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GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Detroit's Perpetual Renaissance

Timeless Visions and Daily Blindness in the Detroit Arts Scene

Susan Badger Booth
Eastern Michigan University

Mark Clague
University of Michigan

> *Most people just found out their jobs are bullshit (or at least not essential). We also just realized that migrant farmers, grocery clerks, and janitors are. It is the role of the artists to bear witness to our collective shifts, and continue to bear our souls. We are acting not only as a mirror that reflects moments/space in history but a window that allows for radical collective re-imagination of a future that is vastly different than what we have been led to believe was normal.* (Cassells 2020)

As we write, the COVID-19 pandemic has invaded the city of Detroit, which has become a regional hotspot. "Southeast Michigan Is Burning," reads a recent headline in the *Detroit Free Press* as it describes how the virus's case count has doubled every three days. Some thirty percent of cases in the state of Michigan are found in Detroit (Shamus & Tanner 2020). All public gatherings have been canceled. There are no concerts. Museum doors are locked. Galleries are shuttered. Only the city's public art is on display, yet no one is looking at the murals in Eastern Market—the streets barren, the city is closed.

It seems likely that the COVID-19 pandemic will be a transformative event for Detroit and, indeed, the world. Art will survive, but it will be different; reshaped not only by short-term cash crises and institutional closures, but by a shift in the psyche of our audiences as well as the communities artists serve. Myriad questions arise: when will audiences be willing to assemble by the thousands in Orchestra Hall? Will artists, whose sheer grit, before COVID-19, allowed them to survive, scrape by economically as arts entrepreneurs into the future? Will the gigs return? Will artists pursue other work? How will they adjust to changing circumstances? The answers to these questions will be many, but the history of Detroit suggests one conclusion: that the determination of artists will find a way forward, probably outside the focus of the media spotlight and outside the galleries and stages of the city's premier institutions. But Detroit's artists will find a way to make their art and by doing so will (re)make the city.

> Right now—with COVID-19 in the city of Detroit—Detroiters have got to sit down and remember who we were during Bankruptcy, who we were during the riots, who we were personally in the microcosm of existence—in your mother's house, grandmother's house, grandfather's house, father's house. When things looked bleak. When it seemed like you were in your own personal famine. To remember how you made it out of there. If you don't do that, you run the risk of assimilating into the fear. . . . That'll be the death of me, quicker than COVID-19. (Smith 2020)

Detroit's Renaissance Dilemma

> I have a problem with the phrase 'renaissance' to describe the era that Detroit finds itself in right now. It seems to imply that we were a podunk town that needed a renaissance. I like to call it an 'enlivening' not a renaissance. (Perron 2020)

Figure 1. Detroit. July 25, 2019. Brandan "BMike" Odums and Rick Williams's "They Tried to Bury Us. They Didn't Know We Were Seeds" mural displayed in the Eastern Market in Detroit, MI. Photo by Raymond Boyd/Getty Images.

The incessant repetition of Detroit's urban 'Renaissance' narrative offers an instructive perspective. As interviews with the city's artists and arts administrators signal, an endless public relations cycle has emerged around Detroit that alternates claims of crisis and proclamations of Detroit's rebirth. Artists/Community Organizer Halima Cassells laments, "From a corporate media lens, invitations for people from the outside to come in and take advantage of the city are offered. Recovery is a loaded concept. What has recovered? Education, water, parking – everything is being privatized," (Cassells 2020).

No matter how well intentioned, this Renaissance ruse focuses journalistic attention on political solutions that have one common thread—a devaluing of the community already present. While the term "Renaissance" in reference to Detroit often invokes art (sometimes literally in discussing the 16th-century gallery of the Detroit Institute of Arts), it rarely is associated with the artists who live and work there. The story of Detroit's artists entrepreneurs is, as often as not, a tale of determination to survive being written against a background of indifference; at best, and, at worst, a series of disruptive urban renewal initiatives that make survival in the city, itself, into an art.

