



Speech by Rip Rapson:

In honor of Leni Sinclair, Kresge Eminent Artist for 2016

March 22, 2016

Adapted from remarks delivered at a reception honoring Leni Sinclair's selection as the 2016 Kresge Eminent Artist, held March 22, 2016 at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit.

My thanks to all of you for being here this evening.

In our Eminent Artists we honor exceptional lifelong achievements and contributions to the cultural vitality of metropolitan Detroit.

I'm honored to look around this room and see poet and playwright Bill Harris, who I know goes way back with Leni Sinclair's, and is one of our eminent artists. We're also honored to have poet-publisher Naomi Long-Madgett, opera impresario David DiChiera, photographer Bill Rauhauser and textile designer Ruth Adler Schnee. Along with visual artist Charles McGee and the late trumpeter Marcus Belgrave, these are our previous years' Kresge Eminent Artists. All very different artists, but all holding up art as a light and sometimes a mirror for our community. And each has been an example – if not a teacher – showing younger generations what it means to believe in expression, and to persevere in that belief.

Now, I'd like to turn to this year's honoree, Leni Sinclair.

I don't know if we've had before an eminent artist quite so modest about her artistic output. To hear Leni tell it, sometimes, it sounds like she *just happened* to take a lot of pictures while she was busy doing other things, like, you know, trying to tilt the axis of the socio-political-cultural world as we knew it. And it *just so happened* that some of those pictures captured the energy and excitement of an era – the anarchic, the madcap, the Quixotic.

And like all *just-so* stories, that explanation is *just* too pat.

No Leni Sinclair didn't *just happen* to get these shots. She was both an instigator in the movements of the '60s and an eagle-eyed documentarian.

She wanted to capture moments for posterity, turn glimpses into gazes. She wanted us to know what we'd miss if we weren't there to see saxophonist John Coltrane in his trance of creation at Detroit's Drome Lounge in the North End. Or to see the gentleman we now call Iggy Pop twisted like a serpent against a microphone stand at the old Grande Ballroom. Or the Nigerian rebel musician Fela, performing at the Fox, fists thrust above his head, his eyes burning with defiance.

And maybe we don't know what it was like to be there. Yet, by fixating on Leni's pictures we can feel like we do.

Every year to further honor our Eminent Artist, we produce a monograph of the artist's career. It's always the case that we're surprised by what we find out. It's always the case that these artists have led richer lives than we imagined, made contributions to their art and their community far deeper than we initially understood.

In Leni's monograph – available later this year – we'll tell you a story about a childhood amid the terror of Europe's eastern front in World War II, followed by the oppression of East Germany's police state, an escape to West Germany and then America and finally joining relatives in Detroit. We'll tell you about her involvement in Detroit's now legendary DIY arts scene of the 60s and her move into the world of social-political-cultural agitation as founder of the White Panthers – and later the Rainbow People's Party.

And we'll tell you about her massive archive of photos shot through that era and since, documenting not just the stars, but innumerable musicians who comprise, as they say, *the scene*. Her opus Detroit Jazz Who's Who from the mid-1980s gives the city a cultural snap shot of hundreds of musicians across styles and generations. It's a document that few other cities – if any – can match.

Just as Leni Sinclair is a cultural treasure – unique, unmatched.

It is my pleasure now to ask you to raise your glasses for a toast.

Artistic expression is often an admixture of the beautiful and provocative, the extraordinary and the everyday. But it is always a highly individualized reflection on questions and ideas rooted in our culture, history, and sense of possibility.

Thank you, Leni Sinclair, for reminding us of that.