

New Art Examiner, a Critical Field of Dreams
Vince Carducci, College for Creative Studies

Typical accounts of the New Art Examiner (1973-2002) rightly focus on its role in creating a critical discourse around and legitimacy for the art scene and artists of its home base Chicago. Tony Fitzpatrick, Kerry James Marshall, Wesley Kimler, Kay Rosen, Anne Wilson, and Inigo Mangolo-Ovalle are just a few of the names of those whose work appeared in its pages and went on to gain larger recognition. And while they had local reputations starting in the 1960s, it can be argued that the Monster Roster, the Hairy Who, and especially Chicago Imagists, such as Ed Pashke, Roger Brown, and Barbara Rossi, garnered national and international attention by the coverage afforded them by the New Art Examiner.

Following its original mission as an independent voice of the visual arts, the New Art Examiner also examined issues too often overlooked by the slick art publications coming out of New York. Special issues on studio craft and self-taught and outsider art **(#1 & #2)** brought critical attention to forms of cultural production beyond of the conventions of so-called fine art. The magazine also confronted issues often swept under rug in the mainstream art press such as social class **(#3)**, politics, **(#4)**, and economics **(#5)**. During the 1980s, the New Art Examiner took a direct stand on the culture wars being waged in Washington and around the country **(#6)**.

Equally important was its role in expanding visual arts coverage in the whole of the Midwest and beyond with monthly exhibition reviews and features on artists working in Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Missouri, and elsewhere. The magazine enabled critics, art historians, and other writers to explore topics outside the art centers of New York and Los Angeles, creating a record of activity that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. These writers developed their writing skills, CVs, and reputations, in many cases leading to significant opportunities in arts journalism, academia, museum practice, arts advocacy, etc. Some of those people are sitting on this panel, including me. Others include Janet Koplos, longtime Art in America editor and studio crafts historian, Jim Yood, also an advocate of studio craft and Artforum Chicago correspondent, Henry Giroux, one of the major voices of critical pedagogy, Eleanor Heartney, another Art in America senior staff member, Alice Thorsen, now art critic for the Kansas City Star, Michelle Grabner, co-curator of the 2014 Whitney Biennial, and there are many others we could name.

The magazine also provided a platform for writers with established reputations to publish material they likely would have had an opportunity to get into print otherwise. Donald Kuspit wrote several cranky articles for New Art Examiner. Robert Hughes also kvetched about art and money, as did Paul Goldberger on postmodern architecture. On a positive note, Suzi Gablik published her ideas on reenchanting art in a precursor to the socially engaged practices that are so prevalent in the contemporary scene.

From a sociological perspective, the New Art Examiner constituted a structure for navigating what Pierre Bourdieu terms the field of cultural production; it was an avenue for amassing social and cultural capital for the ideas under consideration, i.e., language as symbolic power, and the individuals and artifacts being written about, that is, symbolic capital – prestige, honor, and attention – that could sometimes be converted to economic capital in the case of artists or artworks that might become collectable, or the opportunities that might be afforded for career advancement for academics, would-be journalists, and the like. (The pay for writing was a pittance, of course; I only got paid two or three times over nearly 20 years of writing for the magazine and I doubt the total came to more than a couple of hundred dollars.)

Within the pages of the New Art Examiner one finds the elements of Chicago School sociologist Howard S. Becker's concept of art worlds. Art is a form of collective action, Becker writes, dependent upon a division of labor in establishing what Bourdieu terms the "art habitus" and Becker terms "conventions," i.e., the social rules for categorizing types of art, creative practices, institutional frameworks, and the like, for mobilizing material, social, and cultural resources for production, distribution, and consumption of these things called works of art, concepts called aesthetic theories, and agents known as artists, critics, historians, curators, etc. The categories of integrated professionals, mavericks, folk, and naive artists all get the day in the New Art Examiner's archive.

The extent of the primary source material of Midwestern art worlds in the last quarter of the twentieth century is contained in the volumes of the *New Art Examiner*, the surface of which is barely scratched in the 2011 anthology, *The Essential New Art Examiner*, published by Northern Illinois University Press.

I'd like to add to the archive by offering myself as a case study. I began subscribing to the *New Art Examiner* in 1980 when it was still published in the tabloid format. It was the only publication I was aware of at the time that covered art being made in Michigan from a critical perspective as opposed to the journalistic reportage of Detroit's two daily newspapers, the *Detroit News* and *Free Press*. There was a short-lived art publication that had existed in Detroit for a couple of years in the mid-1970s, and the *New Art Examiner* was a welcome presence to fill the void. Equally important was knowledge that there was a lot of art being made not that far away in Chicago, of course, but also Milwaukee, Kansas City, Cleveland, Nashville, and elsewhere.

