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POWRPLNT

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SALOME ASEGA
Cultivating the ecosystem of art and technology

January 14, 2021 / Interview by Jamin Warren | Photography by David Evan McDowell

"E mbodied" may be the best word to describe the projects of artist, researcher, and educator *Salome Asega*. She has created VR experiences that evoke the channeling of diasporic spirits, a Kinect lesson that reinstates a dance form's history, and a roulette wheel that sends participants to lesser-known corners of a world-famous museum. Experiences that physically engage the body are clearly at the heart of the artist, researcher, and educator's work. Trained in creative technology and social practice, Salome's work also centers the communities she is part of. Based in Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy neighborhood, she's a director at *POWRPLNT*, a digital art 'collaboratory' in neighboring Bushwick, where she also leads creative workshops.

Salome told us about her hyper-real upbringing in Las Vegas, the trials of working within the uncharted territory of art and tech, and the power for participatory work to destabilize the long-held role of the artist.

Salome in her Bedford-Stuyvesant home and studio.

How did you make your way into merging art with technology and participation?

The path to working in this hybrid way is totally winding. I went to NYU for undergrad, and wanted to have a public and socially-engaged practice. I was studying participatory methodology and interaction, long before I learned anything about tech. I graduated and did a bit of traveling, some community organizing projects with people locally and in other places, and was seeing all of this amazing work happening at the local level. I wanted to find a way to connect people on the ground.

That's when I became more interested in technology and started to build websites on my own. I learned how to code and was so geeked by what I was learning. It's so satisfying when you do things with some numbers, you hit 'run,' and things actually work. I pursued an MFA in design and technology, and that's where the door was just busted open. I fell in love with physical computing and interaction design that incorporated emerging technology.
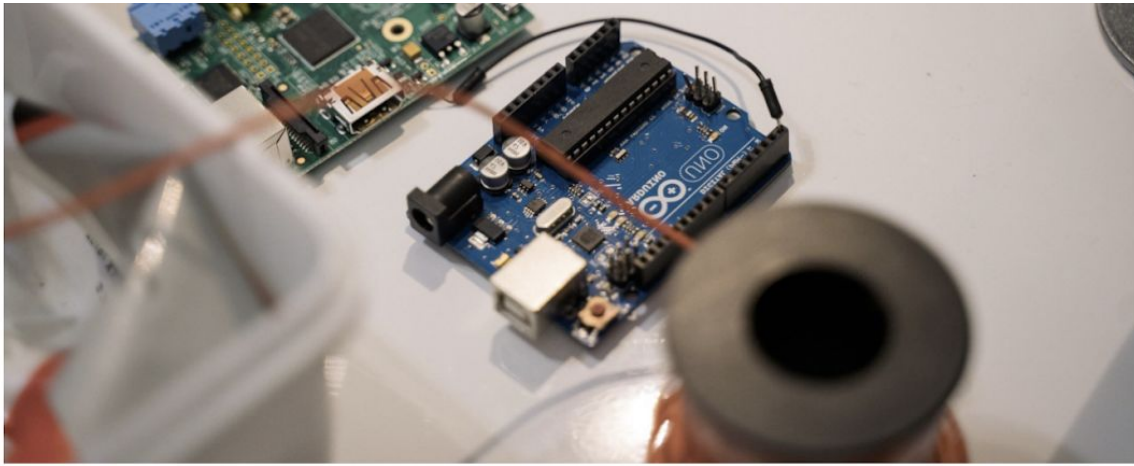
Participation is a lens that challenges where the artist is centered in their work. I didn't want to be the artist that was helicoptered into a site and made something, dusted my hands off, and walked away. I wanted to understand deeper levels of engagement; to work with an audience to develop a story or a narrative that is specific to place. All of my projects unfold once they're removed from the site they were made for. That's because they were made with very particular people and places in mind. For me, participation is a de-centering of myself or self-awareness of where I sit in relation to my work and other people in place.

Growing up, I was mesmerized by artists like like Rick Lowe. What has happened with Project Row houses where a community came together, bought debilitated real estate in a neighborhood that was theirs. They wanted to redirect the narrative of their own neighborhood—the idea that your collective creativity can have infrastructural impact. There are things that this artist center does for the neighborhood that are I'm sure beyond anyone's original dream when they first started. It's a cornerstone of the neighborhood and of the city. That was the art that I want to make with people, things that have lasting effect.

How did you translate that participatory point of reference into the work that you started to build as a technologist?

I suddenly had all this exposure to goodies that I could tinker and play with. If I wanted to maintain this methodology for making, I knew I had to widen the aperture here and ensure that other folks had access to the same tool. The most obvious path for translation for me was to develop a workshop curriculum.

At the same time that I was learning how to code, how to wire, how to solder. I was taking notes and thinking about how to teach this. So the minute I would learn something in a class, I would package that up and be like, *How do I do a workshop with this*?