The phrase "Detroit's Renaissance" first appears on the front page of the city's *Detroit Free Press* newspaper in 1954 under the banner headline "Dynamic City of Future Now Being Forged." Written at what would be the statistical height of the city's population, then at some 1.8 million, the article's lede invokes—seemingly for the first time—the notion of a Detroit reborn:

> Detroit's renaissance, its civic reawakening, is upon us. This rebirth already is beginning to breathe new spirit into the city. Along the waterfront, where the city took roots and sprouted to great size, new milestones are being laid for the Detroit of tomorrow. With each passing day, the concepts of architects and planners are taking form in cement and steel and marble, as Detroit's Civic Center rises toward completion. (Beckman 1954)

The article praises the creation of a "Civic Center for Detroit," a project long-delayed by the Depression and WWII, that would not only memorialize the sacrifice of the city's veterans, but create a series of buildings that would make Detroit into "one of the country's greatest convention cities." These modernist, international-style buildings were intended to signal that Detroit was a city of progress. They included the Veterans Memorial Building (1948–50), the City-County Building (1951–54), and the Henry and Edsel Ford Auditorium (1955). A Convention Hall-Exhibits Building (which would open as Cobo Hall in 1960) was also planned. As would be expected in the "motor city," the plans called for additional automobile parking and a rerouting of highways to serve the new urban design. These new arteries and amenities would bring people downtown, yet highways flow both ways—they also let people escape to the suburbs.

The stated goal of the program was economic development. Its main 'accomplishment,' however, was to wrest Detroit's urban center from its African Americans residents. Racist segregated housing laws confined Detroit's black population to the Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods, just northeast of the area targeted for renewal as the new City Center.

These black neighborhoods, sometimes compared in vitality to New York's Harlem, supported a vibrant ecosystem of black-owned businesses, including a dynamic music scene. This arts scene is discussed in Jeremy Peters' article in this issue—"A Cultural and Social Mecca: Entrepreneurial Action & Venue Agglomeration in Detroit's Paradise Valley Neighborhood." Community allowed Detroit to thrive; Detroit's thriving engendered community.

While the decimation of these neighborhoods is often blamed on developments in the 1960s— when Detroit's 'urban revitalization' project was complete — the area's fate was actually determined in the immediate post-WWII era by the 1946 Detroit Plan. The first of three highways to dissect Detroit's downtown, placing barriers in the urban landscape, appeared two decades earlier. The Detroit Crosstown Expressway was renamed as the "Edsel Ford Highway" in honor of the eponymous carmaker's only son in 1946 (Michigan Highways 2020). It bisected the city, creating a high-speed path through, not to, Detroit. Work on the highway, now I-94, progressed over the next decade, along with construction of two other downtown roadways—the Chrysler Freeway (I-375) and Fisher Freeway (I-75), which were built in the 1960s. This blacktop trio divided and subdivided the city center as effectively as a series of walls, here made of asphalt and whizzing automobiles. For Detroit, this solution failed to find its problem. Detroit's black neighborhoods suffered not from blight, but poverty. Through development, the city's "slums" were razed, but no alternative housing was offered to black residents. The result was to banish Detroit's core inhabitants from the very lifeblood of their community and vice versa. Thus, the 1946 Detroit Plan established a flawed pattern: Detroit's residents, including its signature artist entrepreneurs, were not consulted in drafting the city's revitalization plan, but instead were seen as a source of resistance, as a barrier to the renaissance that must be removed.

In a February 1965 article, *Detroit Free Press* arts critic Morley Driver describes phase two of the city's rebirth—its cultural resurrection. Its physical rebirth complete, he praises the cultural patrons of "Detroit's Renaissance" and their representative masterpieces: Wayne State University and its medical center, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Detroit Historical Museum, and the J.L. Hudson Gallery (Driver 1965). Morley thus celebrates the utopian institutions that have displaced what he calls the "slums" of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. Great cultural institutions, as Morley explains, must result from Detroit's manufacturing prowess and economic strength:

> To put a world on wheels took brains, imagination, and the ability to look far ahead. . . . But there comes a time, with a city, as with people, when economics are not enough; when earnings are sufficient and there is leisure and time to think about something else. That something else is culture. (Driver 1965, 12)

Morley defines culture as "education (in a small part) and mental curiosity (in a large part)." What is clear from context, however, is that for Morley, culture is measured not internally, say by the education and curiosity of the city's residents, but externally, by the

Figure 2. Arts Village Collective – room without a roof used for children's creative play activities. Photo by Mark Clague.

recognition and respect of outsiders, signified by the educational and cultural institutions that the city can command.

