



A Living Theory of Change

by Jeff Chang for

life
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I. INTRODUCTION

Youth Speaks was founded in 1996 to promote youth development, civic engagement, and literacy through spoken word, poetry, writing, and performance. It has since become the nation's leading presenter of youth slam poetry. Youth Speaks is recognized as one of the most innovative nonprofit arts organizations in the country.

In October 2008, Youth Speaks' Living Word Project began an ambitious national campaign called Life Is Living, a series of festivals that would engage and empower Black and Brown urban youths creatively on environmental issues. Under the direction of Youth Speaks Artistic Director Marc Bamuthi Joseph and National Program Director Hodari Davis, Life Is Living began from the premise that poor communities and communities of color must be included in a new, clean, green economy and rooted in hip-hop and youth street cultures. In Oakland, Harlem, and Chicago, Life Is Living gathered hundreds of neighborhood youths at urban parks. Two more are scheduled for later this year.

At Life Is Living festival events, activities sprawl across the park. Youths perform spoken-word poetry and hip-hop theatre. They compete in graffiti mural contests and hip-hop and juke dance competitions. They check out custom-bike exhibitions or skateboard with friends on custom-built ramps. They construct their own green buildings and learn from local environmental and community organizations. Each festival culminates with a concert featuring star talents like E-40, MC Lyte, and Mos Def. These are community events, so while they are youth-focused, the crowds are intergenerational and family-friendly. It is also notable that, in a context of heavily policed youth subcultures and urban spaces, all of the events have been well attended and without incident. As Youth Speaks director James Kass puts it, "Life Is Living has become a place where what is often shunned is placed center stage."

What began as a one-day festival event has become much more. Life Is Living has broadened to include events and workshops in the months leading up to the festival day. More philosophically, Life Is Living has brought Youth Speaks to a deepened understanding of its mission and its process. It has gained a new institutional perspective on ideas about engaging youths, presenting public art, fostering literacy and storytelling, developing arts audiences, transforming the environmental justice movement, and catalyzing community-building. It has also revealed insights into the role that the artists and arts organizations can play in social and cultural change. Life Is Living has catalyzed Youth Speaks to think more expansively about its own theory of change and about the unique role that arts organizations can play in fostering vibrant creative ecosystems. Sharing the ideas and frames that came out of this process—and how they play into a revised theory of change—is what this paper is all about.

This paper is informed by two convenings of community leaders and festival participants in New York and Chicago that provided valuable feedback on the events and a space for local practitioners to discuss how they see the evolving fields of arts and social justice work. Additionally, the paper reflects the thinking of several group discussions and individual interviews with the Youth Speaks staff, consultants, and friends of the organization.

Youth Speaks staffers have described Life Is Living not merely as a "festival" or "project", but as "a process". At the outset of the planning, some staffers were concerned that Life Is Living reflected a departure from Youth Speaks' work, that had focused largely on teen poetry education and performances. But in the end, they understood it to have grown organically from Youth Speaks' mission and Marc Bamuthi Joseph's artistic process.

This process began to give Youth Speaks some answers to questions that were troubling the field of non-profit performing arts organizations, such as:

- How can arts organizations deepen their relationships with the communities they serve?
- How should arts organizations think about questions of audience development?
- What do arts organizations and artists issues do best in relation to efforts to achieve social and cultural equity?
- What are the best spaces in which arts organizations should engage such efforts?
- How do arts organizations interface with institutions, formal and informal organizations and non-artists to produce high-quality aesthetic and social outcomes?

Implicit in these questions was a challenge to think about what the answers might mean for the non-profit arts sector, which was confronting what some articulated thought to be a new crisis of audience development. Youth Speaks also asked itself: What “non-profit crisis” is most urgent to address in the context of changing demographics?

Life Is Living helped Youth Speaks arrive at the useful concept of *the creative ecosystem*, a frame for understanding how the interaction and interdependence of artists, arts organizations, funders and foundations, formal and informal organizations, and non-artists can function and, in turn, produce positive outcomes for the community they seek to serve. The creative ecosystem approach eventually moved Life Is Living beyond a discrete “green”-centered day-long event, and helped provide some intriguing answers to the questions posed above.

Because these questions are pertinent to the field, this paper will outline the evolution of Youth Speaks’ thinking about Life Is Living, articulate the evolution of the institution’s theory of change, and seek what lessons may be had for arts organizations, community builders, environmental justice advocates and social justice funders.