In workshops I've hosted, I've been thinking there's an added layer of application—really thinking about the real world implications of the things we're making. Being intentional and deliberate, too, with what we're coding, how we're coding—how we're even naming variables!

Every piece was couched in, *This can become something in a real world context,* whereas when you're in a lab, or a program, you can just mess around. The point is to break something apart, and learn the mechanics of it. I think of my workshops as, *We have limited time together. Let's really be intentional about what we do at this time, and imagine a new world.*

For "Level Up: The Real Harlem Shake," you used the Kinect. It is a great embodied piece of technology, one that can felt magical for a lot of people using it for the first time. Where did the inspiration for this project come from?

This project was made at a time artists were hacking Kinect and trying to figure out creative applications for this tool. There were tons of documentation online, and I wanted to be part of that work. I partnered with a curator and dancer Ali Rosa-Salas, and Lightfee founder Chrybaby Cozie to develop this game. It was through a residency at New Museum and a dance company called AUNTS.

We came together and started talking about the Harlem Shake. The group of dancers Chrybaby Cozie works with are from uptown, so the Harlem shake means a lot to them. They feel as if they're the last keepers of the dance. We were talking about DJ Baauer who made the song that created the viral trend where people in their offices were just shaking wildly to this music. You'd have to go pages and pages into a YouTube search before you could find videos of the 'real' Harlem shake. We were talking about the erasure that viral trend had caused.

So we asked ourselves, *What educational tool can we make to bring back and celebrate the original dance forms?* We brought in a bunch of dancers and mapped their shoulder movements using Kinect. We took over the theater and basement space of the museum, and had people coming in and out all day dancing.

It was truly celebratory, and highlighted the stakeholders of this dance form in New York City. We aimed to give voice and movement and face and visibility to these people. The conversations around algorithmic bias have further developed—have been more nuanced, more rich.

You see projects like LaJuné McMillan's Black Movement Library, where she uses motion capture to create a library of Black movement vocabulary. It's exciting to see that in the four or five-year gap between our two projects just how much farther this conversation has gone. It's really beautiful.

There are apocryphal stories about who invented the dance for the Harlem Shake—but I don't think there's a single person who started it, right?

We heard so many creation myths during this game's development—one that went back as far as tracing it to traditional Ethiopian dancing. I'm Ethiopian, so I was ready to claim that history [laughs]!

PoSESSION was an ongoing research project, and you were looking to connect virtual reality with some of the West African and Caribbean spiritual systems. Were you looking at VR as a tool first, then thinking of a project to map onto it?

I had seen a series of sculptures of Yoruba practitioners in the process of spirit possession. These figures are so mesmerizing; they're human beings that have a floating orb around them.

During spirit possession, the Orishas and deities mount practitioners through the head. When you see this process, you see practitioners getting ready to put something on their head.

I was thinking about spirit possession as somewhat similar to the experience of putting on a VR headset, and being transported to a different world. I created these VR sketches where a person can enter a space and put on the headset, which takes them to a very specific Orisha's world.

The first in the series is for Mami Wata, who is this deity spiritual figure who is just so regal. She lives in the water, and comes to shore. When she sees you, she promises you abundance, wealth and attractiveness, but you just have to follow her into the water. You're worried when you see her because you're attracted to these things that she promises you, but you actually don't know if you'll come back to land. You don't know if her underwater palace, which has tons of riches and gold, is a trap.

On the development side, you're using the Kinect and the Oculus Rift. What were some of the challenges using those particular technologies in a "non-authorized" way? Was there something that you faced that you could work your way out of—maybe left unresolved, or incorporated into the work itself?

The Kinect itself is so sensitive to light. It was fast-tracking and realizing, *Okay, you're making a work that you won't be able to sit next to every day. Level Up* is meant to be installed in a museum, and it'll travel, so it will be subject to so many various kinds of lighting conditions. I appreciate that project so much because it made me smarter about code—it beefed up how I consider the logic behind a project.

With both projects, I had the hardest time figuring out how to package things so that they didn't have to exist on any of my hardware—that other folks could easily access the game experiences I was making. With each of those projects, I hit a wall. I needed to bring my suitcase of things everywhere, for people to play or use. Everything felt really delicate, and it would be hard to swap out anything. It was very 'homebrew.' I'm not an expert coder—I'm very tech agnostic. All of my projects are about the story first, then figuring out the best tools to tell that story.

POWRPLNT is a digital arts lab that you run. What are you hoping to do with space, and what role do you see it play in the lives of creatives in Brooklyn?

POWRPLNT is what we call a digital art 'collaboratory' in Bushwick. It was started six years ago by my friend Anibal Luque and Angelina Dreem. Back then, it was a mobile digital art school that floated between tiny residencies and galleries in Brooklyn. It eventually found its way to the Red Bull Studios in Chelsea, through an exhibition that Ryder Ripps was doing. From there, we developed strong youth partnerships and found our way to the Hunter College gallery in Harlem.