By January of 1970, the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce would announce yet another rebirth initiative to "revitalize downtown Detroit." "Detroit Renaissance 70" would boast a steering committee that included Michigan Governor William Milliken (who served 1969–83) and Ford Motor Company Chairman Henry Ford II. The goal of this private organization was to bring the "big money of private developers downtown" in order "to help government solve problems" and "to restore the confidence of Detroiters in their city." As one organizer put it, the purpose was "to sell Detroit to Detroiters," (Neuman 1970). But which Detroit? And which Detroiters?

The apex of Detroit's "Renaissance narrative," both physically and symbolically, remains the $337-million Detroit Renaissance Center (constructed 1973–77). A rosette of five tubular skyscrapers that defines the city's skyline to this day, the complex features four 39-story office towers set equally around a 73-story hotel, which since its dedication in 1977 has been the tallest building in Michigan and, more importantly to its builders, was at the time it opened, the tallest all-hotel skyscraper in the world (Cutter 1976, 19-27). The building was controversial from the outset (UPI 1977), but its message about Detroit was clear. It announced the city's rebirth. Detroit Mayor Coleman Young even invited the mayor of Florence Italy to attend the hotel's dedication. He was to be a representative of what Detroit officials called "their Renaissance sister city in Europe," (Indianapolis Star 1977).

As this historical review shows, Detroit's renaissance narrative has been popularized for some nine decades but has yet to generate a sustained or comprehensive economic advantage. Its revitalization efforts seem always to be top-down. A congeries of business and government leaders attract positive press and lure investment through a "Renaissance"-themed publicity opportunity for the city. Historically, the push behind these initiatives has thrust concerns about

damage to other city resources, both businesses and communities, quietly or not so quietly aside. Cries may ring out, but the many voices of community seem to lack the political power to reshape these revitalization efforts or the collective voice to be heard above the blare of political boosterism.

The DIA and the Detroit Bankruptcy Narrative

In March of 2013, Michigan's governor declared that Detroit was in a state of extreme financial distress and appointed an emergency manager with power superior to the city's own elected leaders. Negotiations with creditors and contract holders would prove intractable, and the city moved aggressively to file for Chapter 9 Bankruptcy, surprising creditors as well as the city's unions, and making headlines. Faced with $18.5 billion of debt, bankruptcy facilitated the reduction of payments to creditors (Bomey 2016). But as with any bankruptcy, debt is only half of the equation; assets are the other consideration. Because of a decision from 1919, when the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) collection was gifted to the City of Detroit, initially as a strategy to secure annual operating revenue for the museum, some 2,773 art works donated to and purchased by the museum over the years were in a now precarious position—not in public trust, but as collateral for a series of desperate loans procured by the city. Christie's appraised the art owned by the city at a value between $454 and $867 million at auction (Bomey 2016, 127). Would the city have to sell its art to cover past debts?

"The Grand Bargain," a compromise negotiated by Chief Judicial Mediator Judge Gerald Rosen, would save the DIA collection, by inspiring some $800 million of support from foundations, individuals, and the state of Michigan to help pay off a negotiated portion of the city's debt, thus successfully avoiding the sale of the city owned part of the DIA collection. The philanthropic community would be positioned as the social innovators in this story, yet they saw this as not saving an art collection but rather saving a city and its people. "It was disruptive and it pushed us to our limits in thinking about how we could problems-solve," reflects Darren Walker of the Ford Foundation, which pledged $125 million as part of the agreement. "For me, it had all of the elements of something truly transformative—and that's what I think philanthropy should be doing," (Bomey 2016, 148). Yet in any bankruptcy, whether personal or municipal, compromises must be made with creditors to pay off a reduced portion of the debt owed.

The rub was that creditors accepting reduced payments included the city's general pension fund and the pension fund for police and firefighters. Detroit's retired public workers would eventually see their monthly payments reduced by 4.5 percent, future cost-of-living adjustments eliminated, and the loss of healthcare coverage in retirement. "In the end, the bankruptcy proceedings eliminated $7.8 billion in payments to retired workers and the city got off the hook for $4.3 billion in unfunded health-care obligations and future costs," (Tompar 2018). Detroit was able to negotiate a hold on paying into pension funds until 2024, but one must wonder how the current COVID-19 crisis will impact this timeline, with risk of setting up pensions for yet

another shortfall. It is impossible not to notice that Detroit continues to shelter its assets through the sacrifices of its citizens.