A couple of years later, the nonprofit Detroit Focus Gallery got a grant to start a publication of its own and I volunteered to be one of the original writers. The publication was a quarterly (and in truth an "intermittently" might better describe it) and only 16 pages, so there wasn't much opportunity to engage in dialogue.

My first articles for the New Art Examiner were two short reviews published in the Summer 1984. One of a group show of installation work presented by Detroit Focus Gallery was somewhat critical, while the other of a solo exhibition by printmaker Douglas Semivan, who is now chair of the Madonna University art department, was much more favorable. In retrospect, both hold up pretty well. Within a matter of months I found myself named a Michigan editor of the New Art Examiner and maintained my affiliation with the magazine pretty much until its demise in mid-2002. From 1996 – 2000, I served as a contributing editor and at one point toward the end of that time had had conversations with Kathryn Hixson about coming on full-time as publisher as she was scrambling to reconstitute the magazine by moving it up market. (BTW, I think that Derek Guthrie’s savaging of Kathryn at the Northern Illinois symposium held as part of the kick off activities for *The Essential New Art Examiner* and in subsequent blog posts are quite off-base. The “independence” the New Art Examiner enjoyed was greatly assisted early on and for years by government grants. As that largesse dried up with the defunding of the arts at the local, state, and national levels and the magazine was thrown onto the vagaries of the market, I’m not sure what other alternatives there were.)

My affiliation with the New Art Examiner was important to establishing my identity as an art writer, helping me to develop the requisite habitus and amass social and cultural capital. Up until mid-2000, I was holding down a day job as a creative suit in financial services marketing, so the New Art Examiner gave me artworld cred. By virtue of my position at the New Art Examiner I was contacted by Artnews to write reviews from Detroit in 1985. (The publisher of Artnews was a friend of then incoming Detroit Institute of Arts director Sam Sachs II. I had a bad interview experience with Sam not long after and so the relationship with Artnews quickly soured. I also have to say that my writing was a little too highfalutin.)

My book of New Art Examiner clips also helped open the door to becoming Detroit correspondent for Artforum in 1989. The editor of Artforum at that time was Charles Miller, who was familiar with my work from his time as editor of the Ohio-based Dialogue. Charlie had moved to New York after being denied tenure at The Ohio State University. He unfortunately was stricken with AIDS and had to leave the magazine in 1992 and was replaced by Jack Bankowsky, who didn't have much interest in continuing coverage in Detroit, primarily because Artforum had a low subscription base and virtually no advertising coming out of the region.

Finally, the New Art Examiner clips constituted the bulk of the evidence I submitted for acceptance into the Liberal Studies MA program at the New School for Social Research after I decided in July 2000 to walk away from my corporate gig and pursue an encore career in the academy. The position I established primarily as a critic writing for the New Art Examiner was also instrumental in my getting hired as an adjunct at College for Creative Studies when I returned to Detroit in 2006, and I continue to work there today, having successfully transitioned into higher education.

The first feature I wrote for the New Art Examiner was on the Detroit art scene, "Detroit: Art and Transmission," published in January 1987 **(#7 & #8)**. Reacting against the expected role of local booster, I opened with the line, "Detroit is a hick town." I went on to reject the city's regnant school of urban expression in favor of a "lost generation" of conceptual and performance art.

A piece I wrote for the February/March 1992 issue **(#9 & #10)** commented on the fiscal woes of the Detroit Institute of Arts with the election of rightwing governor John Engler and subsequent slashing of state aid, which recently has regained relevance in that it charted out the options for the museum, a department of the beleaguered municipal government, predicting its likely privatization, which as a result of the so-called rescue plan in the Detroit bankruptcy, appears to be in the offing.

It hasn't been all piss and vinegar, though.

In summer 1995, the New Art Examiner ran my essay on The Inlander Collection of Great Lakes Regional Painting (**#11 & #12**) assembled by sculptor, critic, and folk expert Michael Hall and his spouse Pat Glascock. Featuring works by artists working in the Upper Midwest between the two World Wars, The Inlander Collection, named after a journal entry by Charles Burchfield, was accessioned en masse a decade later into the Flint Institute of Arts, constituting a major portion of the museum's holdings in this area. As a student in Vera Zolberg's Museums and Society class at the New School, I documented the process by which the paintings of The Inlander Collection went from thrift store and tag sale junk to museum quality art, using Becker's concepts as the theoretical foundation, with myself as a self-identified agent of art world change.

In the November-December 2001 issue, New Art Examiner published "Peter Williams's Black Humor," a meditation on the deconstruction of minstrelsy in the work of the Detroit artist Peter Williams. The finishing touches of the essay were being put on literally as the smoke was still billowing across the East River from Ground Zero in the wake of September 11. Living in Brooklyn at the time with my Internet out and unable to get back into Manhattan to use the scanners at the New School, I roamed up and down Court Street trying to locate a working fax machine to send the final edits back to Kathryn Hixson, living and breathing the in-press issue's theme of fear and loathing.