It had an interesting trajectory—from very small gallery spaces, moving into more formal art spaces, and then landing in an academic institution. From there, I came in as a partner, and we set out to start a brick-and-mortar space. We found this bright orange beauty salon in Bushwick.

We began the work of renovating—shout out to <u>Materials for the Arts</u>, which was an amazing warehouse space in Queens where cultural institutions from around the city would donate unused material and other folks could scoop it up. That's where we got the tiles for our space. The tables and more equipment, too. We did a modest $5,000 Kickstarter campaign to buy some used computers, did that successfully, and then set up shop as a community computer lab.

POWRPLNT functions as gallery space, internet lounge and an environment where people from all backgrounds may learn the skills necessary to express themselves creatively in today's networks.

We had open hour time. Then in the evenings, we had sliding-scale and free workshops for young people taught by local artists and musicians. What PWRPLNT has been doing really well since our start is the open computer hours time and the artist-run workshops.

Now in the time of COVID-19, we've shut our doors like everyone else. But they're slightly open because we have free resources available to the community, especially during the summer protests. We're taking donations from people to give to protestors.

A lot of our programming, however, has had to shift. We have always been so place-based—so going virtual has allowed us to make thoughtful partnerships with mission-aligned organizations across the country. We recently brought together six or seven collectives and organizations to host a program—a weekend program called 'Power Up'—where we taught six or seven workshops for young people worldwide. We're a non-profit, so most of the funding comes from individual donors—people who really rock with us believe in us. Then some grants come from local foundations.

I'm hoping that doesn't stop in a post-COVID world. I actually found it beautiful that we all came together to do this.

How are you seeing a tie between the work that you're doing at PWRPLNT and at the Ford Foundation, to bring us up to speed with the present?

I've been doing this work with PWRPLNT for a couple of years. I've been seeing how hard it is for groups like us to really find footing—groups that sit at the intersection of art, design, technology, social justice. Groups that are community-minded but just don't have enough resources to do their work.

At Ford, I'm looking at groups like PWRPLNT, School for Poetic Computation, and Stephanie Dinkins' AI.ASSEMBLY project. These groups are so community-rooted. There's not enough cultural infrastructure to really support all of us. I'm thinking about what is needed to really care for this ecosystem of artists and technologists.

 Maybe it means more grant opportunities specific to people who make in the ways that we make. Or more fellowships that help us distinguish us in our careers, that can really give us a platform for what we're doing. Or more residency opportunities that cater to research and design, help us figure out new languages, and new ways of working. Also, making sure that we're propping up people who are observing this field of practitioners. So really helping curators and critics to be able to talk about what is happening.

A lot of the work I've been doing at Ford thus far has just been exposure—getting arts funders or directors of various institutions to see the work themselves. It's also been to build literacy, to really understand all the tools people are using and how artists come to use those tools in their practice. Also, what the costs are associated with that.

From there, actually interviewing artists or art and tech organization leaders to understand their needs. We ask, *What is missing from your work? How can we help you? How can we show up for you and make sure that these two sides meet each other?*

We're in this moment with technology that feels really dark. So we need to prop up and platform artists working with technology.
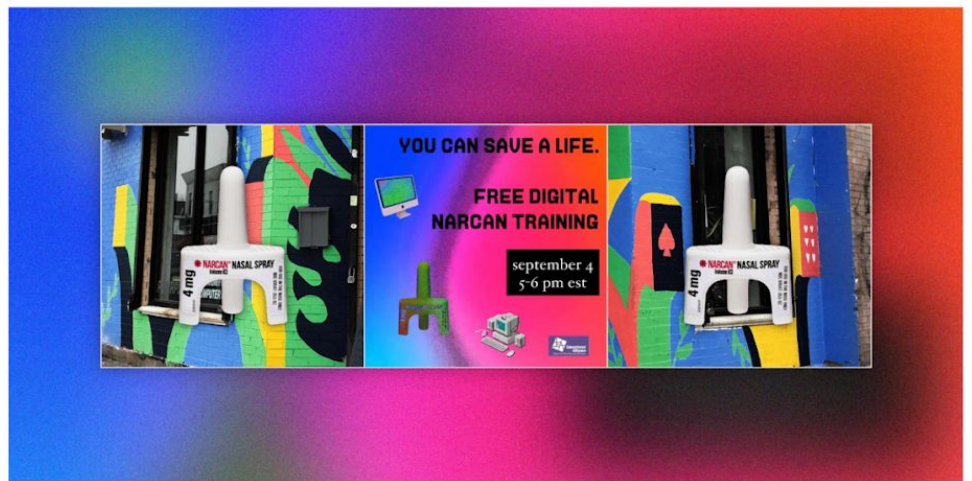
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DOCUMENT

Above The Fold

POWRPLNT, the mutual aid space bridging the digital divide

Read time **4 minutes**

Text by
Maraya Fisher
Posted
September 3, 2020

Bushwick's best-kept secret: Between Narcan trainings and online workshops, how POWRPLNT continues to serve community through the pandemic

POWRPLNT, an organization committed to bridging the digital divide, sits at the corner of Putnam and Evergreen in Bushwick. It's unmissable, wrapped in a tropical mural featuring the bouncing card decks from the Microsoft Solitaire win screen animation. I spent a year wondering what was inside during my nightly walks with my dog around the neighborhood. "It's Bushwick's best-kept secret," jokes Mad Pinney, the organization's Marketing and Programs Manager.

