

BUILDING BETTER FUTURES: COMPLEX MOVEMENTS BRINGS ‘BEWARE OF THE DANDELIONS’ TO DETROIT

*Multifarious piece—part interactive sculpture, part community engagement project
—uses speculative fiction for social change*



Outside the *Beware of the Dandelions* pod at Talking Dolls in Detroit.

DOUG COOMBE

It's the day after the 2016 United States presidential election as I write here. After the counting of electoral votes the night before, Americans are faced with the reality that a candidate who was endorsed by the KKK and "alt-right" white supremacists is now the president-elect. The country feels divided after a neck-and-neck race between the two candidates. Eight years after electing its first black president, the nation is now experiencing an inverse backlash or "whitelash," as political analyst Van Jones termed it. As Americans try to understand how this happened and prepare to resist or indulge the murky ideals of its underqualified and inexperienced president-elect, I'm wondering how art-making will be affected by his transparently racist, homophobic, and xenophobic administration.

In recent months, we’ve witnessed artists responding to the election in myriad ways. In October, Carrie Mae Weems created a pro-Hillary video [titled *The Power of Your Vote*](#), which features audio of President Obama’s recent speech to the Congressional Black Caucus, paired with visuals of pedestrians on American city streets. Feminist performance artist Martha Wilson has even assumed the character of Donald Trump, dressing as the polarizing figure and carrying out his persona in public spaces and art galleries, in an effort to interrogate his vitriolic personality.

Since Trump’s election, a handful of [articles](#) have suggested that the art market may benefit from a Trump administration—a reminder of how brutally capitalistic the art industry is, though that has hardly been a secret. What I’m concerned about, though, is what the role of artists will be in such a polarized moment in America. How can artists incite and facilitate social change?



L05, ill/Invincible, and Jeedo in the control room.

DOUG COOMBE

These are questions I was also asking myself exactly one month before election day, on October 9, 2016, as I went to see the latest body of work by the Detroit-based trans and interdisciplinary arts collective Complex Movements. The collective comprises musician and activist ill/Invincible Weaver, graphic designer and artist Wesley Taylor, artist, designer, performer, and engineer Carlos “L05” Garcia, music producer Jeedo/Waajeed, and producer Sage Crump. Together, they have provided us with a prototype for an artistic practice committed to creating narrative-shifting work that influences social change, while also presenting objects and experiences that are aesthetically appealing and unprecedented.

The collective describes [Beware of the Dandelions](#) as a mobile art installation that encompasses holistic elements of hip-hop performance, visual arts, and social justice organizing. So far, the piece has traveled to Seattle and Dallas. The first time the group presented the work in its home city, Detroit, was October.

This delayed homecoming was in part due to the fact that Complex Movements simply could not find a location in the city that had both the proper space for the installation and met its ethical standards. “Trying to find a venue here has been an upward, uphill struggle,” ill/Invincible told me during a meeting with the collective. I met with ill, L05, Sage, and Taylor at Talking Dolls a few weeks after experiencing the installation. The space had been completely transformed since my last encounter. On the days of the performance, participants encountered walls covered in black drapery, with a waiting area and a path outlined by the black fabric leading to a larger room with the installation. During my conversation with the collective a few weeks later, the drapery was gone, and the waiting room resembled a bare artist studio. While I sat with the group, ill shared how difficult it was for the collective to find the ideal space in Detroit for *Beware of the Dandelions*.

ill/Invincible said, “We would’ve done this piece sooner [in Detroit] had that not been the issue, but because of the dynamics and layers of displacement and cultural displacement here in the city, there just weren’t too many art venues that felt value aligned—a safe and productive space for us and our communities to engage in—in addition to the space fitting the technical needs of the piece, which is a challenge in and of itself.” Their willingness to wait, and decline venue offers that were at times tied to organizations they felt were undermining the very political efforts of the group is indicative of Complex Movements’ core nature. The collective is arguably the antithesis of the art industry, rejecting its interplay between artists, corporations, and celebrity prestige. Sometimes this comes at the expense of having to postpone their installation projects.



Inside the pod.

COURTESY COMPLEX MOVEMENTS

And so the group ended up staging *Beware of the Dandelions* at a space set up by one of their own, Taylor, who cofounded Talking Dolls, an experimental design studio nestled in Detroit’s east side, an area not yet gentrified with coffee shops and dog parks that is home to plenty of post-industrial residue, including beige, brown, and brick-colored warehouse spaces that once housed parts for local auto industry plants. Located in one of those buildings, the studio is very much a destination, but

if someone hasn’t tipped you off, it is unlikely that you would ever stumble across it.