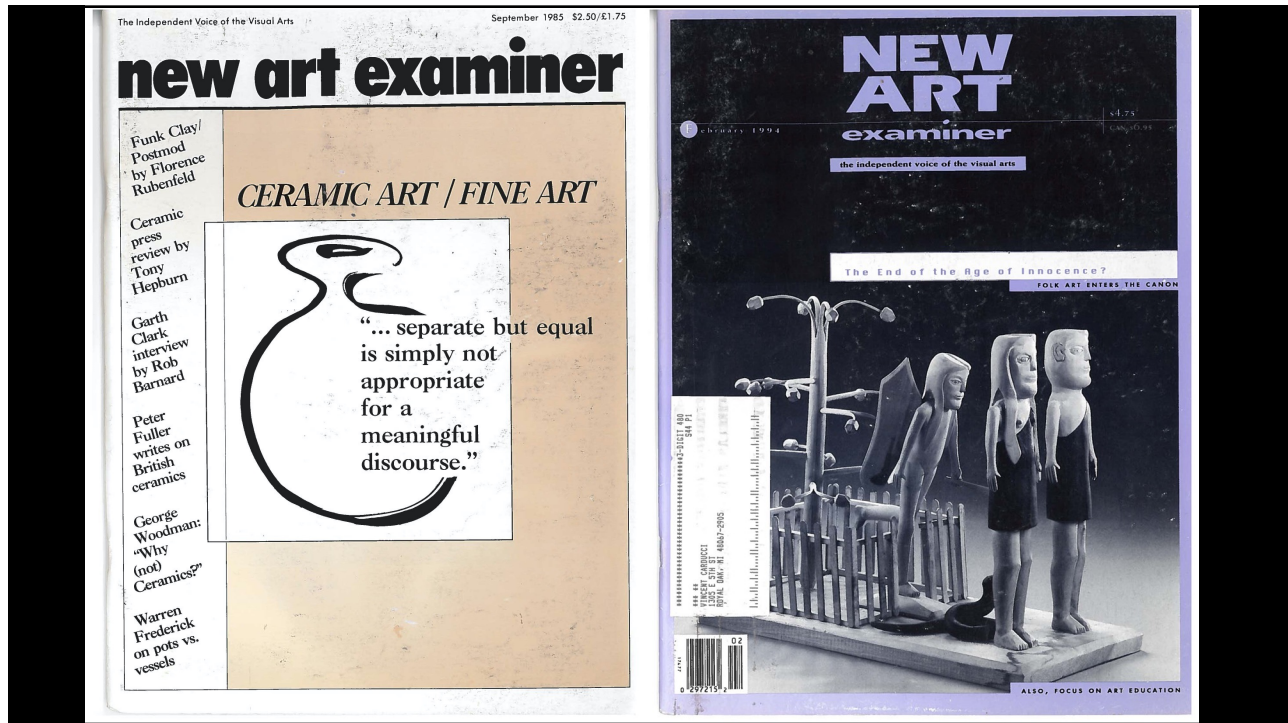
The article ended up being cited and its thesis incorporated into the curator's entry for Peter in that spring's catalog for the Whitney Biennial. Peter Williams was the first Detroit-based included in a Whitney Biennial since the 1970s heyday when Sam Wagstaff briefly served as the DIA's curator of contemporary art.

The members of this panel and other contributors to the New Art Examiner over the years could no doubt relate similar narratives. With the current, severely diminished state of arts coverage in an age of media convergence and consolidation, it's important to ponder how such narratives might now be constructed. In the decade-plus since the New Art Examiner's demise, no other venue of its scope has arisen. In past few years, Julie Meyer, an art historian at Eastern Michigan University, has mounted two important exhibitions of Detroit art, one of pioneer African American artist Charles McGee and another on Detroit's first avant-garde, the Cass Corridor, featuring heavily documented catalogues drawing on primary sources that include the archives of the New Examiner. Where will historians 20 years hence go for documentation on regional art scenes? The few reviews that get published in the back pages of Artforum and Art in America aren't enough, and most of them have had the lifeblood edited out of them.

In Chicago, Bad at Sports and Paul Klein's newsletter are online sources, but they don't extend their reach geographically with depth and consistency of the New Art Examiner. Hyperallergic and the Brooklyn Rail make some gestures toward cosmopolitanism, but still have primarily a New York focus.

This doesn't even begin to address the larger issue of the state of art criticism in general. The in-your-face stance of the New Art Examiner is in pretty short supply these days. This has deeper implications for today.

In his study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, German social philosopher Jurgen Habermas identifies the emergence of art and literary criticism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a crucial element in the development of the civil society that underpins democratic consensus building. The ability to think critically, according to Habermas, was honed by the likes of literary critics and thinkers Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux, Denis Diderot, Alexander Pope, and Immanuel Kant, which opened up a critical space for the political writings of John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Edmund Burke, and Mary Wollstonecraft. One must seriously wonder what the prospects for democracy are without the habit of critical thinking, which the New Art Examiner, for one, espoused.



