

MACAA Conference Summary

Collecting, Documenting, and Sharing Detroit Arts Culture: In and Around Wayne State, 1960s-1980s

In the 1960s, as explosive social and political movements gave rise to the rejection of post-World War II middle-class society, Wayne State University and its nearby environs emerged as a cultural force. A loosely drawn community of artists, poets, musicians and politicians became active participants in this boldly expressive movement, with much activity centered in the Cass Corridor, adjacent to campus. While this mirrored what was going on in other parts of the country, Detroiters had their own source material, inspiration, and tools for expression.

For the MACAA Conference, six panelists presented a number of projects undertaken to preserve the heritage of this important time in Detroit's cultural history, as well as efforts to document current trends.

Sandra Schemske, University Art Collection Coordinator, Wayne State University

In order to provide background on the art scene around Wayne State during this time period, Sandra presented a documentary video she produced for the University Art Collection, which was made in conjunction with an exhibition at Elaine Jacob Gallery on Wayne State's campus. The exhibition and video—"Time and Place: Art of Detroit's Cass Corridor from the Wayne State University Art Collection"—featured the work of a number of Cass Corridor artists whose work is displayed in and outside of campus buildings and offices. The video provided a tour of that exhibition, and served to familiarize MACAA Conference attendees with the artists and their work, as well as serving as a testament to the continuing value the art and artists have to the university and community.

Joseph Turrini, Assistant Professor, School of Library and Information Science, and Coordinator of the Archival Administration Certificate Program, Wayne State University

Joe provided information on the role he played in preparing WSU graduate students to participate as interviewers in an oral history project called the "Cass Corridor Documentation Project" which was a collaboration between the University Art Collection and the Library System, and whose purpose was to document stories of the art as well as music scenes in Detroit, focusing on the 1960s-1980s. The students were all enrolled in his Oral History methods course, which provided them with the tools they needed to research their subjects, conduct and record audio interviews, and transcribe them. Almost thirty interviews were completed and the stories of artists, art educators, critics, gallery owners, art collectors, as well as musicians, and others from the music community have been preserved.

Dennis Nawrocki, Adjunct Faculty in Art History, Wayne State University

Dennis participated as an interviewee in the "Cass Corridor Documentation Project." Because of his longtime involvement in the Detroit art scene as educator, author, curator, and critic, he was a valuable source of information.

For the MACAA Conference, he discussed his interview experience as well as the Cass Corridor art movement and its relation to other regional art movements of the time. He also discussed the importance of the University Art Collection to the preservation and sharing of Cass Corridor art with the community and beyond. In addition, he described his curation of a recent art exhibition—"Ménage À Detroit: Three Generations of Expressionist Art in Detroit, 1970-2012"—which revisited the work of Cass Corridor artists from the 1970s, in relation to two "generations" of later work.

Gilda Snowden, Artist, Art Professor and Interim Chair of Fine Arts, College for Creative Studies, Detroit

Gilda is a Detroit artist, and was asked to participate as an interviewee in the “Cass Corridor Documentation Project” because of her knowledge of the local art scene, her experiences as a painter, which has included numerous accolades, including a coveted Kresge Artist Fellowship, as well as her work as an educator of young, local artists.

For the MACAA Conference she discussed her interview experience, and the value of artist oral histories from her perspective as an art educator, as well as her recent involvement documenting the current local art gallery scene. She presented images from her You Tube video series, taken at sixteen popular local galleries, many of them run by young, local artists, which she posts on You Tube to provide public access. Her videos provide glimpses into current local gallery exhibitions, often during their opening receptions. Her You Tube project underscores the value of documenting the work of Detroit’s artists, not as a look back at history, but as a look forward.

Monika Berenyi, Canadian Visual Artist, Documentarian and Educator, Ryerson University

Monika added another dimension to the Conference presentations. She shared her experiences working on a project she developed called the “Detroit City Poetry Oral History Project” which documented the history of Detroit’s poetry and print culture during the 1960s-1970s.

While studying in Amsterdam, she was prompted to create a public art project on Detroit, and with an interest in Detroit’s Counterculture, she familiarized herself with the work of poetry publishers from the time, including the Detroit Artists Workshop, Broadside Press, Lotus Press, the Alternative Press, and Past Tents Press, which lead to subsequent meetings and discussions in Detroit with poets and poet publishers, as well as video tapings. To date she has created twenty video oral histories which she donated to the Wayne State University Libraries. The Library System has made them available for circulation to faculty and students, and is in the process of converting the files for online access.

Diane Sybeldon, Arts and Media Librarian, Wayne State University Libraries

Diane is WSU's Arts librarian, and served as session chair for the MACAA Conference. She provided an overview of the project collaborations between the Libraries and the University Art Collection, the School of Library and Information Science, as well as with Canadian documentarian Monika Berenyi. She included information on the oral history projects as well as other library collection building efforts. She also discussed the Library System’s role in providing access to these important materials, including digitization, and technologies to centralize access, as well as to make materials publicly available online. In addition, she discussed the library as an engaging display i.e., gallery space, for a collaborative installation with the University Art Collection—“Cass Corridor Culture: In and Around Wayne State, 1960s-1980s”—that brings together art and artifacts from Detroit’s art, poetry, and music scenes from that time.

Submitted by Diane Sybeldon 02/01/13