Beware of the Dandelions is pretty much the exact opposite of that unassuming building—it is a technologically advanced interactive sculpture that combines the sophistication and nuance of Martin Puryear’s sculptures with the skeletal yet functional architecture of Mies van der Rohe. Described briefly, it is a 400-square-foot geometric pod structure composed of several somewhat opaque screens. Being inside it is like being ensconced inside a strangely luminous diamond. In the pod, there is a small camera, LED lighting, and surround sound speakers. Complex Movements invites up to 35 people or so to experience the performance and installation for about an hour at a time. A couple of dozen performances, presentations, and public programs were held throughout the duration of the installation during the entire month of October.

At the core of *Beware of the Dandelions* is a shape-shifting story. Throughout the hour-long experience, ill/Invincible acts as a narrator, telling a story through lyrical rhythms, in a cinematic style of drama and intrigue.

ill/Invincible’s cadence and delivery have all the markings of classic hip-hop performances—there are elements of storytelling, calls and responses, and variations of flow. However, ill/Invincible is not present in the pod and not visible to the audience that surrounds it until the very end. The physical absence of the emcee, in what can be viewed as a concert, is one of the first ways Complex Movements dismantles and reconfigures the expectations of audience members in the installation.



A performance still.

DOUG COOMBE

The story that ill/Invincible tells would not be out of place in an Octavia Butler science-fiction novel. It is set in the Planetation Hub—the last livable place on the planet, which is ruled by ultra-wealthy one-percenters known as the Dome

Dwellers. Extreme military units, the Groundskeepers, also protect the Hub. It is implied that those authorities, although ostensibly there to protect the townspeople, are in fact limiting the freedoms and resources of the Hub’s citizens.

The pod structure in the installation is positioned in the narrative as a communication and surveillance center in the Hub, which is later reclaimed by the Hub’s townspeople to share untold histories from the community members. Essentially the citizens in the Hub (the 99 percent) have been working in an industry, harvesting apples that are unjustly consumed by Dome Dwellers to preserve their immortality.

The townspeople exist in a state of exploitation akin to conditions that American blue-collar workers have faced throughout the 20th century, premised on promises that never seem to be fulfilled.

The narrative takes a turn when the citizens’ respected elder, keeper of knowledge for survival, and “oracle,” GG, dies after going on a hunger strike in an effort to protest the use of pesticides in the community’s orchards by the Dome Dwellers. After GG’s death, youthful organizers Zakera, GG’s niece, and Maji enter the narrative. They propose conflicting strategies for how the townspeople should move forward. Their inability to create workable strategies that all can agree on causes a rift among the townspeople—an issue not uncommon in grassroots organizing efforts. I later learned that GG is based on a host of real activists and community leaders, such as Henrietta Lacks, Grace Lee Boggs, and Charity Hicks.



ill/Invincible speaking, with Jeedo in back.

COURTESY COMPLEX MOVEMENTS

As the emcee shares this story, the audience—or participants, more accurately—are presented with three-dimensional-like graphics and instructions that are displayed on the surrounding panels. The graphics created by Taylor and Garcia include

avatars of the townspeople, images of the fictional dystopian landscape, and instructions for participants to follow. During my visit, another distinct voice entered the space, Complex Movements member Waajeed. He advised us to divide ourselves up into two groups in the space. The performance I attended was a preview, and included mostly Detroit community members who had worked together or organized together at some point in time. That familiarity allowed us to joke with one another freely as we navigated the installation prompts, not knowing what to expect.

We were then asked to create a series of hand claps to make a collective rhythmic pattern without talking to one another. Before we did, we all looked around instinctively, waiting for someone to lead us in the task. After a few seconds, one participant began clapping, creating a simple pattern for us to follow. What we were able to produce was a sound similar to [starling murmuration](#). Our murmuration triggered sensors in the pod, and our collective sounds were translated on the panels into the movements of small black ant figures.

This was a fun and engaging way to immerse people in an artistic experience, yes, but the task was also very much a strategic means to an end. The practice of murmuration is a metaphor for emergent strategy, a set of certain consistent actions that form an inadvertent pattern, not initially anticipated or intended in the initial planning phase.^[1] At its core is improvisation, trust, and collaboration. An example of emergent strategy at the most organic level is the [murmuration of starlings as they fly together in huge groups](#).