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detroit artists monthly
June, 1978
Screen Art!
ARRGH!!

Detroit Artists Monthly, cover illustration, June, 1978. Detail of Keith Aoki's "Artist Story."

Detroit: art and transmission

by VINCENT A. CARDUCCI

I must confess to being diffident about the project at hand. As a "regional" critic, I know I should use this opportunity to promote my home town before a national audience. I should demonstrate convincingly the resolute hipness of the local scene—show it as an obscure, yet unique, and therefore deserving of attention and praise. In addition, I feel the pressure of an indigenous discourse which demands that I build upon the work of others, extending their ideas in order to ground more firmly the structure which supports the notion (ideology) of a "Detroit" school. On the other hand, I fear that such an agenda might be but one more in a series of lobbying efforts, mounted from those "regional centers" in addition to

Detroit, which have sought to establish regional parity with the "mainstream" (New York art power cluster).

The issues are obvious: (1) the outflanking maneuver, which puts forth an autochthonous aesthetic as being on a par with the "mainstream," acknowledges that "mainstream" as *the* measure (a self-imposed Artland separate-but-equal—Jim-Crowism); (2) while attempting to establish equality, the maneuver in no way questions the ideological field in which such a concept ("mainstream") can be constructed. It is with these thoughts in mind that I introduce what originally was intended to be my opening sentence.

Detroit is a hick town.

Obviously, that kind of statement would raise the danger of those in the local art community—reflecting a de-

fensive "civic pride," used to mask feelings of inadequacy for living a regional existence. But I would also intend that opening statement as a fall against those who would, and do, use that "pride" *offensively*—that is, as a networking device, whether it be for the furtherance of an individual career or as forward a particular group or cause. Over and above a general contrivance, I have adopted this tack so as not to accept blindly my role (particularly as "promoter") in the hope that something of greater value will result.

In a metropolitan area of several million people, I have been unable to locate for purchase a single copy of *Recordings*, by Hal Foster. This book is quite possibly the most important collection of critical essays by a single author to be published this year. While this situation may seem trivial, it is only one of the many examples of the lack of critical discourse, in terms of dialogue and research, which characterizes Detroit. The usual objection to criticism and other theoretical pursuits is that they are "too difficult." In my mind, this kind of willful ignorance is quintessentially "hick" behavior.

A few years back, the area's only true alternative cinema, the Detroit Film Project, screened Halis Frampton's *Nostalgia* (1970) at the opening of a photography exhibition held at a Detroit non-profit gallery. By the end of the film, three-quarters of the audience—which had numbered only about three dozen to begin with—had left, many chattering derisively as they walked out. The director of the gallery attempted to alert the projectionist that there was "something wrong" with the film—apparently unaware that the time lag between image and narrative in *Nostalgia* is structurally central to the work.

Since that time, I have sat in DFP audiences of less than two dozen for a personal appearance by Charles Schenman and seven for the Chicago Filmmakers Group. Attendance for performances by Meredith Monk, Laura Dean, Robert Ashley, Trieba Brown, and many others has been in the low hundreds. It appears that anything that is not facile will find meager rewards waiting in Detroit.

Detroit "hicks" can be taken as easily as any. The "city slickers" in this case were a group of graffitiists and their impression who blew into town from New York City last spring to do a show in a makeshift gallery downtown. While they were here, they vandalized the exterior of a local museum on rails, the Artrain, at Artrain's request, were

feted by local collectors and gallery owners, and even lectured at the prestigious Cranbrook Academy of Art, where they vandalized the student lounge (to everyone's delight). One's opinion of this series of events notwithstanding, it goes without saying that extensive public commissions such as these are rarely available to Detroit artists. (It also helps to have Gil Silverman, the town's most important collector of contemporary art, paying your way.)

Once considered a great jazz center, having been home for Thad, Hank and Elvin Jones, Betty Carter, Kenny Burrell, Alice Coltrane, Pepper Adams, Paul Chambers, Ron Carter, Tommy Flanagan, Yusuf Lateef, Curtis Fuller, and Sheila Jordan (just to list those few I can name off the top of my head), Detroit now finds itself in the position of borrowing legitimacy by using "Montreux-Detroit" to establish the pedigree of its summer jazz festival. The reference to the famous annual Swiss festival, now billed as the "Montroux Music Festival," is particularly fallacious. This reputation of Detroit's improvisational jazz tradition, which is born of ignorance, would be nothing more than sad were it not that the jazz festival, as well as many other "cultural" events which have taken place in the central business district, functions as a public relations tool encouraging capital infusion into the city's eroded economic base.