II. THE YOUTH SPEAKS CONTEXT

From the start, Youth Speaks focused primarily on teaching teens to write and perform poetry. Free writing workshops and presentations, such as Brave New Voices, the national poetry slam competition, and through its Living Word Project, commissioned theater work, still constitute much of its program. These imperatives are reflected in the organization’s mission statement. (See Appendix A.)

Youth Speaks’ mission statement also focuses crucially on the use of youth culture, a commitment to developing community, and a call “to empower young people with opportunities to discover and develop their own voices.” Its statement concludes, “We believe in LIFE. We are firmly attached to the idea that every young person matters, that we all deserve to be safe in our local environments, and have the right to know that our voices will be heard and will live on.” These latter points would inform the inception of Life Is Living.

As Artistic Director, Marc Bamuthi Joseph guided the Life Is Living process from its beginning. He describes the organization’s practice as informed by what he terms “radical reciprocity,” the idea that artistic development and audience development must develop concurrently. For example, the way that poetry is taught ordinarily requires a young person to respond to a canonical “primary text”, whether Shakespeare or Whitman or even Tupac. Youth Speaks’ pedagogy encourages young writers instead to approach their own lives as the primary text. They are encouraged bring to bear on their writing their entire context, including their community. In this sense, Youth Speaks believes that individual and community development also go hand-in-hand.

“Arts practice uncovers truth, preserves individual and collective ritual, and explores form. Usually arts practice is isolated. It is thought of as an enlightened process towards the creation of an object. It creates a performed fiction,” says Joseph. “But our work is different because we contextualize our arts practice within voice and community transformation. So the process reveals the product, and the product reveals the process.”

As the Life Is Living process moved forward, it began to reveal that while the institution's focus on new writers and new audiences remained at the core of its work, fulfilling other aspects of its mission and artistic practice could accommodate organizational change.

III. DESCRIPTION OF LIFE IS LIVING

This sense of change fit with the evolution of the organization in the late 00s. Beginning in 2007, Youth Speaks began partnerships with HBO, the Redford Center, and The U.S. Green Building Council. Through the production of the acclaimed HBO television series, "Brave New Voices", Youth Speaks brought the national popularity of youth spoken-word poetry to new heights. Working with the Redford Center and the U.S. Green Building Council to create Brave New Voices Speak Green and produce poetry performances in venues like the United States Conference of Mayors, they saw how the youths' poems could directly impact public policy, especially around issues of environmental literacy and engagement.

Together, these successes reaffirmed to Youth Speaks that their work could resonate far beyond the workshop, classroom, and stage. Emerging as an elaboration of Joseph's idea for a theatrical production he called "Red Black and Green (A Blues)", Life Is Living began to take shape in 2007. That year, the Living Word Festival, one of the organization's core programs since 1999, experimented with a youth event that brought in dance and graffiti centered on green themes.

As designed by Marc Bamuthi Joseph and Hodari Davis, Life Is Living became a more formal response to issues of literacy, audience development, and green living. Life Is Living meant to foster "audience development through the lens of eco-equity, the radically democratic position that poor communities and communities of color are logistically and psychologically included in to the new, clean and green economy." This direction marked departure from their previous work as a presenter—the events would go beyond poetry and center on a single social issue. But Life Is Living still resonated loudly with Youth Speaks' mission statement.

In 2008, Youth Speaks sponsored the "Red, Black and Green Environmental Caucus and Concert" at De Fremery Park in West Oakland, a historically significant space as it had been a primary site of community events organized by the Black Panther Party. The event was attended by 1,500 and capped by a Mos Def performance.

The success of the event led Youth Speaks to apply for and secure a 19-month \$150,000 grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation to, in its words, "support the LIFE branding initiative, which will host eco-equity interdisciplinary performance events in parks in underserved neighborhoods in a community-based convening that intersects environmental activism, interdisciplinary performance and next-generation artistic creation." More specifically, Youth Speaks set out to continue to replicate the events in Oakland and across the country, and to document and disseminate what it had learned through this paper and further discussions.