As larger powers influence socioeconomic and political conditions in our cities and in our country at large, community members, specifically in Detroit, have been actively organizing to perpetuate social change without the help of the city government, which is lacking in both financial resources and power, and other authorities. This work has relied heavily on collective work and strategies that emerge as they are being implemented. *Beware of the Dandelions* is emblematic of these grassroots ideologies, which has manifested itself through the work of the late Detroit leaders Hicks and Boggs.



DOUG COOMBE

Charity Hicks was a Detroit community leader and organizer who founded the Detroit People's Water Board. She was integral in leading efforts to resist shutting off water to low-income residents in the city, and organized efforts pertaining to environmental justice and food security. Hicks's work could be seen as a continuation of the activism and philosophies of Grace Lee Boggs, who died at the age of 100 in 2015. Known for interrogating poor living conditions and civil and labor rights, Boggs and her husband, James Boggs, were highly influential in justice efforts for low-income residents and people of color living in the city throughout the later half of the 20th century. At the core of both Hicks's and Boggs's activism is a call for humanity and empathy toward the human experience.

Hicks's and Boggs's approach to fomenting change in Detroit resounds in *Beware of the Dandelions*, which involved its creators' conducting research on cities where the project would be installed. As immersive and impressive as the actual physical installation is, the project is arguably even more so impactful on the level of [community engagement](#). The community arm of the project is informed by the Urban Bush Women's *Entering, Building and Exiting Community (EBX)* strategy, which values multiple truths, community autonomous collaboration, and the process of community engagement, as well as the final product.

Complex Movements engages with communities 18 months to 2 years prior to installing *Beware of the Dandelions*. For the Detroit interaction, the collective invited community members to facilitate and host programs in the installation that included skill-sharing sessions, potlucks, mural making, and book releases. "In order to [engage with communities] with a level of reciprocity, authenticity, and integrity we realized we had to be partners with communities," said Sage Crump, the cultural strategist of the collective. "We had to figure out how to be in relationship with communities that may not have access to the type of spaces that were interested in this work. The inspiration is about how people make change."

Before the end of the game-like experience in the narrative installation, we are told that Zakera reaches a point of enlightenment and is reminded briefly of the tenants of survival her elder GG shared with her. The ephemeral memory eventually helps resolve the townspeople's problems. "Turn constraints into resources, turn the waste into three courses... So help the land bless you, this knowledge is ancestral," GG declares. Through the vision of this memory, the townspeople are reminded to follow GG's practice by investing in agricultural efforts to ensure autonomy over core resources.



Inside the pod during an interactive section.

COURTESY COMPLEX MOVEMENTS

Through organizing and collective strategy, they are encouraged to use this knowledge to prevail against the powers that be. At the end, ill/Invincible joined participants in the pod, and called for us each to share what we “Wage Love” for. One person said “liberation,” another said “courage,” and one woman said, “For Kalief Browder and all the other Kalief Browder’s we don’t know about,” referring to the New York teenager who was incarcerated for three years awaiting trial on charges that were later dismissed, endured abuse and long periods of solitary confinement, and committed suicide after being released. As I departed from the deeply immersive experience, I felt an urgency to commit to forging idealized futures for ourselves and our communities.

The type of futurity and science fiction narrative building that Complex Movements brings forth is indicative of a grander ethos that exists among Detroit creatives. Complex Movements could be likened to the work of Sun Ra, John Akomfrah’s *Last Angel in History*, and most recently Rashid Johnson’s focus on escapism in “Fly Away,” his latest solo show in New York. All in some way posit the use of science fiction to explore ideas of otherness, displacement, and survival despite a lack of resources. However, Complex Movements takes it a step further than those examples, presenting us with dystopian scenarios of what could become reality, while simultaneously asserting strategies for how humans can grapple with the impending threats of the privatization of water and other resources, climate change, and the extreme effects of gentrification. Complex Movements represents the intersection and use of speculative fiction as a catalyst for social change.

One of the many works that influenced *Beware of the Dandelions* is an anthology of short stories by adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha, *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. The stories focus on imagined futures of just utopias. In the book’s foreword, writer Sheree Renee Thomas captures and shares the impact of intersecting activism, art, and science fiction broadly, and the work of Complex Movements specifically. She writes, “[Art