The crassness of this commercial strategy set a new standard this year when Andy Warhol and Keith Haring were commissioned to collaborate on the festival's poster. The result was incredibly lame, consisting of Haring's "atomic babies" scattered over Warhol's misappropriated silkscreen images of music slaves. The poster was not a statement about Detroit or jazz, but served only to demonstrate the creators' "star quality" through the use of their trademarks. Interdisparaged for aesthetic value is common in Detroit's business community. I term the phenomenon "militantly hick" to reaffirm business journalist Earl Shorris's observation that "the powerful art has no meaning, only uses." ("Reflections on Power," *Travler's*, July 1985).

The best known attempt to posit aesthetic value for the Detroit art scene has been the adoption of an ideological construct commonly referred to as the "Cass Corridor School." The subject of a major museum exhibi-

tion at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1980 ("Kick Out the Jams: Detroit's Cass Corridor 1963-1977"), which traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Cass Corridor has received national attention through the proliferation of the show's catalogue, reviews and front-the-backback reports in the major glossies, and numerous awards to its practitioners. The term "Cass Corridor" has become stylistically synonymous with "regressionist assemblage." However, very few artists in

the exhibition actually fit the mold. (Three exceptions are Gordon Newton, Michael Lochs, and William Antosow.) The Cass Corridor concept, which rests on Modernist constructs such as "originality," "creativity," "formal invention," etc., has engendered myriad problems because of the tendency to misapply it as constituting a *movement*, rather than simply as describing a collection of diverse activities that occurred at a particular place and time. Although the "paleocross" of the term was acknowledged in the "Jams" catalogue by curator Jay Belloli, time and again even he runs into trouble by attempting to make irreconcilable works occupy a unified field.

Later artists have used the concept unthinkingly as the underpinning for their own work. In this sense, the Cass Corridor is truly a "school" because its masters, particularly Newton, Lochs, and Robert Stotock, have established a method and a principle of authority which has been transmitted to student imitators as a received aesthetic. (It must be noted that the ossus falls on the receivers, not the givers.)

The misunderstanding has been exacerbated by critics and historians who have promoted some of these artists as a "second generation." One such master was Dennis Nawawski's "militantly hick" to reaffirm business journalist Earl Shorris's observation that "the powerful art has no meaning, only uses." ("Reflections on Power," *Travler's*, July 1985).

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How such a group could become "lost" is easily seen. Working mainly with conceptual, video, film, and performance methodologies, the Lost Generation presented a body of work which was difficult to understand—from the traditional art historical perspective in place at the time—because it required a critical theoretical background foreign to most Detroiters. This is especially true of the area's two major newspaper critics, Jay Colby of the *Detroit News* and Marsha Mino of the *Free Press*, who were, and still seem to be, unacquainted to address such esoteric practices. The Lost Generation was in line with what might be called "mainstream art" currents by virtue of its access to media information and through personal contacts; but it was also politically exped-

DIANE SPODAREK, in "Disregard Diane and the Disasters of Our Detroit Past," in performance at the Detroit Institute of Arts, 1978.

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ent to ignore the trend because of its incompatibility with the ideology surrounding the Cass Corridor.

In his performance *Whiteman* (1978), Keith Aoki openly proclaimed his own disaffection for what was then an already solidifying myth about art in Detroit. The first part of the work shows a "Detroit" artist saying: "too much chinamen massacre me... my head... too much Feigenstern make the collector... Cass Corridor murder town... I felt like my life had turned into an idiotic comic strip..." In another passage, the character, Jake Rasputin, states: "I didn't want to be no panty-waist 'New York artist' but Detroit was deceiving my brain..." (Shortly after performing this piece, Aoki moved to New York.)

The methodologies of the Lost Generation encompassed concerns that were, and still are, global. Mass media and mass society, social codes and their articulations, were issues addressed in the various works. The information glut and its cultural effects prompted Jim Hart to hold that "there can no longer be a characteristic regional anything." His works of the era, the "German Ideology" series, were a radical deconstruction of cinematic experience influenced by two universal fountainheads of modern Western discourse—Marx and Freud.

The Lost Generation left a legacy of events, including such multi-media presentations as "Video, Film, Performance" (1977), done in collaboration with the Center for Experimental Art and Communication of Toronto. "The

New Audience" (1977), at the Willis Gallery; and "Performance" at Gallery 7 in 1978. The group also arranged an exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1978 titled "New Video and Performance in Detroit," with a catalogue by Peter Frank.