At its heart, POWRPLNT is an open space for the neighborhood, providing a computer lab, WiFi, and skillshare workshops taught by local artists, free for children and with a suggested donation for adults. It's a place for kids to get homework help, teens to learn essential Adobe programs, adults to print their résumés, and seniors to learn the basics of digital literacy. Founded by artist Angelina Dreem and Bushwick nightlife's resident lawyer Anibal Luque as a digital art space to foster a new generation of talent, POWRPLNT began as a pop-up, opening its brick and mortar location four years ago.

"We want to be the first place that someone has their art exhibited or has their first performance or learns how to use Photoshop for the first time," Luque comments. DJs like Pauli Cakes—who runs the nightlife and mutual aid collective DisCakes, which recently had its first Boiler Room showcase, with Marley Marl—got their start playing sets at POWRPLNT. "We kind of consider [Pauli Cakes] one of our alumni because they really did start at POWRPLNT, and we were able to see them grow as an artist and as an activist," Luque explains. "To [see them] go from DJing for the first few times to being on the global stage, and also being so vocal in the activist space and a voice for their generation, is really inspiring to us and to me personally."

When the pandemic hit New York City, POWRPLNT was forced to close its Bushwick location, challenging Pinney, Dreem, and Luque to continue with their mission online. "This space is so connected to its physicality. You know, we offer computers and materials," Pinney explains. But Pinney soon saw new opportunities to build community through the internet, connecting artists and teachers with kids outside of the New York City area. POWRPLNT also began to host hour-long, donation-based Narcan training sessions, where attendees can learn how to properly administer the nasal spray form of Naloxone, a life-saving medication that can instantly halt an opioid overdose. Following the training, Sela Grabiner of Educational Alliance sends attendees a Narcan kit complete with two doses.

POWRPLNT switched gears again as the Black Lives Matter protests began. During New York City's week-long curfew, Taehee Whang of Hyperlink Press asked Pinney why artist spaces, many with mission statements declaring support for their neighborhoods and for Black Lives Matter, were failing to provide to their communities during this time. The next day POWRPLNT reopened as a sanctuary space for protesters and locals. It is currently open most days of the week for limited hours, complete with a stand outside offering personal protective gear, water, snacks, and absentee voting applications.

Both the protests and the pandemic have expanded POWRPLNT's role in Bushwick and beyond. Keeping an eye to its original purpose of providing the immediate neighborhood with the tools and skills necessary to be digitally autonomous, the organization is becoming a mutual aid space and a resource for students of any age across the country.

Click here to sign up for POWRPLNT's latest Narcan training, September 4th at 5pm est.

Tags

Black Lives Matter

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VOGUE

CULTURE

Meet Salome Asega, the Multihyphenate Artist Working to Diversify the Tech World

BY AKILI KING

September 19, 2019

Photo: Courtesy of Sophia Wilson

"There's an archetype for what people who work in technology are 'supposed' to look like," says Salome Asega, the partnerships director of Powrplnt. Founded by Anibal Luque and Angelina Dreem, the space—filled with plants, colorful lighting, and charming black and white tiles—provides affordable technology-meets-art workshops led by local artists, which are free for children and donation- or membership-based for adults. The classes cover a wide range of subjects, from music production and Photoshop to logo making and DJing. In Asega's role, she scouts for organizations with which Powrplnt can host various programs and workshops. "We are doing hybrid work and blurring the lines of how people view and interact with the tech world," the Las Vegas-raised, New York-based artist explains. "We want to shake up what it's supposed to look like, while making it fun and accessible for all."

The space offers classes specifically for people of color, women, and gender nonconforming people, "so that everyone can feel comfortable asking questions without feeling judged," Asega says of Powrplnt's mission to carve out safe spaces. "It's important that people can be silly while learning. You don't want to feel so self-aware to the point where you're blocking your own learning," she notes, recalling moments in her own schooling when she hesitated to speak out.

