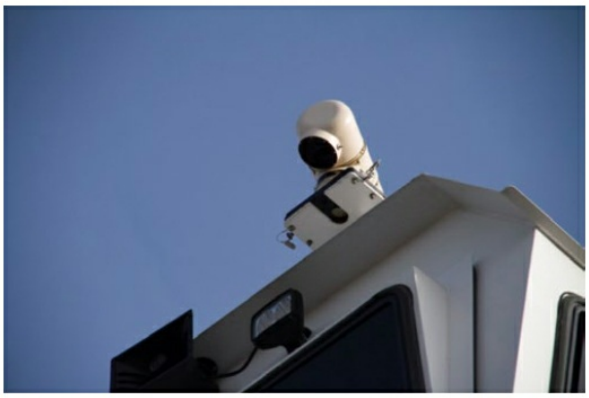
So what that looks like is you elect your mayor and your city council. The state says, “Sorry, you’re financially struggling. You owe more debt than you can pay. You’re past your debt limit. Your books aren’t balanced as a local government entity. We’re going to actually replace your elected body with one gubernatorial-appointed figurehead. We’re going to do this even though one of the main reasons why your books are all fucked up is because we cut revenue sharing to you, and you’ve been the victim of predatory credit schemes on an individual level, in terms of your tax base and then on a municipal level, in terms of the bonds you got. Yet, we’re still going to take away your democratic control, because the real problem is not how revenue is allocated to cities but rather corrupt government officials.” The trajectory for this type of problem-solving that we find so problematic was set up in the Constitution.

It’s interesting too because the politics and the policy that you’re discussing is intrinsic and foundational to the artwork itself. You can’t separate those.

SM: No. You can’t.

KL: They are, and sometimes that’s a problem. I’ve shown the book to a lot of different people. Some people who are activists or historians or policy people or community organizers are like, “I totally get this.” Their critiques have been more like less victim, more empowering, which is where Shanna’s protest photographs are really important, and then we added this whole other element of non-protest problem-solving. The people who are art-world people were like, “I don’t understand this. What the fuck are you talking about? Like I can see where you’re going with this, but like please give me more structure.”

It’s because the policy is married into the form. It’s messy, it’s hard to explain, it’s nuanced and layered. But how much detail can you go into? How much do you have to extract for a national audience, and how many points of references do you have to apply that aren’t necessarily relevant for a local community, that will help people from a national lens understand what we’re talking about?



***Bill of Rights* initially started as a collection of photographs and documentation you two have taken while living, working, and protesting in Flint and Detroit. Now, the project includes poems and essays from others. Why did you choose to add them?**

SM: It felt like such a natural decision. Almost all of the work that we do together includes collaboration with community and with the folks that we are hanging out with. It's just a part of daily life: we're going to community potlucks, we're going to court hearings, we're going to protests on the street, and it's impossible to do the book without their insights. It comes from a genuine interest of wanting to hear from people who are on the ground doing the work in that area, because they are the ones who are going to know best how to fight back against it.

An example is Eviction Defense in Detroit. I started going to Eviction Defense meetings a while ago. We do a lot of work with them with the National Lawyers Guild. They will help to fight to keep people in their homes when people are losing their houses. They'll help through things like courtroom defense and street actions. They'll force the banks into a conversation with the families to help keep a family in their house, rather than a family getting kicked out on the street and then have that be another blighted house in Detroit.

The most amazing thing to me about Eviction Defense is that you've got the people who are leading it and then the people who know the most about the subprime mortgage rates and reversible mortgages and all of these things that are really complex are the people who've gone through it. They understand it better than the policymakers themselves. It's so bureaucratic, it's so hard to get your mind around. You've got these movements, these grassroots organizations where really the people who've gone through it are the ones who are leading it, and I think that that's the way it should be.

KL: Anytime you have two white people who are both coming from a place of privilege, it feels wrong, because the golden rule is communities should be able to represent themselves. One of the main reasons why we have problems in this country is because of narrative—narratives that have been proliferated for hundreds of years by people who are both represented and harmed.

To have Shanna and I representing others—we're going to get a lot of shit wrong. The idea of having all of our collaborators that we engaged be Detroit and Flint writers was a way to address that, because then it's like, "Here's what we've seen. Why don't you comment on it, and help us shape these pictures."

But at the same time, there are scores of talented, articulate visual artists in Detroit, who we collaborate with and sound artists and other installation artists we collaborate with kind of semi-regularly, but they're not the primary makers in this project. There's problems with the collaboration in terms of why we've set it up this way and how we've brought other people in, but it's also because there's problems with everything. With this book, even though we started with our photographs talking to each other, we can make enough room for the writings and the information and feedback from other people who are deeply involved in this work to form the foundation.

I want to ask you how and if you can define community.

SM: Wow, I've got to think about this for a second. [*pause*] When I came into the social justice movement in Detroit, it was through the Grace Lee Boggs Center and I was introduced to the Detroit Coalition Against Police Brutality, because I had an interest in doing anti-police brutality work. I met the spokesperson for the coalition, it was a man named Ron Scott who's recently passed away. He was the co-founder of the Detroit chapter of the Black Panther Party.

It was some folks from the Boggs Center, Ron, and quite a few mothers who had either lost children to police violence or whose family have been assaulted by police. The way that organizing happened for me was really through meetings, dinners, potlucks, going out to people's homes, and having these very small, intimate gatherings where they would be a strategy session, but also a really deep meaningful connection to other human beings. It's about building a family as much as it is about building a movement.

KL: How do I define community? [*pause*] Community is a word that we often use, because we don't have a better one to talk about people who are affected by systems of oppression. The community is seen as a system of people coping together. But at the same time, we use it really specifically, like the investment banker community or a community of people who are facing lead-tainted water. Or a community could be a block. It could be defined by a region. It could be defined by people who are interested in the same thing.