One of the most important artifacts in the Lost Generation's archive is the *Detroit Artists Monthly*, which was published from 1976 to 1979. Edited by Diane Spodarek, a central figure in the Lost Generation, the *Artists Monthly* chronicled Detroit's art scene. The major format used in the magazine was the interview, although straight reviews, news items, and cartoons appeared as well. Spodarek and others were able to meet and speak with a surprising number of personalities, including Peter Frank, Dore Ashton, Robert Pincus-Witten, Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Joyce Kozloff, and dozens of others, of renown and not. The *Artists Monthly* existed outside regional art institutions. It was a grassroots effort in the truest sense, and characterized the "will to art" Pincus-Witten noted in Detroit at the time. (See Robert Pincus-Witten, "Detroit Notes: Islands in the Blight," *Arts*, February 1978, pp. 137-141.)

Any discussion of the Lost Generation, no matter how cursory, would be remiss without further mention of Spodarek. In addition to editing the *Monthly*, she was its major contributor in every way. She made videos exploring women's role in mass culture, which were highly influential during the period. She organized

exhibitions, such as those listed above, and conducted other arts advocacies. Finally, as "Dangerous Diane," of "Dangerous Diane and the Diagnostics," she presided over the dissolution of the performance scene, which, rather than follow the aristocratic avant-garde model to institutionalization ("Ivory Towerism"), followed the plecthan-bolshevik one to ghettoization ("Undergroundism") that resulted in the emergence of Detroit's punk scene. The last complete issue of the *Artists Monthly* (January 1979) was devoted mainly to new music, the very last mailing from the *Monthly* was a concert announcement. (Diane Spodarek is now living in New York City.)

To those "hicks" who seek simple solutions and those ideologues of the Cass Corridor, I would counterpose a group of "Neo-mainstream" artists who are working with a variety of methods. This group includes, although it is not limited to, artists such as Connor Samaras (Image Appropriation), Gary Kulak (Postminimalism), Karen Roth ("Post-post-painterly Abstraction"), Robert Wilentz (Realism). In their diversity, these artists and others make it nearly impossible to summarize the character of the city's art practice in this short space. It must necessarily be exposed over time, through continued discourse in additional reviews and features. For me, this is only the beginning.

Vincent A. Carducci is a Michigan editor of the *New Art Examiner*.

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DIA in decline

by VINCENT A. CARDUCCI

Without a doubt, one of the most dramatic stories reported recently regarding public funding for the arts concerns the difficulties currently plaguing the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), the primary institution of cultural legitimization in the state of Michigan and the sixth largest art museum in the United States. Changing priorities, due to last year's election of a new governor, Republican John Engler, have resulted in the slashing of the museum's funding allocation in the state budget to \$9.6 million in fiscal year 1991-92 from \$16.4 million the year before, a reduction of nearly 40 percent. Previous to the cutbacks, state support for the DIA accounted for about 60 percent of the museum's operating budget.

The reduced funding has garnered national coverage for the museum and has prompted drastic responses from the DIA administration such as the imposition of a mandatory discretionary admission fee at the museum for the first time since the Great Depression, the cancellation of all major exhibitions, and a significant reduction in the hours that the collections are open to the public. In addition, there has been a 45 percent reduction in staff with certain programs—predominantly in the education and performing arts areas and including the highly acclaimed Yoshimoto—having been eliminated entirely.

One of the most unfortunate aspects of the timing of these events is that the museum has been making strides in recent years toward connecting with a wider cultural constituency. For example, the museum commissioned African-American artist Romare Bearden to create a mosaic entitled *Quilting Time* (1985) for its permanent collection. In addition, the DIA recently mounted a survey of contemporary African-American abstract artists and housed a major survey of the work of nineteenth-century painter Henry Ossawa Tanner. The museum, after a number of years of inactivity, had also established a structure, however flawed, for addressing the indigenous art community.

The DIA and the state administration have traded salvos over the budget issue, with the museum intimating further reductions in services and the state threatening the elimination of funding entirely. Without state funding the DIA would reportedly be unable to function as even

the most minimal level and would, as a result, close its doors to the public, thereby becoming the nation's largest art warehouse.

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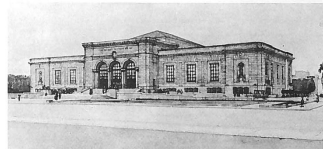
As with many of America's museums, the DIA traces its roots to the late nineteenth century, a time that University of Chicago historian Neil Harris has described as one of great optimism in a then expanding nation. During that period art museums, which provided examples of the most refined forms of taste, worked in concert with International Expositions (which demonstrated America's productive might and department stores (which embodied nascent consumer culture) to form a public declaration of standards and values to

which the burgeoning mass society being formed and guided by a solidifying national identity might aspire.

In keeping with the civic-minded spirit of the times, the DIA was founded in 1817 as the Detroit Museum of Art, a private institution dedicated to "the cultivation of art" for the citizens of a thriving "boom" town. The museum became known as the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1910 when the trustees ceded all collections to the City of Detroit in exchange for a pledge of ongoing operational support.