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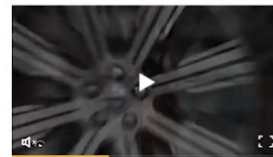
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During a class at Powrplnt.   Photo: Courtesy of Powrplnt

But Asega's work on bridging the gap between the art and tech worlds, and diversifying those realms, doesn't end with Powrplnt. The New York University graduate, who studied socially engaged art and sculpture, is also a part-time instructor at Parsons the New School for Design, where she teaches speculative design, and has a fellowship at the Ford Foundation until February 2020, where she brings a technological lens to the "creativity and free expression team, which covers arts and culture, journalism, and documentary filmmaking."

Her own artwork leans heavily on interplay between the two spheres. The Iyapo Repository, which she created alongside Ayodamola Okunseinde during a residency at Eyebeam in 2016, is a resource library full of artifacts dreamed up in participatory workshops that "affirm and project the future of people of African descent." Asega and her team then bring some of those artifacts to life as films. Take, for example, *Artifact 111: Mother Radio*. "Mother Radio is an artifact that resembles a seashell, but acts as a radio that airs sounds and music across diaspora and time. The person who drew this wanted to make a connection between the deity Yemaya and women's impact and influence in sound and music-making practices," she explains.

Artifact 111: Mother Radio, from the Iyapo Repository.   Photo: Courtesy of the Iyapo Repository

Having carved her own path, she recognizes the importance of encouraging and developing a better understanding of "all the ways artists are using emerging technology to tell stories, and why it's important for these two communities to come together." In the abstract, it might seem like these two fields often diverge, but Asega firmly believes that, together, they can have very specific benefits: "Having an arts or humanitarian lens in technology centers people and communities," she says, and makes learning about tech more accessible and inclusive as "it can offer an entry point for people to better understand the more complex aspects of technology."

Stay tuned for a second Powrplnt space, although the team is still figuring out where it will be located. "I would love to see it grow in a way that continues to align with the hyperlocal mission," Asega notes. In the interim, she will continue aiming to diversify the tech space and showing that the art and tech worlds go hand in hand, as she understands the importance of "being surrounded by those who look and think like you in those times of learning."

so we're off to a fast-food spot in Peckham.

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The IRL and Online Worlds Meld at POWRPLNT, a Tech Education Space in Bushwick

By **Kelsey Lawrence** - April 17, 2017

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We tend to live our lives online or off, in a perpetual binary state of existence. But, it can be difficult to meld those worlds effectively, in a way that does not feel distracting, or that diminishes real life encounters. Bushwick's POWRPLNT, however, might succeed in doing just that. It describes itself as a digital arts collaboratory, which is probably the best overview of what this art space, both physical and digital, offers to teens for free, and anyone else who walks through its doors. It is a chance to symbiotically expand your tech skills and your network, online and in-person. The space occupies a small, electric-blue storefront along a residential stretch of Evergreen Avenue, and is equal parts classroom, computer lab, gallery, and event space. The agreed-upon sentiment for those who've been there? "I really wish I would have had this as a teen."

The collaboratory itself also looks like a virtual landscape come to life. Its white walls, checkerboard-tiled floors, and plastic tables with desktop Macs give the room a modular, open feeling, the equivalent to a create-your-own-adventure translated into a physical space. Broad, leafy green plants and a bearded dragon and its aquarium make the room feel like Brooklyn meets a terrarium. Founder Angelina Dreem and her team of volunteer teachers offer classes and programs that teach you what you wish you knew, or, more specifically, the tools that you need to be a young creative in 2017. A sampling of classes available: Intro to Adobe Premiere, GIF-making, building a site in Github, how to make a flier in Photoshop, and more. Classes are always free for teens and available on a sliding scale donation for anyone else who's interested. The gallery's volunteers can use the studio space during off-hours and receive access to the network of teachers, artists, designers, and programmers that come through.

Angelina Dreem, Brooklyn resident of seven years and founder of previous venues such as the yoga studio-meets-event space Body Actualized Center, came up with the idea for POWRPLNT after a culmination of experiences. Upon graduating from the University of Washington, Dreem realized she didn't have the qualifications for the jobs she wanted. So, she "went rogue with everything" as she describes it, teaching herself video editing and more, and moved to New York to start making music and putting on events.

"After getting pretty deep into New York nightlife and events and the underground scene, I wanted to do something with more of a lasting impression and not so transient," Dreem says. "It became pretty clear to me that I loved Brooklyn and wanted to stay here. I met this lawyer on Craigslist and he drove us to a festival. I told him my idea and he was like 'Let's do that.' It was all very serendipitous." Originally, they envisioned the space at 2nd Street and A, right next to a power plant—hence, the origin of its name. But then, a friend sold them the space on Myrtle and Broadway. "We made flyers and recruited a bunch of artists that I had been working with in nightlife," said Dreem. "It just grew from there."

