



Speech by Rip Rapson:

Art X Detroit: Why Art Matters

Closing remarks from Kresge's president.

April 11, 2011

Although I'm about five days too late, let me welcome you on behalf of The Kresge Foundation to the inaugural [Art X Detroit: Kresge Arts Experience](#), a unique celebration of the 2008-2010 Kresge Eminent Artists and Kresge Artist Fellows. It has been a wonder to watch – from the DIA to Leopold's Books, from the Charles H. Wright Museum to the Scarab Club, and countless venues in between. But, as in all things so complex, it was a ton of work. I want to thank Sue Mosey and the Midtown Detroit staff for their courage and downright doggedness in producing Art X. Thanks, too, to our partners on the planning committee: [the College for Creative Studies](#), the [Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit](#), [ArtServe Michigan](#), Gary Anderson from [Plowshares Theatre Company](#) and Terry Blackhawk from [InsideOut Literary Arts Project](#). And I must take this opportunity to thank my staff: Alice Carle and George Jacobsen, who worked tirelessly to make this amazing festival happen, and Benjy Kennedy, from our Detroit team, who along with his other team members is doing incredible work in Detroit on behalf of the foundation.

And thank you to everyone in the audience for participating in the events of the last five days. I believe we have broken new ground in Detroit and there is no going back from here. Since Art X's opening on Wednesday night – with the dedication of Charles McGee's wondrous sculpture, with a thousand people stuffed into MOCAD, with the first public reflections Mayor Dave Bing has offered about the arts and with great performances from Marcus Belgrave and Joel Peterson – Art X has shown the power of arts and artists to animate a very different kind of conversation about Detroit's future: a conversation based on the revelations that can emerge from creative reflection, on the interweaving of disparate life experiences into a shared sense of common purpose and aspiration.

We're not done yet. After this forum, we still have Art X performances from our Fellows and Eminent Artists, including music at the Scarab Club, dance instruction at the N'Namdi Gallery, flamenco dance and poetry readings at the Virgil H. Carr Center and, of course, a closing performance by Marcus Belgrave and his TRIBE ensemble – who have never played in Detroit – at the Charles H. Wright Museum this evening. Be sure to grab a schedule if you haven't already mapped out your path for today.

Why Art X Matters

Kurt Vonnegut once said: “I want to stay as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can't see from the center.”

Who would have known that Vonnegut had Detroit and Art X in mind when he said that? Each of you has helped this community see so much of what it had not seen before. Indeed, that is why the arts are so powerful in this time and place: to make connections across the past, the present and the future; to view our community through a lens that substitutes for a tired and incomplete view of a city in decline a fresh and unexpected view of a city in the process of creative reinvention.

On one hand, Art X sought to celebrate the 38 supremely talented Eminent Artists and Artist Fellows who have received support from the Kresge Foundation. To witness their unimaginably diverse expression through canvas, sculpture, the written word, music, dance and other forms would alone have made this event one of the seminal events in this city's recent history.

On the other hand, Art X demonstrated to people from throughout the region the renaissance of Midtown Detroit – encouraging them to experience this remarkable geography as a vibrant, energetic, walkable place that also happens to be a center for robust and compelling arts and cultural activity.

So we've succeeded on both counts. But I think there is a third dimension as well: to remind our community why arts matter. There is a practical answer to that. But there is a more philosophical answer as well. Let me say just a word about both.

Art as key element in the revitalization of Detroit

First, the practical answer.

Detroit and its suburban neighbors host more than 400 arts organizations. A remarkable 41 percent – 164 – of those organizations are located in the city. The major institutions to be sure – the symphony, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the College for Creative Studies, the Charles H. Wright Museum, the Detroit Historical Museum and others. But also small and medium-size organizations touching the lives and daily routines of thousands of city residents – think Sphinx, Heidelberg, Matrix, Pewabic and others. And the vast majority of the organizations located outside the city provide services that benefit city residents.