Since then the DIA has been a hybrid organization, with city government owning the museum building and its contents and providing for day-to-day administration, along with a private fundraising arm, known as the Founders Society, responsible for special projects, primarily funding the acquisition of new works of art. Due to this arrangement, little emphasis was placed on building the endowment fund, which stands at about \$40 million—a paltry amount when compared, for example, to the \$330 million endowment of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Following Professor Harris's model, it is not surprising to note among the DIA's major patrons the J.L. Hudson family, one-time owners of the region's preeminent emporium. The J.L. Hudson Company also had its origins in Detroit in the late 1800s and has been headquartered in Minneapolis since its merger with the Dayton's department store chain. In addition to the Hudsons other members of the city's patrician class—initially, the newspaper, lumber, and railroad magnates, and then the automotive



PHILIPPE CRUX: The Detroit Institute of Arts, "underwater on page 5217.

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families—have taken their respective turns at creating the museum's place in a cross-section of Detroit's claim to world-class status as an urban center. In fact, during the late 1960s and early 1970s Eleanor Clay Ford, widow of automobile baron Edsel Ford, personally underwrote the DIA's annual budget deficit.

Over the last 105 years, the DIA has amassed one of the largest, in some areas approaching encyclopedic, collections in the nation. Of note are the museum's collection of European old masters—particularly the Dutch—German expressionist art, American paintings, and textile works. Henri Matisse's *The Window* (1916), acquired in 1923, is among that artist's earliest inclusions in a public collection in America, and *Gravelayer* (1972) was the first full-scale realization in metal of a sculpture by Tony Smith. Diego Rivera's most significant mural outside of Mexico, *Detroit Industry* (1932), is also housed within the museum's walls.

In the last 20 years, the bifurcated nature of the museum's management has been a source of difficulty. The primary division has been between the City of Detroit, which represents the central city's predominantly Black population, and the museum's private patrons, who tend to be middle- to upper-class suburban whites.

In the mid-1970s the Detroit city government, suffering from severe financial setbacks due to prevailing economic conditions and an ever-rising tax base, suspended its allocations for operating expenses at the DIA. On June 16, 1975, the museum closed its doors to the public for the first time since the museum passed into municipal hands. In that same year, late museum director Frederick J. Cummings and his success successfully lobbied the state legislature for a direct line item in the budget to support operations at the DIA. This funding had continued until this year at increasing levels in acknowledgment of the DIA's role in the



Model of the Museum at the Greenway project June 1976

cultural life of the state of Michigan. Even though state funding was sought and obtained more or less with the approval of Detroit Mayor Coleman A. Young from the mid-'70s on, the accountability of the museum to a variety of constituencies as a result, coupled with the financial independence of the private Founders Society (which covers almost all of the museum's remaining operating budgets), have been central issues in city politics for years. In August 1983, Mayor Young used an audit of the Founders Society's financial records to request direct city control over the museum, which is technically a department of municipal government. The audit resulted in Cummings's resignation in January 1984 amid charges of mismanagement, financial irregularities, and cynicism.

The most recent fiscal crisis appears to portend yet another threat to the museum's ability: a new state government politically committed to balancing the budget and cutting

taxes during a period of slow economic growth. Republican John Engler defeated incumbent Democrat James Blanchard in last year's gubernatorial race by mounting a grassroots campaign geared toward the anti-urban sentiments of state residents in suburban areas. Engler vowed to provide Michigan citizens with tax relief achieved through the elimination of state "extraneous" programs and the streamlining of government bureaucracy. This campaign pledge resulted in the elimination of tens of thousands of individuals from welfare rolls, a policy that has made national headlines and prompted a march on the state capitol led by the Reverend Jesse Jackson.

The cutting of DIA appropriations was a part of a general rollback in funding for the arts, which are considered by the new administration to be a "nonessential service." Indeed, even the state's primary granting agency, the Michigan Council for the Arts (MCA), itself was spared virtual annihilation only after a last-minute summit meeting with some of the state's most prominent patrons who are also supporters of the arts. The MCA's cultural affairs department survives reorganized under the commerce department and highly restricted in its scope.

Most any funding controversies have been framed as debates over public affiliations of morality or issues of free speech. On the surface the situation at the DIA would seem to be politics at a more basic level; that is, concerned simply with the apportionment of scarce resources to recessionary times. Nevertheless, it is not outrageous to suggest that the recent events at the DIA, too, are part of a larger ideological struggle being fought on the battlefield of culture.

It has been reported that in the face of dire circumstances the DIA is reviewing its options in order to safeguard future operations. One option—sharing resources with another museum,

perhaps in Japan—seems unlikely to survive the trial-balloon stage; however, two other viable alternatives that would forever reshape the cultural landscape of the region.

The first option is to regionalize the museum and establish a taxing authority to fund its operations. This proposal recognizes that the individuals who use the museum regularly are not just residents of the city proper, but people who come from all over the tri-county metropolitan Detroit area and beyond.