In May 2009, Youth Speaks partnered with Riverside Church and the City Parks Foundation in New York for the first Life Is Living festival. Later in the year, it partnered with The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and hip-hop arts/activist organization Kuumba Lynx for a second festival held at Clarendon park on the north side of Chicago. After both the New York and Chicago, a documentation team captured data from convenings of community organizers and local participants. Another Oakland festival closed out the year. In October 2010, a third festival in Oakland will happen. In November, Youth Speaks will put on a festival in a partnership with the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts at the University of Houston.

Each festival has included the following elements:

The Estria Invitational Graffiti Battle. Organized by world-renowned graffiti artist and organizer, Estria Miyashiro, these high-profile mural battles have focused on the visual expression of words like “Life”, “Earth”, “Word”, and “Alive”. The battles have gathered up to 24 of each city’s top artists. They paint in real-time so that festival-goers can stroll through live works as they are being created. After the festival the murals are exhibited by local partner organizations. From a sociohistorical point-of-view, the Estria Battles are a powerful corrective. Competition among graffiti writers has sometimes turned violent. The artform is still stigmatized as a gateway crime into neighborhood annihilation. Yet these events show graffiti to be an artform that celebrates creativity, interconnectedness, community, and life.

Brave New Voices Speak Green. At each *Life is Living*, members of the Brave New Voices Speak Green program (14-24 years old), perform original poems on green issues. These poets have also been featured at GreenBuild, the Sundance Film Festival and various other venues performing for mayors, presidents and policy makers. As young people articulate both their relationship to the larger environmental movement, they reveal the dilemmas the traditional green movement faces in reaching youth and communities of color, and affirm the importance of expanding the dialogue.

Dance Battle. The dance battles are among the most magnetic events occurring at the festivals. They feature b-boy and b-girl contests that honor the Bronx- and Brooklyn-originated movements that now are thought of as global classical hip-hop dance. But because new forms of hip-hop dance are always emergent and locally specific, these battles also incorporate the flavor of the city: juke and footwork battles in Chicago, turf dance battles in Oakland. These contests are literally vibrant celebrations of neighborhood movements.

Service Learning. Locally sponsored service-learning projects have engaged over 1,000 youths in a variety of community-development practices, including planting seeds in community gardens, feeding elderly community members, building aquaponic gardens, and constructing bamboo structures. Through this program, Youth Speaks ties together the need for community work and action with the development of creative and critical expression.

Youth Transit. Skateboarding and biking have been alternative means of transportation that allow for dynamic creative expression. A novel feature of Life Is Living festivals has been the incorporation of these youth subcultures. The Chicago festival was held near a public skateboard park that was transformed when Saul Williams decided he would perform there for the hundreds of skaters. In Oakland, the Hood Games installed skateboard ramps, attracting hundreds of youths who usually have to travel across the city or to Berkeley to skate. Youths also rode and exhibited their personally customized Scraper Bikes. In Houston later this year, a bike parade and a daily ride—coordinated by a local biking collective, Tour de Hood—are being planned. Graffiti artists will also paint carhoods that will form a fence for an organic farm.

Music Concert. Nationally recognized musicians such as Mos Def, E-40, The Coup, Pharoahe Monch, O-Maya, MC Lyte, Linda Tillery, and Goapele have performed free concerts in the park. While municipalities often sponsor outdoor concerts, urban parks such as West Oakland’s De Fremery Park are rarely chosen as venues. For many performers, Life Is Living reverses a common bind—artists are often compelled by success to perform increasingly outside of their communities, a cycle that bespeaks the gentrification of culture. The staging of such concerts is not only a powerful draw for the festival, it’s a reaffirmation of the value of these communities, both as inspiration and as audience.

Use of New Media. Each Life Is Living event has been filmed and documented by a documentation team led by Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi and Bethanie Hines. Rolando Brown and MVMT have also maintained a rigorous online presence through www.lifeisliving.org, and have leveraged discussions on blogs, Twitter, Facebook and other outlets. Over 300,000 users have logged on to engage with *Life is Living*, an extension of the physically-fixed festival experience.

In addition, Life Is Living has expanded its activities depending upon the needs and ambitions of its local partnering organizations. This expansion was significant. It reflected a crucial reframing of the work that gave Youth Speaks a new perspective on its goals and purposes.