On POWRPLNT's site, the first words underneath the header image are "Access to technology is a *right*, not a privilege." That sentiment is the main thrust of what defines POWRPLNT as an organization, both as a static, physical space and as a community of people. Dreem and her volunteer teachers are doing their part to bridge what seems like an ever-widening technology gap. "If all the people who are programming are so over Photoshop, can you even imagine other people who don't have cell phones or computers?" she says. "There's such a gap, and it's only getting bigger. I just think about that all the time when we're at these VR or tech conferences, and I think, *This is so far from so many people's reality*."
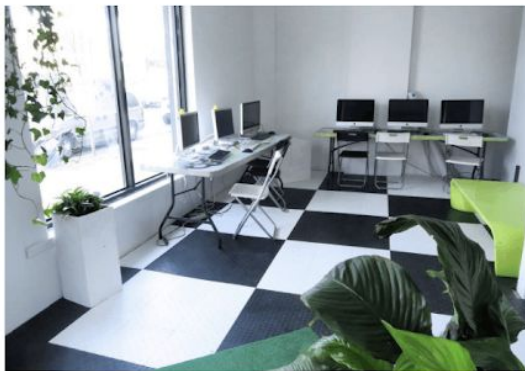
On a cold, gray Thursday afternoon, things are quiet during POWRPLNT's after-school program with Sonic Arts For All!, a relatively new non-profit offering an alternative to the traditional music classroom for grades K-12. Jaydee DeLeon and Eliza Walton, teachers with SAFA!, are sitting by their laptops and equipment, waiting for kids to arrive. Sometimes it might just be one kid who gets a lot of special attention that day; other times, it might be eight kids making drum machines out of Arduinos and Play-Doh.

"We've had some success here with kids in the neighborhood just kind of walking in and joining us," DeLeon, a nu-metal musician when he's not teaching, says. "We give them music, not through violins or pianos or cellos or choir, but through these different music apps that are digital versions of actual real-life synthesizers. We have a physical keyboard or drum pads that connect with it. We have very simple drum machines where the kids can come through, and we record them and post it on SoundCloud so they can have it afterwards."

Walton, who makes electronic music, found out about SAFA! through her curiosity about POWRPLNT. "Angelina told me to come by, and Max, the founder [of SAFA!] was here and invited me to teach," she says. As we're talking, DeLeon spots some kids and their parents walking by outside. He jumps up and runs out the door to tell them they can come make music for free.

"It's the best when the kids are walking by to go play basketball, and we're like 'Hey, come make music with us,' and they're like 'We're going to play basketball,' but then they come back later," Walton says. "And we'll be here for them. The world kind of sucks, and I want the kids to have a good time."

POWRPLNT's most recent big project was a series of DJ workshops launched on International Women's Day with Intersessions, another DJ workshop and network for women and the LGTBQ+ community. Started by rapper Chippy Nonstop, Intersessions's workshops have taken place in Vancouver, Los Angeles, and now, this past March, in Brooklyn. Last Saturday was the final DJ showcase and panel on creating spaces and community for women and non-gender conforming people within the music industry. Dreem says the Intersessions residency has been her favorite example of how POWRPLNT merges life online with actual, in-person connection.

"They're a group of four girls with gender non-conforming identities that just started posting on social media about these DJ workshops," Dreem says. "They get people from all over to teach, and it emerged really organically from their social networks and connections. People meet IRL and, at the end of the workshop, everybody's like 'What's your handle?' and like 'Yeah, come to our party next weekend.' It's very much an integrated lifestyle."

POWRPLNT's team now consists of Salome Asega, assistant director and, as Dreem describes, an "amazing VR artist and programmer and designer," and Marcha Johnson, the space's outreach coordinator. Anibal Luque, the lawyer that Dreem met back during that fateful Craigslist ride-share, is now vice president. POWRPLNT might not be Dreem's forever project. "I'm an artist," Dreem says, "This is part of my career and social practice, but I also have other realms of work that I want to experiment with." She wants to ensure that the infrastructure is in place to allow the collaboratory to evolve and expand, not just to the other boroughs, but to cities like Los Angeles, Miami and Mexico City, places where there's a complicated but intense and interesting relationship between art, technology, and who can access either of those worlds.

"I feel like it was all led by this idea of being able to create a concept using the tools that we are trying to teach," Dreem says. "It's a medium-size ship now, and I want it to go places. The whole idea is to build a model that can be implemented with school funding in other locations around the state and the world. I want to create a franchise of computer labs that can inspire all of those creative people who have no real, tangible outlet for how to be a creative today."

A lot of good ideas don't work out in the long run, at least not enough, perhaps, to leave a lasting impact on the neighborhood around them. Angelina is hoping to change that with POWRPLNT. "New York is a very transient city, and people are very suspect like, 'Where are you gonna be in 5 years?' she says. "I live above POWRPLNT right now, and that reinforces the idea that I'm here, you know?"