The second option is to privatize the museum. The advantage of this option is said to be that it would facilitate the raising of endowment funds, an effort which has reportedly been severely hampered up to this point by apportionment on the part of would-be donors as to how the City of Detroit has administered DIA funds since the Cummings audit. It would also serve to wrest control of the museum from the militant Mayor Young.

Of the two alternatives, regionalizing the

museum would be the more democratic. If the plan were to include the dissolution of the Founders Society, which would be rendered obsolete under an efficiently structured reorganization, the jurisdictional conflicts that have plagued the museum would be eliminated. This option also has the additional benefit of publicizing the museum's status as a public institution, held in trust for the benefit of all citizens.

As appealing as this alternative is, hard economic times have galvanized Michigan voters against additional taxation and any tax-increase proposal put on the ballot is liable to be defeated. Similar recommendations to fund construction of a new stadium to house the Detroit Tigers baseball club have met with resounding protest; and if opening for the "grand old game" has the citizenry up in arms, the exotic world of art is even less likely to be accommodated.

Even though the loss of face incurred on the part of the city administration in ceding one of its prime assets to a private group of individuals would be daunting, privatization of the DIA seems the most likely resolution to the crisis. In



DETROIT INDUSTRY: The Window, oil on canvas, 27 1/2" x 40", 1916



THE FIRST OPTION TO REGIONALIZE THE MUSEUM AND ESTABLISH A TAXING AUTHORITY TO FUND ITS OPERATIONS. THIS PROPOSAL RECOGNIZES THAT THE INDIVIDUALS WHO USE THE MUSEUM REGULARLY ARE NOT JUST RESIDENTS OF THE CITY PROPER, BUT PEOPLE WHO COME FROM ALL OVER THE TRI-COUNTY METROPOLITAN DETROIT AREA AND BEYOND.

THE SECOND OPTION IS TO PRIVATIZE THE MUSEUM. THE ADVANTAGE OF THIS OPTION IS SAID TO BE THAT IT WOULD FACILITATE THE RAISING OF ENDOWMENT FUNDS, AN EFFORT WHICH HAS REPORTEDLY BEEN SEVERELY HAMPERED UP TO THIS POINT BY APPORTIONMENT ON THE PART OF WOULD-BE DONORS AS TO HOW THE CITY OF DETROIT HAS ADMINISTERED DIA FUNDS SINCE THE CUMMINGS AUDIT. IT WOULD ALSO SERVE TO WREST CONTROL OF THE MUSEUM FROM THE MILITANT MAYOR YOUNG.

OF THE TWO ALTERNATIVES, REGIONALIZING THE

Indeed, it is one of the supreme ironies of the museum's recent state that Governor Engler's inaugural ball was held at the DIA.

fact, it would appear that in many respects the groundwork is already being laid. Most of the employee layoffs thus far at the



THE INaugural Ball at the DIA, FEBRUARY 1983

museum have been City of Detroit employees. Given that the Founders Society's ostensible purpose is to support museum operations, this appears to be inefficient in that many Founders Society positions are more highly compensated than the city positions and are staffed by individuals, a number of whom are refugees from the Dayton-Hudson merger consolidation (including Founders Society Executive Vice President Joseph P. Bianco, Jr.), who lack professional training in art history or museum management.

Another indication of the progress being made toward privatization is a phenomenon many museum insiders refer to as the DIA's "Renaissance" marketing program, which derives its name from a metropolitan Detroit franchise of banquet facilities. It refers to the practice of renting the DIA out for ivory social functions. Indeed, it is one of the supreme ironies of the museum's recent state that Governor Engler's inaugural ball was held at the DIA.

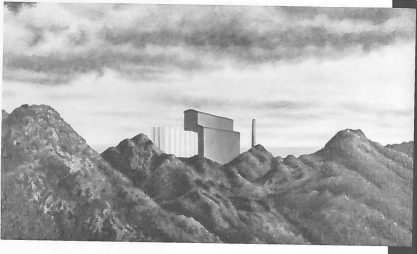
The PR campaign to manufacture consent for privatization seems to be the next mission: the city's *Free Press*, *The Detroit Free Press*, has already editorialized that "It doesn't really matter much whether the Detroit Institute of Arts remains publicly owned or goes private." The final indication will undoubtedly be a scene from Orwell, where the citizens awake to see in the face of the legend which once read, "DEDICATED BY THE PEOPLE OF DETROIT TO THE KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF ART; A NEW sign which declares "FOR MEMBERS ONLY." ■

Vincent A. Carducci is a Michigan editor of the *New Art Examiner*.

regional reflections

By Vincent Carducci

The Inlander Collection reveals mainstream Modernism as filtered through local faculty.




Clarence Carter Cleveland Center Oil on canvas, 18" x 20", All photos by Charles in Clark, