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The Future of Work: The 'Citizen Artist' Bringing Hope to Pittsburgh's Homewood

Vanessa German saved her own life by making art — and breathed new life into her neighborhood by inviting local kids to make it, too.

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Think-tank like festivals can be hit or miss, but I jumped at the chance to attend last week's eighth annual Tom Tom Summit & Festival in Charlottesville, Virginia, and it didn't disappoint. Some 5,000 people showed up for a week of engaging thought-leadership on creativity, urban problem solving, and how to build a "creative ecosystem." Here's one of three women I was lucky enough to snag a private audience with.

When Vanessa German strides onto the stage of Charlottesville's Jefferson Theater, the first thing you notice is her swishing skirt. Stiff and hand-painted in bright cobalt, red, and yellow, its design features a

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scattering of oversize, unblinking eyes. They peer out at the audience as if to say, "Yes, I am watching you." German is a self-described "Citizen Artist" and, as such, it's true that her gaze — attuned to systemic hypocrisy as well as the both the personal, individual promise and the piercing need within her community — misses little. She's here to deliver one of the festival's keynote speeches but, she informs the audience, what's about to happen is unlikely to resemble any keynote they've seen before. Underscoring this point, she starts by silently plucking the petals from a clutch of long-stemmed red roses, casting them across the stairs that lead up to the stage she dominates. "Someone's coming up here on the stage," she says, in a tone that is part invitation, part warning, "and I'm doing this now so you can start thinking about if it should be you." Then she walks to center stage, throws back her head, and proceeds to sing — no, blast — a poem into the air. For those who came to this theater expecting to hear a TED-style talk by an influential female fine artist, this powerful, melodic incantation is completely unexpected. The sound is stunning. The audience is rapt.

German is a sculptor, painter, writer, activist, performer, and poet. As a visual artist, she's best known for her sculptural assemblages: Mad, riotously detailed African American "Power Figures" often made of materials found in abandoned buildings and lots. As a "fat, queer, black, wanting-to-be-joyful human being," she credits the making of these figures with keeping her alive. They've also earned her a place on art's main stage, including, in 2018, the prestigious Don Tyson Prize from the Crystal Bridges Museum, worth \$200,000.

But as an activist, her success is much closer to home. Growing up, German lived in Milwaukee, Los Angeles, and Cincinnati. In adulthood she chose to carve out a life for herself in the Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh, where the high rate of gang- and drug-related violence often overshadows a rich artistic and cultural past — and, until a recent boom in gentrification, houses were often foreclosed upon or abandoned. A decade or so ago, German built sculptures in her Homewood basement. But then her pieces got so big, they had to be dismantled in order to be taken out of the house, a process she found heartbreaking. So she started making her art on the front porch, in full view of the curious neighborhood kids. Soon children were dropping by daily, asking questions, watching her work. German got them art supplies. Then their families started coming too. Now there was a community that wanted to make art all the time, rain or shine. A front porch wasn't enough.

Eventually German made ARTHouse official: She bought her first house in Homewood for \$3,495, including closing costs. Today she owns two rowhouses, side by side — she lives in one apartment, works in another, and has dedicated one to ARTHouse. Nearly every inch of the building's sky-blue exterior is adorned, with a mosaic of multi-color stars stretching over most of the front stoop and a sweeping sign that reads, "We are all here together." The place is a beacon of light and life in neighborhood that desperately needed one, and a constantly-open space (funded mostly by German herself), where kids, women, and families gather to make art.

As she described this on the stage at Tom Tom, the slide behind her reads, "I believe in the power of art." Listening to her story, it's hard not to agree. (Fun fact: German's cousin, actress Kelly McCreary, has played Dr. Maggie Pierce on Grey's Anatomy since 2014).

MAGGIE BULLOCK: What is a citizen artist?