Upcoming events at POWRPLNT include Art Future: Youth Mode, a program curated by Parsons Scholars Pre-College program. Youth Mode is a multimedia platform organized by teen artists for teen artists. On April 22, there will be a panel discussion hosted by Nadia Williams, assistant professor of diversity and inclusion and director of Parsons Scholars program. "Visionary Worlds," on April 29, will feature a lineup of live performers—young poets, dancers, musicians, and more—as well as an open mic.

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FOUR REAL-LIFE DEFENDERS, OUT TO CHANGE THE WORLD

We live in a world that feels as divided as ever. On nearly every issue—from police brutality and racism, to climate change and gun violence—progress seems static, with no compromise in sight. And while our lives move increasingly online, cutting through the noise to affect positive change can appear all the more difficult, and also, disheartening.

But it takes a certain type of person these days to have the courage to actually do something. A superhero, if you will, who dedicates his or her life to making this world a better place—both in their communities, and in society writ large.

Netflix recently debuted its newest original series, Marvel's *The Defenders*, which tells the story of four superheroes —Daredevil, Luke Cage, Jessica Jones, and Iron Fist—uniting for a common cause, knowing far too well that they can't extinguish evil alone. To celebrate the show, we spoke with four real-life "defenders" in the show's locale, New York City, who are fighting for justice, peace, and equality, in ways both big and small.

Scroll down below to hear their stories, and what inspired them to make a difference.

POWRPLNT

BRINGING DIGITAL ART TOOLS TO THE KIDS

The story of POWRPLNT started sometime around when Angelina Dreem couldn't get a job. Fresh out of college, Dreem's applications fell short, due to a lack of web design proficiency. So instead, Dreem entered the underground net art world—first in San Francisco, and then, New York—and taught herself the skills needed in an ever-digital world.

But, she admits, there was a catch: "I had access to a credit card to buy computers. But I think about young people that don't have access to cash or trust funds or credit cards, and how important the computer was for my development, and independence."

That was how POWRPLNT was born. Open five days a week to anyone, free of charge, Dreem's Brooklyn Hub is a computer lab, community center, garden, studio, and arts nonprofit. Oh, and also: gallery, classroom, and theatre. "When you have space, you can do whatever you want," Dreem says.

Its M.O.—"Access to technology is a right, not a privilege"—derives from what she saw in Bushwick, a working-class neighborhood in flux, with creative, often white types increasingly at odds with the communities of color they enter. The divide was real. "There was a lack of dialogue between artists, and young people living here," Dreem says. "So I kind of connected the two."

Partnering with Anibal Luque, Dreem started POWRPLNT as a pop-up in 2014, before moving to brick-and-mortar a year later, and bringing on assistant director, Salome Asega. "People were hesitant to come in when we first opened," Asega says. "They thought this would cost money, because computers are luxury items."

POWRPLNTS' entrance is colored with vines and playing cards. Inside, a row of iMacs, equipped with Ableton, Photoshop, and other software, line the wall, while spritely houseplants give the interior a holistic feel; a token from Dreem's days at Body Actualized, a now-defunct New Age-y DIY venue. On a recent visit, an art installation by Emily Manwaring featured self-portraits of the local teenage artist.

Dreem hopes to open POWRPLNT in other cities, and make it ubiquitous with "the next level of community space." Two years have already seen regulars, and results. "There are people who come back and say, 'Oh, from that Logos 101 course, I started a clothing line,'" says Asega.

At 22 years old, LaDre Smith credited POWRPLNT with helping him launch his career as a brand producer, and photographer. He volunteers, and regularly uses the space at night for shoots. "Me and my friends were walking past on day one," says Smith. "We had a conversation, and started coming back every day since."
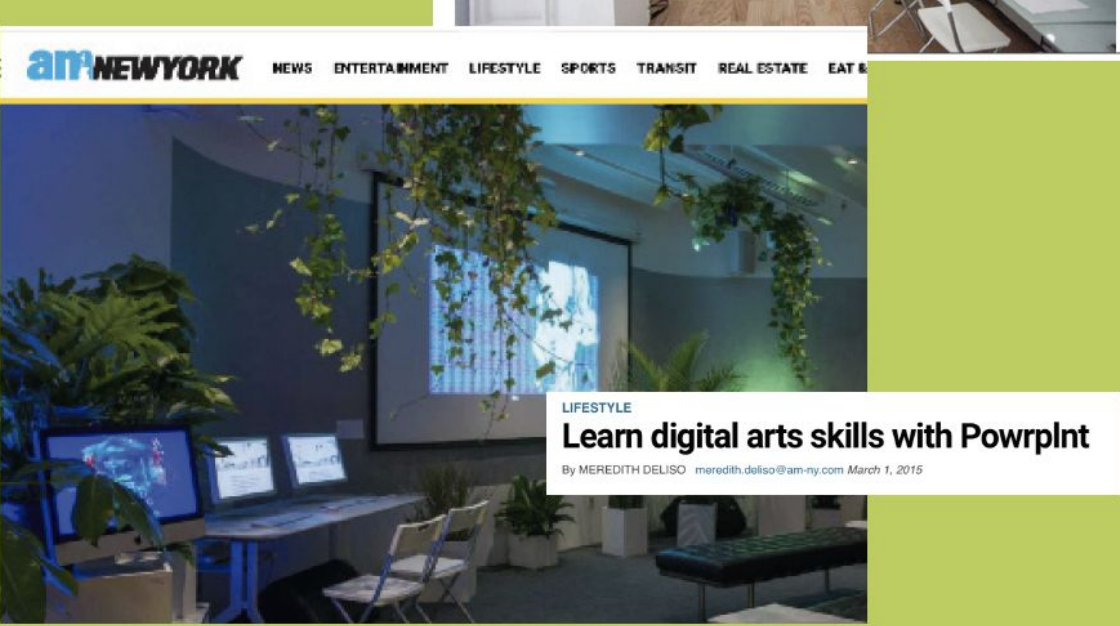
That is Dreem's mission: for the youth to be their own boss, especially in an automating world that demands more from our ability to create. It's no longer okay, she says, for culture to be run by the privileged few. With the Internet, anyone can make something of themselves, and change that. "Once you have these basic skills, the only limit is where you take them," she says.