What is the impact of moving money from foundations to retired city workers? Is this in fact a lost opportunity to support creative work in Detroit? Halima Cassells notes during a recent interview: "Detroit is the canary in the coal mine – wow, bankruptcy works let's try it somewhere else. Deals are being made without thinking of the people who live in this city. We must find new ways to use systems that focus on collective value and participation." One such innovative tool is the "Cultural Community Benefits Principles Toolkit" developed by Cassells along with other Detroit cultural organizers. It strives to "seek accountability, through community benefits agreements, from private developers who receive public support for large-scale development projects," in Detroit and other urban settings (Arts in a Changing America, n.d.). If it succeeds, future Renaissance projects will necessarily benefit the community.

Detroit's independent artists do not require rebirth, they are survivors. They continue to forge community, if largely out of the spotlight of the press and beyond the support of its signature cultural institutions. Founded in 1885 by a group of local pianists, the Detroit Tuesday Musicale continues to fulfill its original mission to promote classical music in the city and advance the artistic growth of its members. Propelled by dedicated volunteers, the Musicale persists. It presents an annual slate of some ten concerts in and around the city at low-cost venues, including churches as well as piano stores, such as the Steinway Gallery or The Piano Place in Troy. With performances at a professional standard, these recitals still occur on a Tuesday afternoon or evening. They feature club members, regional guest artists, and students at both the high school and collegiate levels (Tuesday Musicale of Detroit, n.d.). Most artists perform without pay. Periodically a hometown hero—a concert artist raised in Detroit now on the world's stage—returns to the city to perform (Detroit Free Press, 2010). The club awards a dozen annual prizes and scholarships to students, but flies under the radar of cultural notice but for a free listing in the newspaper's events column a couple of times each year or a listing in an obituary of a former member (Boston Globe 2013). Detroit's Musicale is emblematic of the city's art scene in that it survives on a determination for art, despite tenuous economic circumstance.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra is at the other end of the economic spectrum of Detroit's cultural institution as an international flagship. Yet the DSO faced its own financial crisis, strike, and lock-out that resulted in a twenty-six-week silence in the midst of its 2010-11 season as described in Nathinee Chucherdwatanasak's award-winning article in this issue "Making Detroit Sound Great." This story of the orchestra's bitterly contested survival is also the story of its intrapreneurial transformation, as ideas for "patron minded pricing" and a "Neighborhood Concert Series," a "Social Progress Initiative" at medical care and service agencies, and the "Live from Orchestra Hall" webcast series arose from the experiences connected to the work stoppage and the orchestra's "'entrepreneurial turn' to be 'the most accessible orchestra on the planet.'" By losing access to their storied music hall, the "Musicians of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra," as the ensemble was known during the lockout, rediscovered the city and its people and restored its civic mission, not just as a clarion call to the world of the city's cultural achievement, but as a service organization for Detroit's people.

For the artists of Detroit, the city itself is the work. Detroit is both canvas and construct. Motown is both place and genre. This civic ontology is made visible in the Detroit Artist Village, created by John George and the Motor City Blight Busters (1988–). Their recovered building on Lahser Road in Detroit's Old Redford neighborhood is not only the non-profit's headquarters, but an art gallery, performance venue, and community center, fused with a revenue-generating coffee shop and Airbnb rental. It is characteristic of Detroit's problem-oriented creativity. Reviewed in this issue is a 2014 book of artist case studies by Julie Pincus and Nichole Christian that expands upon the theme of Detroit as both a work of art and the work of artists. Titled *Canvas Detroit*, this illustrated essay serves as a "visual ethnography" of the city, according to reviewer Jonathan Kuuskoski, that showcases "art as a way of life for local artisans," while conveying "a sense that art is *alive* in the city, bound by a common understanding that individual works have larger implications when coordinated around social action."

Figure 3. Halima Cassells working on an eco-friendly mural constructed with found objects; not toxic paints.