IV. CHANGING THE ORGANIZATION, CHANGING THE FIELD: THE EVOLUTION FROM A “GREEN” FRAME TO A “LIFE” FRAME

In September 2006, a paper by the James Irvine Foundation called “Critical Issues Facing The Arts In California” described a new crisis in the nonprofit arts world. This crisis centered on dwindling demand and financial support for the work of many nonprofit arts organizations. The report stated flatly, “The nonprofit sector is no longer the ultimate arbiter of taste and talent that it once was, especially when it comes to emerging artists, artists working in immigrant communities and those working in media-based art forms.” For nonprofit arts organizations, the notion of “audience development” appeared to have taken on a new urgency.

But Youth Speaks did not recognize this non-profit arts crisis as theirs. They had a different problem: their audiences—very much inclusive of “emerging artists, artists working in immigrant communities and those working in media-based art forms”—were burgeoning and enthusiastic. But the non-profit arts sector did not recognize what they had done to reach that level.

To them, it was clear that the some non-profit arts presenters did not understand that creating new audiences was about engaging new participants exactly where they were (*in* their spaces and *through* their cultural interests), not where they were *not* (the empty seats in the venues). Rather than engaging communities, these presenters and the culture industry both treated “audiences” as consisting of passive consumers.

Youth Speaks staffers began to ask themselves: If the non-profits arts crisis demanded innovation, why did funding streams still favor the status quo? What about organizations that defined and achieved success through actively engaging individuals and communities? Weren’t funders simply sustaining unsustainable practices?

Confronted by the rhetoric of crisis, Youth Speaks reaffirmed the tenets of its mission statement:

- Underserved youth were the predominant focus;
- Literacy was the key to personal liberation and lifelong creativity;
- Creative expression could be a powerful, sustainable social good; and
- Community was both the target of change and the source of creative renewal.

At the same time an interest in all things “green” emerged. Hip-hop activist organizations in the Bay Area provided a crucial context. For instance, Van Jones and the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights pioneered green jobs policies for inner-city youths and made significant strides in bringing together the mainline environmental movement and hip-hop activism.

Life Is Living was therefore at first framed by these two discussions: the nonprofit arts crisis and the “green economy”. Youth Speaks felt that it could help revitalize the field by continuing to seek greater engagement not just *with*, but *in* underserved or ignored communities. It could further bridge the predominantly white environmental movement with Black and Brown youth movements, and advance social and cultural equity. Life Is Living was described as “a method of increasing our communities’ capacity to positively influence and powerfully benefit from the Green movement, as well as bring LIFE to environmental injustices.”

But through the convenings and further close discussions with its partners and festival participants, Youth Speaks staff found the “green” theme often clashed with the notion of youth-driven creative activity. After the Harlem Life Is Living event, participants and community members discussed whether or not the graffiti art contest was “green enough.” But Youth Speaks staff saw the question as the wrong one; that conversation that resulted pointed toward silencing youths.

As Rolando Brown says, “We wanted the conversation to be: instead of you saying I can’t use a spraycan, I’m gonna say my scraper bike is environmental. It’s more like, ‘What can you do? What can you contribute?’”

Youth Speaks staff also learned that “green” frame had spectacularly failed to resonate with young people. Some youths said that the idea felt like corporate branding, an imposition of outsiders’ views onto their autonomous, vital youth movements. Others were even more cynical. At the New York convening, one young participant commented, “It’s one day of fun in the park. The next day somebody gets shot.” In response, others noted that the idea of “life” was a more relevant and powerful theme. “Life” spoke to the fostering of environmental justice and environmental consciousness, the value of creativity, even the need for intergenerational dialogue.

While “green” signified consumption, elitism, and segregation, “life” signified positive values: creativity, spontaneity, and dialogue. “Green” was a narrowing frame, “life” was an expanding one. “Going green” felt like a departure from the Youth Speaks mission, talking “life” allowed them to think about their mission in new ways. The community feedback process, itself an outgrowth of Youth Speaks’ understanding of active audience development, refocused the organization on a more powerful frame.

Life Is Living was thus redefined in terms of the value of life: one’s own life, the life of the community, the life of the natural world. It returned the discussion towards Joseph’s ideal of increasing interconnectedness, interactiveness, and innovation. The process, in Joseph’s words, would:

- Reposition perceptions of where art takes place, who art is for, who are viable audiences, and how one experiences art;
- Develop new vocabulary for what art is, what social practice is, what community engagement is, what “green” is, what partnership is;
- Add value through non-hierarchical collaborations, where organizations forge a bond to do work—such as fundraising and programming—together, thereby creating new value through new relationships, new process, and new partnerships;
- Inspire innovation via these collaborations, requiring creative approaches to problem-solving;
- Model and grow a creative ecosystem, because after organizations and institutions have made their investment in such community-building work—whether monetary or otherwise—they will likely want to continue to grow their equity in it.

