



# CREATIVEMANY

## MICHIGAN ART FOR JUSTICE FORUM

APRIL 3, 2018

ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN

### FINAL REPORT

The Michigan Art for Justice Forum (the “Forum”) was presented on April 3, 2018 in Ann Arbor. The Forum was the first of six state-specific convenings organized by teams of professionals in California, Michigan, Texas, Alabama, Georgia and New York. The Forums were designed to bring together individuals and organizations working at the intersection of the arts and creativity and justice system policy reform in order to curb mass incarceration in the United States. California Lawyers for the Arts acted as the primary catalyst of the national effort, as well as lead grant administrator for funding provided by the Art for Justice Fund, the Andy Warhol Foundation, the Quentin Hancock Fund and the National Endowment for the Arts. In addition, we received generous in-kind support from the staff and volunteers of the Prison Creative Arts Program at the University of Michigan.

#### **Michigan Organizing Team**

The Forum was organized in Michigan by staff from Shakespeare Behind Bars, The University of Michigan Prison Creative Arts Project, and the Lawyers for the Creative Economy Program of Creative Many Michigan. Staff from California Lawyers for the Arts were deeply involved in the planning of the Forum, and maintained regular contact with the Michigan team from late 2017 until the Forum, and continue to work with the Michigan team on the follow-up work with attendees.

In addition to the staff team from each of the primary planning organizations, the Michigan team engaged community members, formerly incarcerated individuals, and elected officials in the Forum planning activities. This larger planning group assisted the Michigan team with picking the topics presented at the Forum, finding speakers, and building out the invitee list used to attract attendees to the Forum.

#### **Forum Framework**

The Forum was organized as a full day of programming (from 9:00 am until 5:00 pm), and took place primarily in a single ballroom space on the University of Michigan Ann Arbor campus. There were three moderated plenary panel sessions, two facilitated breakout discussion sessions, a networking lunch, and a closing reception held at a campus art gallery during the 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners.

The breakout discussion sessions covered 13 different topics and were facilitated by volunteer facilitators. The volunteer facilitators were provided with a short set of prompts for their

discussions and tips for facilitation. Attempts were made to pair each facilitator with a volunteer to record the highlights of each breakout session, but in some cases the facilitators took notes directly. The notes from the breakout sessions reveal that the Forum attendees were highly engaged and ready and willing to share their experiences in the field, and point to a strong desire to continue the discussions that started at the Forum.

### **Attendance at the Forum**

176 individuals pre-registered to attend the Forum online, and 120 people actually attended (based on the sign-in sheets at the registration table).

### **Evaluation of the Forum**

The response from Forum attendees was generally positive. 46 attendees returned evaluation surveys for the event. Full copies of the completed surveys are available upon request.

- 95% (40 out of 42 respondents) said their objectives for attending the Forum were met.
- 90% (36 out of 40) rated their satisfaction with the plenary panel speakers as excellent or very good.
- 90% (62 out of 69 responses) ranked the discussions during the breakout sessions as excellent or very good.

The following is a sample of comments from the survey results (taken from responses to survey questions requesting suggestions for improving the Forum and what the most valuable part of the Forum was for respondents):

- *Each panel should have a question/answer session*
- *Hearing from formerly incarcerated people was the most valuable part in general*
- *Learning the innovative approaches of other organizations*
- *Table discussions were filled with knowledgeable practitioners*
- *The panels should be more interactive*
- *There should be more formerly incarcerated speakers and more persons of color as speakers*
- *There should be more academic departments involved, and a list of opportunities for students to get involved*
- *There should be speakers from the MI Department of Corrections and more legislators*
- *There should be better directions for parking/location*
- *There should be more focus on sustainability/fundraising*
- *We need more space for dialogue between speakers/attendees*
- *The audio could have been better*
- *Keep the political discussions out of it: politics are divisive*
- *More unstructured time for networking*
- *There should be more information available about how to get involved with the organizations that were present*

- *A location closer to Detroit would be better*
- *The networking was really great, including the exchange of ideas and brainstorming talks*

### **Opportunities to Extend the Work of the Forum**

Based on feedback from the Forum organizers and participants, there is strong support for continuing the collective work of the organizations and individuals working either in direct artistic interventions with incarcerated individuals, returning citizens, and their families or in justice reform advocacy work in Michigan. Thirty individuals responded to an email message sent to all Forum attendees indicating that they are willing to participate in efforts to organize activities to continue the work started at the Forum.

Respondents to the evaluation survey provided suggestions for the following follow-up activities:

- *Efforts to coordinate evaluation methodologies for the effectiveness of new and existing art programs targeted at incarcerated and returning citizens*
- *A regular forum/convening for the organizations/individuals working in the field to create “best practices” content or other resource-sharing opportunities*
- *Coordinated advocacy activity to influence legislative and administrative changes*
- *Efforts to utilize the arts and creativity to connect prison justice reform movements with other justice movements (i.e., environmental justice)*
- *A media campaign related to creativity and its impact on incarceration in Michigan*

The creation of an affinity group that creates opportunities to bring the Forum participants together on a regular basis and acts as a touchstone for continued engagement may be the best viable option to capitalize on the momentum created in Michigan by the Forum

After the conference, Melnee D. McPherson, a returned citizen, worked with project consultant Jacqueline Trescott to complete an article describing the forum. Her piece, “An Appeal for Art for Justice,” was posted as a blog on the website of the Justice Arts Coalition:

<https://thejusticeartscoalition.org/2018/09/26/an-appeal-for-art-for-justice/>

*This report was written by Joe Voss, Director of Strategic Partnerships at Creative Many Michigan, with support from Ariel Heinicke of California Lawyers for the Arts.*