



Speech by Rip Rapson:

The Gift of Leni Sinclair

*Photographer, activist captured
an era of social and artistic change*

October 18, 2016

Delivered on October 18 at a community celebration of 2016 Kresge Eminent Artist Leni Sinclair. The celebration at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit coincided with the release of the Kresge Eminent Artist monograph on Sinclair's life and work, and the opening of an exhibition of her work at the center. Rapson followed Richard Rogers, president of the College of Creative Studies.

Thank you, Rick. It's a deep privilege for Kresge to be able to partner with the College of Creative Studies. Your creativity, professionalism, and passion have made you and your staff tremendous stewards of our decade-long effort to open new channels of opportunity for artists and arts organizations across the region.

And thank you, Juanita Moore, for your tireless and visionary leadership of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. Juanita's offer not only to open the doors of the museum for this evening's celebration, but also to mount an exhibit of Leni Sinclair's work, was a powerful affirmation that this is the exact place where the honoring of Leni belongs.

It's fitting that the college and museum have joined hands this evening to celebrate the life and work of Leni Sinclair. They exemplify the power of arts and culture and education to connect the deep reservoirs of this city's cultural patrimony to the strengthening currents of inclusive dynamism and innovation, to offer fresh ways of setting our collective aspirations, to bridge across difference in the face of forces that seek to affirm isolation. Thank you.

Our Kresge team has spent a lot of time with Leni this year. In one of the early meetings, Leni said that being named the 2016 Kresge Eminent Artist was the greatest gift that she's received. Her comment led me to think about "gifts" – and the kinds of gifts whose impacts can be felt for years.

The Kresge Foundation began with a gift. Nearly 100 years ago, Sebastian Kresge celebrated the 25th year of his namesake retail chain with a monetary gift that began The Kresge Foundation with the mission he set: to promote human progress. He continued to make gifts to the foundation for the rest of his life (And I would be remiss not to acknowledge his great-granddaughter Cynthia Kresge, who sits on our board of trustees, and is with us here tonight.)

Thanks to Sebastian Kresge's gifts, The Kresge Foundation can work nationally to promote opportunity for low-income people in cities across the nation. By promoting access and success for low-income and first generation college students. By mitigating and adapting to the effects of climate change on vulnerable communities. By attacking health disparities and strengthening the ability of human services organizations to help put low-income people on the path to dignified self-sufficiency. By capturing the power of arts and culture to help revitalize cities.

But perhaps nowhere have Sebastian Kresge's gifts been more heartfelt, and meaningful, than in his hometown – our hometown – of Detroit. It is here that all the strands of our work come together: health, the environment, human development.

And our work in Detroit is anchored by arts and culture. Through direct operating support for cultural organizations such as the Wright Museum and the College for Creative Studies. Through direct support for artists, as Rick so eloquently explained. And through the recognition each year of an individual artist who embodies artistic excellence, who holds close the values of community, who links between generations.

That describes Leni Sinclair to a tee.

Leni has a gripping life story, an important story. With her mother and siblings, she became a child refugee on the eastern front of World War II. Then came life in the increasingly regimented East Germany, which she fled while still in her teens. To our very good fortune, she landed in Detroit.

And thanks to a parting gift of 200 German marks from her mother, she arrived in the states with her first camera. She intended, at first, to snap the all-American shots: Leni at the Statute of Liberty, Leni at the Grand Canyon, Leni doing what every tourist does.

Instead, that camera – together with the cameras that replaced it over the years – provided a unique record of Leni's times in her new country, times that she recorded as an artist-photographer, and times she helped to shape at key points as an activist.

She was there with her camera during the civil rights movement and the 1963 March on Washington. She was there the next year for the founding of the Detroit Artist Workshop. She was there for the 1967 Detroit rebellion. She was there for antiwar and anti-establishment protests, for the Black Panthers, the White Panthers, the Rainbow People's Party, the hippies and the Yippies.

And since she saw culture as inseparable from politics, she made sure she was also there for the flowering of jazz, blues, rock, reggae, Afro-Beat. She captured the giants, to be sure. But her aim was to capture everyone – to capture all of the surrounding the energy and emotion – and to capture it so vividly that you can all but hear in her photographs the sounds of the moment, the sounds of history being made.

It is a profound honor for our foundation to be part of such a riveting story by extending to her the gift of the 2016 Eminent Artist Award. I'll leave to Leni to describe her plans going forward. Perhaps it will be to better organize her trove of more than 100,000 images. Perhaps it will be to create some essential support and security that any artist needs and deserves. And perhaps it may even be to join forces with one of Detroit's iconic companies to open her images to an even broader audience.

So, I'm delighted and humbled to present first to Leni and shortly to the rest of you the monograph documenting her life and work. It is a wonderful, brilliant small book prepared by two artists in their own right: Sue Levytsky and Julie Pincus.

Whatever Leni may say about the gift of the Eminent Artist award, the real gift we celebrate tonight is the gift of Leni Sinclair herself: the gift of intertwined art and activism and love for community.