I think it gets applied often as a way to talk about someone other than you. Like "community engagement," meaning "make sure you get buy-in from the people whom you're talking about before you talk about them." I feel like we need to push past that word and be a little bit more precise about what we're talking about. Community is a word that we need to figure out how to replace. It's a word people are comfortable with, but it's a word that can be easily, easily co-opted and appropriated in a way that's self-serving. But "community organizer," I still really like that term, because it means that you're trying to create a democratic process for multiple stakeholders to come to the table around an issue. So if I'm a community organizer and I work in my neighborhood, I'm playing a role in the initiative to get people to the table to make decisions about how to address something that affects their lives.

How can an artist be socially engaged? What does it take?

SM: I think that there are a lot of different ways for artists to be socially engaged. I think that for everybody it's probably different. I consider myself less of a social practice artist because I have my studio practice where I feel like I'm the sole director of that work. It's more conceptual. Then, I have this work that I do just out of the photojournalism and the legal work that I do is more out of necessity. For me, it's a combination of being driven by hope and rage on a daily basis.

KL: People teach whole classes on this. I think it depends on the artist's subjectivity. If you are somebody like me who grew up in and was traumatized by, in some ways, a very white, moneyed world, that was also clean and conservative and oppressive by its whiteness alone, you need to think about things differently than if you are somebody who grew up in a community that was directly harmed by the community that I grew up in.

For me, it means thinking about how to shift resources from the art world to the people and the organizations that are doing work around the topics that I'm addressing and representing. Socially engaged art is about sharing as much as I can, literally about myself and literally in terms of resources. That might look like giving up authorship to a certain extent, whereas somebody who grew up in a community that was directly harmed by or systemically harmed by the community that I grew up in, might need to take the opposite approach to authorship. It still involves basic tenets of community organizing, which are derived from basic tenets of democracy, but how you relate to that is different.

Why do protests matter?

SM: I love talking about this in the context of Detroit because in Detroit you have a movement that is led by people of color who have a radical analysis of power in the streets, but also in neighborhoods. You have this visionary, organizing, prefigurative political work, where people are saying, "Okay, we can't just protest all the time. We can't just be about what we're against and tearing down the system. We have to be working towards the alternative vision. The alternative world that we want to live in."

That's what we're trying to uplift in this book—the idea that both of those things are happening in a meaningful, impactful way. You've got people who are going out into the streets and going to city council meetings, and doing a mixture of protest and direct action. Eviction Defense is out blocking dumpsters when the trucks come to take people's things out of their houses. They're going to stand with the families and say, "No, you're not going to do that today. This family is going to stay in their house."

Then you have people who are taking over lots, because there are no affordable food stores in Detroit. You have people who are taking over lots and are growing food for their families and their neighbors. I think that that's an act of revolution too, and an act of protest.

KL: Protests matter because it's making visible the power that's generated by community organizing and self-organizing around an issue. I bet you Shanna's answer was longer than mine on that.

How would you define success?

SM: Success as an artist or a success as a community?

KL: For who?

Let's do artist and then as a community.

SM: I think the time that I feel most successful as an artist is when somebody tells me that I have really made a meaningful impact on them. Something that I said at a lecture stuck with them, or a piece that I've made. Connecting with my students who want to make work about social justice, because not everybody does.

In my teaching practice, I always encourage my students to make work about what they think is important. It doesn't have to be political. Some people want to make work about music, or art itself—institutional critique. Some people want to make work about politics, but I think connecting with other people who are also inspired by art and politics and who are inspired by what I do with it… that is success.

KL: I have a really fucked up relationship to success. Part of my practice is actually like self-annihilation as a performance, and I'm okay with that, but there's still something in me that makes me do that, because I know it's going to get me acclaim or whatever. Then I guess I would be successful if I used that to then support movement work, which is a really broad term and needs to be specified also.

I feel most successful when the work I'm doing makes people feel good. It's enjoyable for them and is a break from the thinking that they have to engage in. In those instances, there is something that feels really good about just sitting and looking in somebody's eyes and having a conversation and having a good time, while having that conversation, that cuts through everything. The art becomes a vehicle to do that. That's success.

Then how would you define success as a community?

SM: In the progressive realm, we all know that we're against Trump's policies. We all know that we're against Muslim bans, that we're against the wall. The more innocuous neoliberal things that happen, the obstacles that are put in the way to divide us, I think that is a big issue to overcome. Not working in silos, talking and working together, I think, is what leads to success.

That's what I've always been so fascinated about here in Detroit. It's that we have the policy people. We have the visionary organizers who are doing the work in neighborhoods. We have the people who are out in the street protesting, putting their bodies on the front lines. I think it's a combination of all of those things together

that make a movement successful.

KL: I would define a successful community as one that creates space for all of its nuances. Nuances in the form of personalities and desires and people and wants and needs and goals, which I don't think is this. I could say something like a successful community is one that is completely self-sustainable and not relying on extracting from other communities, but that's a myth.

Things to read, see, and visit:

Black Bottom Archives
OneMile
Arts.Black
A Black Scroll Network walking tour led by Jamon Jordan
Naomi Klein's *Disaster Capitalism*
Raoul Peck's *I am Not Your Negro*
Humanitarianism's Housing Question: From Slum Reform to Digital Shelter - Andrew Herscher
A Written Testimony Submitted to the Michigan Civil Rights Commission on the Flint Water Crisis, KWA and Strategic-Structural Racism
Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power*
Mike Davis, *City of Quartz*

Name
Shanna Merola and Kate Levy

Vocation
Artists