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VANESSA GERMAN: When I started calling myself that, I didn't know that anybody else called themselves that. After I started the ARHouse, I needed to find a way to say, "This is the center of my life, and I'm asking you to do everything possible." That sounds romantic, but that's what I'm going to do: Inhabit my citizenship as your neighbor, as a human, as a black person, as a gay person, as an American, as much as I can. People just didn't understand. [They wanted to know] who told me that I could do what I'm doing? "Who said you can just buy a house, put out art supplies, and then open the door and say anybody can come in? Who says that that's okay? Who funds it? Who did you get the idea from?" It was like I had to explain the permission that I gave myself, so that I could say to people, "You can decide too. As a human citizen, you can decide all by yourself."

MB: Why do you think they were distrustful?

VG: Well, I think that racism and white supremacy are marvelous thieves. We know now about how trauma affects the body. In the most amazing line from the movie *Dark Girls*, about colorism, a white psychologist says, "Do whatever you can in your lifetime to heal the trauma that you have, because you will pass it on to your children." So, in my neighborhood in Homewood that's populated by black people, single mothers, mostly women-led households, it's not a surprise to me that they would say, "Who said you could do this?" Because that question at one point was a matter of life or death.

MB: Your mother was a fiber artist. How did her artistry shape yours?

VG: My mother had a really clear, brilliant creative mind. I think that it was hard for her, even though she loved us and loved having kids, to not have more of her own creative time. One of the ways she raised us to be whole people — and also to make sure that she had her own time — is she'd make us make things. We would choose the fabric for our own clothes, and then lay the pattern out, and cut out our own clothes. We'd make scrunchies for our hair. We'd make our own stuffed animals. She would just set stuff all over the dining room table and be like, "Here."

MB: And your father?

VG: My father, in Milwaukee, worked for Schlitz. He always had these ideas at the plant. He'd say, "You know, if you moved that part over here, you would cut down the time." So he rose up through the ranks. Eventually he got a job at Toyota in Terminal Island in Long Beach, California. My dad, no college degree, loving math and getting into computers, was one of the people who designed the import software for Toyota parts. My dad went to work wearing a suit and smelling like cologne, and my mom stayed home with us.

MB: Sounds pretty traditional.

VG: My mother was also an activist. She was one of the students at the University of Wisconsin who got put in the U-Haul van when the black students took over during the Civil Rights Movement. I remember being afraid of my mother's friends, I could tell that they weren't flaky women, because I'd been around women who were flaky. I remember as a little girl, recognizing that there were different ways that women moved through the world, different ways that women expressed themselves to get what they wanted.

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These activists were so strong. They would look me in my eye like they could see through me. I remember being able to play with certain adults, and thinking, "I can't play with these women." My mother spoke a lot of different languages, and she had friends from all over the world, and they would come to the house have these intense conversations. Sometimes they would quilt together. I remember being outside the door of my mother's sewing room, listening to the sound of their voices, and recognizing that this was serious women's work. And that they were also sort of feeding each other.

MB: Growing up, you lived in Milwaukee, L.A, and then Cincinnati. How did you end up in Homewood, which at one point was called the most dangerous neighborhood in America?

VG: In Los Angeles, one of the schools I went to had to physically move its location because there was so much violence around it. In Homewood, five boys were once killed in one weekend. The youngest died of a leg wound. People heard shots, didn't see anything outside. [But] somebody had shot a kid in a vacant lot. The grass was so high that he fell, and nobody saw his body for days, and he bled and died. I remember thinking, "This sounds familiar, like Los Angeles in the '80s and early '90s. Why is it happening in Pittsburgh?"

But that doesn't happen every day. It doesn't happen every week. Most people aren't shooting each other. Most people are not running drugs. It's a very small percentage of the population who are engaging in really extreme activities. John Edgar Wideman, who wrote a series of books called *The Homewood Trilogy*, lived in Homewood. Lena Horne hung out in Homewood. Dinah Washington's aunt lived across the street. There were these great basement hip-hop producers in Homewood. There was all this black creativity and black imagination bubbling up — which is not nearly as sensational as 'five little boys got shot and killed in one weekend,' right? All this historical energy is still moving. You can call upon that energy, and use it as an ingredient. I knew that it mattered to be an artist, and to be a part of the fabric of the community, like how everybody in the neighborhood knows who the teachers are: "Oh, that's Ms. Stevens, she teaches over there." It mattered to be, "She's an artist in this community."