Youth Speaks had stumbled upon what they would call a “living theory of change”, one that would evolve as the institution brought in new ideas through its practice, and one that might recognize innovative work and practices outside its doors and incorporate them into the growth of sustainable creative ecosystems. If, in Youth Speaks’ practice, life was the primary text, then life here was also a powerful metaphor for creativity.

1) Life is the most important value to uphold.

Life is the universal element that unites concerns from the personal to the social. Sustainability begins with survival. Art—whether poetry, theater or community engagement—is fundamentally a celebration of the complexity of life. As such, it cannot but belong with progressive change.

2) Life is where we make it.

Social, cultural, and eco-equity begins with the valuing of life in under-resourced and ignored urban environments as equal to others. Promoting “safe spaces” of creativity are key, not only as a reaction to violence, but as a positive step towards reversing abandonment and fostering renewal.

3) *Life is what we make it.*

Creativity is the wellspring. It always rises and then spills over. It does not know funding silos, it does not know boundaries, and it escapes narrow definitions. It defines itself according to its own space, its own trajectory, and its own standards of excellence. Sustainability—or “sustainable survival practices”, a term coined by Davis—is the highest achievement of survival because it allows creativity to continue and evolve.

4) *Life begets life.*

The community is an ecosystem, and its health and growth depend upon diversity, care, and maintenance. As James Kass says, “To ward off unhealthy practices, you have to strengthen healthy practices.” Fostering collaborations and relationships preserves and nourishes a healthy ecosystem. Creativity springs from these relationships. Renewal and change are the natural results of maintaining a healthy community.

V. THE CREATIVE ECOSYSTEM

Life Is Living could be described as the process of modeling a creative ecosystem. The process is an expansive one; it takes into account the various actors in a community, their roles and their strengths. It then activates curiosity, inquiry, and play as it engages those actors to ply their unique perspectives toward community-wide problem or set of problems. In Hodari Davis’s words, “It’s a celebration of practices that already exist. It’s not about bringing a movement into a community. It’s more about bringing the community into a movement.”

A creative ecosystem may be a radically different way of understanding how to effect change in the community. It takes the notion of improving the community’s health as its end, but rather than taking a policy approach to a social problem—an approach that is necessarily limited by the resources and politics of the state—a creative ecosystem approach relies upon diverse, decentralized, community-driven solutions to that problem. A creative ecosystem approach takes advantage of the ways the artist and/or the arts organization is freer to propose, catalyze, and enact than other actors in civil society.

For instance, in Chicago, convening attendees gave examples of collaboration projects they had created to lead up to the event. Educational projects moved young people from establishing a sense of personal value to developing a sense of community value, from self-respect to respect for the environment, from an individual sense of survival to a collective understanding of sustainability. Many at the convening noted that the festival needed no visible police or security presence. The Festival was a culmination of an ongoing process of community-building.

These insights inform an expansion of activities for the two upcoming events. The second Oakland Life Is Living Festival, to be held in October, will feature a Food Justice Zone including a farmers’ market and organic food carts, a Health and Wellness Zone including massage and edible garden demos, a Youth Zone with face painting and an art wall, and a historical bike tour and Critical Mass bike ride. The music concert will feature 10 acts, including the Glide Memorial Church Choir, John Santos Sextet, The Coup and E-40. The acclaimed visual artists, Brett Cook and Theaster Gates, will be organizing large-scale participatory mural and totem-making projects that will be permanently placed in the community.

The Life Is Living Houston process also demonstrates the forging of a creative ecosystem. Produced in partnership with the University of Houston’s Mitchell Center for the Arts, the festival—including activities leading up to the festival—will involve no fewer than 26 community partners and hundreds of artists, activists, farmers, and educators. The setting will be Emancipation Park in Houston’s Third Ward. Life Is Living has leveraged University investment into the community, and that the collaborations that are being fostered by the event are creating tangible forms of equity for the Emancipation Park and Third Ward community.