Detroit rapper Deidre "D.S. Sense" Smith is another example. While making music and delivering international workshops for the U.S. State Department through its Next Level initiative which uses hip hop dance, music, and art as a cultural diplomacy tool, Smith's activism includes work for Detroit's Ruth Ellis Center and its programs for LGBTQ+ youth. Her song "On My Detroit Everything," (2013–19) became an anthem among her fans and the title became the name of her own renaissance social project. As Smith explains:

> "On My Detroit Everything" started as a mantra. . . . that I would tell myself. At the time I was homeless. . . . And also, the city of Detroit was facing its own perils—the emergency manager and the bankruptcy and everything. My life and the city's were sort of synonymous. And I needed something to pick me up and to keep me invigorated. . . . I would get up . . . and say "I'm On My Detroit Everything"—get myself together and hit the street.
>
> And then . . . I'm On My Detroit Everything . . . the rhythm started coming through and it went from being a mantra to a song, to a crowd favorite, to a chant from the crowd, to an initiative. . . . I think it resonated so much, because we had already had our Detroit versus Everybody. . . . We are always underdogs, for some reason. And we needed something to champion our presence.
>
> Here I was saying, I'm "On My Detroit Everything," which is if you never acknowledge me, it doesn't negate the fact that I'm about my business, and I have a job to do, whatever that entails.

> . . . For me, it meant get my ass up, and not accepting my situation. And certainly not succumbing to it. That's what it meant for me. . . . It's beautiful, you can mold it into anything you need it to be, as long as it's positive, positive, highlights Detroit and its citizens. (Smith 2020)

Many of Detroit's activist artists have incorporated as non-profits over the years to provide a structure to receive grants and donations, yet they still operate as lean start-ups even decades after their creation. One example is Aaron Timlin's Detroit Culture Club and Chalfonte Foundation, which operates as an art gallery out of his home. "Detroit has a history of creating space for responsiveness to artists, and after funding for artists died in the early 1990s, KAID filled an important need." notes Michelle Perron, who serves as founding director of the program. "KAID started as a way to give artists resources, time, and space to reward them for their creative practice, but quickly we realized that communities can't flourish without the creative drive of artists. So, we knew we needed to empower artists to be leaders in Detroit if our community was to change. "This is why we added the professional practice component that would arm artists with the tools, training and expertise so they could create social change," (Perron 2020). A key component of Kresge's grantmaking is a series of arts entrepreneurship workshops. Attendance at the professional practice activities is not required, but awardees are encouraged and empowered to participate. This leverages the Kresge Fellowship into a series of opportunities that help sustain careers.

Detroit's African Bead Museum founded by Olayami Dabls—a Kresge fellow—is a signal example. Filling nearly a full city block of indoor and outdoor installations on the corner of Grand River and West Grand Boulevard, the museum is an idea at the center of a homegrown

Figure 4. Olyama Dabls at the African Bead Museum in Detroit, photo by the authors, January 2020.

urban redevelopment project. The museum is both place and performance, centered on what is the future museum's gift shop, over which its founder presides. The full experience is in effect a performance art piece with Dabls as architect, designer, sculptor, proprietor, and solo performer. Visitors are recruited as interlocutors in a series of historical tales and philosophical insights that express the artist's worldview and serve as a capsule history of Detroit. The gift show generates revenue, while also serving as a theatrical set and launching pad for Dabls' visions.

> "I do believe that this is soul work," notes Deidre "D.S. Sense" Smith, "we are of service, to each other, our creator, our community, all of it. It's not hard." (Smith 2020)

The Renaissance narrative of Detroit still dominates city hall, the downtown businesses, and the editorial offices of newspapers from the *Free Press* to the *New York Times*. Detroit's underground art scene is sustained by a social service mission, the resilience its resident artists who ride the ups and downs of the city's economic cycles with support from one another, and a few local foundations. In this sense, Detroit may be a case study in the typical. In Detroit, a city's arts ecosystem is less an integrated, coherent whole than a series of layered sets of social relationships. Flagship institutions serve to broadcast the image of civic vitality across borders national and international, while local artists serve to create a web of creativity, addressing social needs, solving neighborhood problems, and creating a sense of beauty and pride in place.

> "One thing for sure is that the arts help sustain a healthy environment," said Michelle Perron. "It is an empowering kind of food for the community. So much of the richness of Detroit's art scene has been inspired by our challenges. That richness is about hope, drive and desire." (Perron 2020)

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