MB: When did you realize that your front porch was more than a neighborhood hangout?

VG: I was making art on the front porch and eventually, you know, kids would make art on the front porch. It wasn't just kids: their parents would come, grandmothers would come, and they'd be like, "This is amazing. We can just sit here and make art. The kids are having a great time, and I can stick this on my wall." Some kids were making crazy beautiful stuff. One boy was obsessed with painting the night sky with stars. He had moved to Pittsburgh from Georgia, and he was trying to replicate the night sky in Georgia, obsessively. It was so powerful to witness.

MB: But awful things kept happening right outside of the ARThouse.

VG: I made "Stop shooting, we love you" signs, and one man that put one in his front yard, somebody went to his door and shot him. Nobody knows why. The news [crew] came to my house after Mr. Jeff was killed. They're like, "How does it feel to have somebody die in front of this sign?" Over that time, the August Wilson Center for African American culture went into foreclosure, and there was this horrible series of articles in the newspaper that said the people running it didn't have the financial wherewithal

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to keep this ship afloat. I was like, "You know what? Nobody's going to be able to take that house from me. I'm going to buy a space. I'm going to buy it in cash." It'll function as my studio and I'll keep opening the front door. There will never be an article in the newspaper like, "They couldn't handle it, they couldn't keep it a float." I bought two houses next to each other. And one of them is the ARThouse.

MB: How has your own depression informed your trajectory as an artist?

VG: I grew up making art. Before I necessarily called myself an artist, I was a teaching artist in school programs whose mission was, like, "Heal communities of color through engagement." But that wasn't present inside of some of the programs. I watched people taking advantage of children, taking money from programs for children, all while saying they were doing something good, giving themselves pats on the back. That pain piled up inside of me, on top of recognizing all around me that as neighbors and communities, we were not able to be with each other: We were losing eye contact, and unable to hear each other's stories. There's a lot of fear around saying what you saw, saying what you feel about it. Fear of being found to have feelings about a thing. I couldn't really figure out how to keep myself inside of the energy that it took to hustle so hard, to keep the lights on. I was like, "Is this what being alive is going to be?" I had the kind of depression that I hated mornings, because it meant there was a whole day ahead.

MB: During your Tom Tom keynote, you said there was a six-month period where you were living in a basement apartment that had no running water, just trying to keep yourself alive. How did you do that?

VG: I stopped working for anybody else. I was like, "I'm going to see what's possible. I'm going to do whatever I want." I picked up stuff off the ground — free art supplies in the vacant lot. Free art supplies in the partially fallen-down hall. That's literally where I got the first wood I worked with: banisters from stairs. I pulled the nails out of other things. And the morning changed for me, because I thought, "What am I going to find today?" I was making stuff. I didn't call it art until a dealer came to my house and was like, "I can sell these." I figured if he's paying me \$3,000 for that thing I made in my basement, I wonder how much he's selling it to somebody else for? I thought, this can sustain my life. This sustained my soul. I am healthier than I was when I started this. And, I could do this every day.

MB: Last year, you won a big art award. How does \$200,000 change things?

VG: The money doesn't so much change the day to day, because I have an active work life as an artist. When I won, I called my accountant. She goes, "You know that's not \$200,000 right?" She was like, "Your tax rate is click, click, click, click [mimes punching a calculator]. What you won was \$123,000." One of the things that was important about that prize was that I had absolutely no idea it was happening. I don't live in New York or Los Angeles. The work is alive in the world. When the man called to tell me I won, I said, "Who nominated me?" He said, "Vanessa several people nominated you." As a self-taught artist, people were literally like, "Well, Vanessa, you'll be a certain kind of artist. You can do those great summer festivals by rivers and you'll be able to sell your stuff." And I was like, "Oh, OK. I'll be a certain kind of artist." One person literally said, "You'll be the kind of artist who will have to ask people if they will show your work." It was really important for me to have people from outside of the world that I came up in look at my work, and look at my life, and say, "That's good, that's important. It's right. It's right for now."