Life Is Living is not an ongoing event in the cities outside of the Bay Area, a critique noted at the New York convening by some attendees. “In the beginning we thought of the event as the endpoint,” says Joseph. “We as an

organization have had a learning curve.” As the process has continued to evolve, Youth Speaks staffers have come to understand Life Is Living as a kind of catalytic cultural intervention that begins long before the festival day and may continue long after. The creative ecosystem already exists, if largely dormant. Life Is Living creates the parameters by which the ecosystem is made aware of itself, and through which new collaborations can be forged.

Through townhall meetings, performances, and other Life Is Living events in Houston, Youth Speaks staffers have worked deeply with their partners, community organizers, and green advocates in the Third Ward. The Mitchell Center continues to hold bi-weekly meetings with the community partners, and organizations are still joining in the festival. The result will be the largest Life Is Living Festival yet, encompassing such events as a vintage clothing exchange, live local cooking demonstrations, soccer and basketball tournaments, a day of service at a local organic farm, alongside mural projects, gardening, children’s activities, dance contests, and the concert. Like its natural counterpart, a creative ecosystem is strengthened by diversity. Mutuality and reciprocity are part of the process.

So it is unsurprising that the Life Is Living process has already begun to catalyze new collaborations among the partner organizations, separate from Youth Speaks and the Mitchell Center. For instance, the independent Aerosol Warfare gallery and the Last Organic Outpost farm intend to continue to do more events that will bring together the local graffiti scene and the organic movement. The Awakenings Ministry will hold services at the farm as well, and a harvest is planned. University of Houston professors will continue to work with the solar business SPACE to create family and residential applications of the technology—such as solar-powered doghouses and biodegradable play structures. Nicole Laurent of the Mitchell Center notes, “The relationships that they are building together will be the most tangible result of the Life is Living Festival. We hope that the energy may plateau then continue to build.”

VI. CONCLUSION: The Value of Ecosystems and The Role Of Artists And Nonprofit Arts Organizations In Change

Life Is Living made Youth Speaks regard its own organizational history in a different light. The organization had built up into its present incarnation by activating artists and audiences for poetry throughout the Bay Area, the country, and the world. It created the conditions for these programs to evolve beyond poetry into other ecosystems, such as the performing arts.

Now Life Is Living raises questions about how arts organizations can be relevant and important in this historical moment of change. It asks how ecosystems can be fostered for the benefit of communities. It also raises serious questions about how ecosystems in diverse communities are valued in a field where lack of innovation is often rewarded.

For much of the past decade, against the backdrop of a bubble economy, the public case for the arts followed Richard Florida’s influential thesis of “the creative class”. Florida believed that the arts were a spur to local economies because they attracted a class of liberal, highly educated, highly skilled information-economy workers who would then improve the social and economic life of a city. Florida’s thesis—and his corollary, that industrial cities like Detroit were doomed—was taken to heart by municipalities battered by the post-industrial economy, from Albany to Oakland. In this narrative, the nonprofit arts sector could be useful as a catalyst for *someone else* and *something else*. Much like the communities they served, they were not valued for what they were and did in and of themselves. Change could only be imposed from the outside.

When Life Is Living organizers proposed events held in the heart of urban communities, some were concerned about the safety of the park spaces that were chosen. These open spaces in the inner city were perceived as unpopulated, “under-utilized” spaces, and unsafe. Yet for community members they were hubs of activity. Hodari Davis notes that De Fremery Park was where his daughter learned to swim, where he held practices for his youth baseball teams. “These spaces aren’t underutilized,” says Davis. “They are under-resourced.” Valued less by the city government than parks in the hillside neighborhoods, De Fremery Park was nonetheless a key cultural center.

Youth Speaks values this space as an ecosystem, and Life Is Living activates the community in its own renewal. Here change comes from within.

It may someday be written as a happy historical irony that cities like Detroit, New Orleans and Oakland—which had once been dismissed as examples of urban death—were in fact renewed by independent artists and by independent-minded, often, but not always, nonprofit arts organizations. An alternative history of each of these cities during the 2000s might note the key role that artists and arts organizations played in maintaining communities against deeper decline and in tending to the kinds of cultural ecosystems that are leading their return. These stories are being written by those who value the arts for what it can do, not what it is not doing or what *e/se* it might do.