ANGELINA DREEM

FOUNDER OF POWRPLNT

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Learn digital arts skills with Powrplnt
By MEREDITH DELISO   meredith.deliso@am-ny.com   *March 1, 2015*

FADER   **This Non-Profit Is Giving East Harlem Teens Free Classes In Digital Art This Summer**

POWRPLNT's founder Angelina Dreem wants to give teenagers the chance to try art on for size.

By **RUTH SAXELBY**

OBSERVER

June 29, 2015

https://observer.com/2015/06/digital-art-one-womans-hard-wired-solution-to-harlem-gentrification/

Digital Art: One Woman's Hard-Wired Solution to Harlem Gentrification

Founder seeks to battle gentrification with equal access

By Casey Quackenbush · 06/29/15 3:24pm

Angelina Dreem at the launch her Powrplnt exhibition, on view at Hunter College East Harlem Gallery. (Photo: Casey Quackenbush/The New York Observer)

"Powrplnt," a new exhibition, is planting the seeds for interest in digital art at Hunter East Harlem Gallery.

Artworks on computer and television screens are the focus of the show, which opened last weekend at 2180 Third Avenue at 119th Street. But, going way beyond simple display, Powrplnt will offer free classes (the first series starts tomorrow, June 30) in making digital art to local youth.

The exhibition features cyber and sculptural work by four local artists: Yulan Grant, Sam Rolfes, Samantha Cornwell, and Giguel Maybach. To mitigate the sterile environment technology creates, the organizer, Angelina Dreem, 29, hangs plenty of plants, creating an indoor garden—hence, the organization's name.

FEATURED VIDEOS

Ms. Dreem regularly hosts these shows in areas "on the rift of gentrification," she said, as a way to expose locals to digital art and pique their interest in the digital media classes. Taught by Hunter College IMA MFA students and NYC-based digital artists, the classes will be held inside the gallery at the Hunter College uptown venue over the next 9 weeks. (The show runs through Sept. 5).

There are two four-week long sessions, with classes such as "Alien or Bust: Digital Sculpting," "Animation Situation," and "Digital Painting."

"It's important because really what defines gentrification a lot is access to technology," Ms. Dreem told the Observer. "Technology is a real way of evening [that] out."

Digital art by Sam Rolfes presented at the Powrplnt exhibition. (Photo: Casey Quackenbush/The New York Observer)

When Ms. Dreem graduated from University of Washington in Seattle a few years ago, she said she found it difficult to obtain a job in San Francisco because she was never exposed to the basics of Photoshop. As technology advances exponentially, introducing communities to the basics is crucial—not only to pursue a career in digital art, but bridge the gentrification gap.

"I know a lot of kids identify as being an artist, but they don't see where contemporary art is going in some respects," Ms. Dreem told the Observer. "I think once you have access to a computer, the only limit is your imagination."

A few dozen kids signed up at her previous installation in Bushwick, and about ten have already enrolled in classes this summer.

Terrell, 17, (who declined to give his last name) from East Orange, New Jersey, was at the gallery opening and signed up for the Digital Painting class. He commutes to the city to work at a digital company called To Be. He's thinks he'll pursue a digital media career, but his school doesn't offer classes like Powrplnt. "Maybe I'll learn something I didn't know before that I can use later on," he told the Observer.

Ms. Dreem hopes to take Powrplnt to Los Angeles or Detroit in the near future.

Digital art by at Giguel Maybach at the Powrplnt exhibition. (Photo: Casey Quackenbush/The New York Observer)

Filed Under: Arts, Gentrifcation, East Harlem, Digital Art, Hunter College, Angelina Dreem, Powerplnt

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