That is the institutional landscape. But individual artists themselves stand at the heart of the ecosystem, of course. By one count, some 4,000 artists live or work in the city – a figure that is almost certainly an undercount and that is rising every day. The energy we have seen at Art X is contagious. Artists are coming to Detroit from all over the world, attracted by what some have termed “Rust Belt chic”: the possibility of buying a house for \$1,000 or renting for a pittance; of working unconstrained by the city's bureaucracy to carve out unexpected uses in unexpected places; of converting the public ruins of factories and warehouses into studio and exhibition spaces. For the generation of artists experiencing Detroit for the first time, it is not a city on the skids but – in the words of a transplanted New Yorker – “a theater of engagement.”

In a time when everything has to be costed out, measured against a standard of return on investment, the arts can increasingly hold their own, as Rocco (Landesman, chairman of the [National Endowment for the Arts](#)) has so eloquently described. Just a couple of examples:

First, artists in Detroit are working true to type and serving as urban pioneers. They are often the first people to see opportunity in older and neglected neighborhoods. They are often the people willing to tackle seemingly intractable social issues through the verve and insight of the creative act.

Take, for example, [The PowerHouse Project](#), an effort by artists to purchase and create self-sustainable homes for as little as \$100.

Second, arts organizations can imaginatively repurpose abandoned or underutilized land and property as a canvas for the ingenious and viral creation of art.

There is certainly the [Heidelberg Project](#). But the College for Creative Studies also demonstrated that with a vengeance in its rehabilitation of the [Harriet Tubman Center](#). Similarly, the 2.2 million-square-foot [Russell Industrial Center](#) has been converted into a remarkable small-business and cultural complex comprising over a hundred commercial tenants – architects, painters, clothing designers, glass blowers, wood craftsman, metal sculptors, graphic designers and many, many others.

Third, artists are small-business incubators. Each one of our Kresge Fellows falls into this category. And then there is [Detroit SOUP](#), a monthly dinner held in Southwest Detroit through which creative Detroit-based projects are funded by microgrants. Or 71 POP, a pop-up shop that will provide artists and designers the space to develop their retail business without the risk of leasing their own space.

Art as an act of affirmation

That's the terribly important practical side. But there's also the less tangible dimension – the role the arts are playing, and will play, in changing the trajectory of a once-great city's aspirations.

Detroit needs to come at its challenges with an ambition unprecedented in America. It will have to be smart – challenging our preconceptions about what a city is supposed to look like and how it works. It will have to be bold – pursuing ideas that will strike some as outlandish and others as foolish. And it will have to be unflinching in its courage – bracing against forces that won't welcome such sweeping change. Anything less won't do the trick.

The arts are uniquely suited to helping meet those challenges:¹

- Because they transform the routines of daily life by questioning the way we see the world.
- Because they offer fresh ways of looking at that world.
- Because they draw a thread between our past and our future.
- Because they permit us to stand outside ourselves.
- Because they detect order within disorder and poke and prod the dormant.
- Because they arc toward the ideal, and attempt the pointless.
- Because they offer beauty and confront us with the reality of the repellent.
- Because they seek to explain but decline to prescribe.
- Because they present a vision of connection rather than an affirmation of isolation.

Because they leave us no option but to wrestle with what is good and what is bad, what is false and what is true.

To paraphrase the great British cultural writer, John Tusa: The arts matter in Detroit because they embody, embrace and express the soul of this place. Without the arts, the city would “stop talking to itself, stop dreaming, lose interest in its past and sacrifice its curiosity about the future.”

The immensely good news is that this is not our future. We did not need Art X Detroit to tell us that. We already knew that this is a city rich with art, with culture and with creative people committed to their core to making art matter.

That makes me very optimistic indeed. Together we can make a difference in this community's life. Thank you for coming and for all you do for the city of Detroit.

Read [remarks by Rocco Landesman](#), the National Endowment for the Arts president, at the same event.

¹The recitation is drawn from John Tusa's remarkable book: *Art Matters: Reflecting on Culture*, p. 22. (Methuen Publishing: 1999).