A creative ecosystem approach may be one of the best ways for artists and arts organizations to engage social issues. Cultural change can be defined as the shifts in social consciousness that must precede and accompany other forms of change (political, economic). Here artists and arts organizations are in their element. Because of their ability to balance divergent and convergent thinking, artists and arts organizations also may serve as highly effective catalysts and bridges—bringing together actors from widely varying fields. At its best the ecosystem—once visualized and made manifest—can then continue on, even if there is no additional intervention.

What the arts, artists, and artist organizations do—and perhaps do best—is to give voice to new energies and ideas, preserve important traditions, awaken and strengthen networks of creativity, and foster the kind of thinking, dreaming, and work that seeds the ground for sustainable survival practices. Here, finally, is the importance of art and place. Art believes in life, cultivates life, cares about life when no one else will. Life Is Living begins from the notion that survival is the beginning of sustainability and concludes that a healthy community is the end toward which the best arts practices arc.

APPENDIX A: YOUTH SPEAKS MISSION STATEMENT

Youth Speaks works to shift the perceptions of youth by combating illiteracy, alienation, and silence, creating a global movement of brave new voices bringing the noise from the margins to the core.

Youth Speaks creates safe spaces that empower the next generation of leaders, self-defined artists, and visionary activists through written and oral literacies. We challenge youth to find, develop, publicly present, and apply their voices as creators of societal change.

By providing free arts education to youth with limited access, our programs seek to empower young people with opportunities to discover and develop their own voices. We firmly believe that in order to overcome the difficulties of the circumstances within which they are situated, young people must think of their voices as vital tools through which they can process their lives, shape the world around them, and hone their abilities to envision and create long-lasting impact. To achieve this, our programs employ educational best practices while encouraging youth to write about issues relevant to them, in their own vernacular. Youth thus engage their own cultures and bridge their personal literacies to the traditional academic literacies presented in school.

At Youth Speaks the voices of youth matter.

We Believe in VOICE

We believe it is critical that young people have opportunities to find, develop, publicly present, and intentionally apply their voices. Silence is a powerful thing when chosen, but incredibly oppressive when forced upon.

We Believe in CONTINUUM

We are committed to providing opportunities for youth to engage with the tradition of oral literacy and oral poetics so as to immortalize the voices of today's young writers.

We Believe in COMMUNITY

Youth Speaks reflects diversity and engenders a community of young artists who reach across demographic boundaries toward self-exploration and growth, providing a platform where conflicts are resolved on the page or the stage, rather than on the street.

We Believe in CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Youth Speaks is committed to the written and spoken word, innovating our program so that it remains accessible and attractive to the population we serve, and reflects their stories without leaving out the stories that have come before.

We Believe in INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Youth Speaks provokes movement from silence to empowerment based in liberatory pedagogy and youth development. We intend to democratize a civic population of youth by giving them a platform to speak.

We Believe in EXCELLENCE

We challenge young people to find their own voices, to work hard to apply them, and to do so responsibly. We ask youth to not be afraid of their own potential; we promise them we won't be.

We Believe in LIFE

We are firmly attached to the idea that every young person matters, that we all deserve to be safe in our local environments, and have the right to know that our voices will be heard and will live on.

We Believe in LOVE

We are compelled by the radical notion of community before self, sacrifice before greed, love over hate, peace over war, and hope over hopelessness to *speak, act, believe*, and risk it all rather than become mere spectators of history.

APPENDIX B: LIFE IS LIVING VALUES STATEMENT

Our Values

Living.

We understand that crimes against human life are just as important as crimes against other forms of life in our world. We believe in messages that recognize environmental crimes against communities like West Oakland & the South Bronx are just as pressing as those in the Western Arctic & the Southern Amazon.

Word.

We believe that due to the work of great environmental activists and green economy supporters, the dominant sustainability narrative has improved with regards to its relevancy to youth. Still, this narrative isn't as accessible as it can be, and it will take brave new voices to creatively tell stories of new perspectives and points of view.

History.

We know as a matter of historical fact, that youth have long histories of actively caring about LIFE. We value the innovations of those encouraging all-inclusive methods of green action that can be easily implemented. We look to have, as an end-result, a series of performative non-fiction essays in which the ethos of environmental justice & racism are deconstructed as the result of historical facts, rather than inherent or implicit conditions of the human temperament.

Real Possibilities.

We believe in messages tied to the reality of what people in urban communities are making possible. We encourage shining light those actively adopting alternatives that can enhance the quality of their lives.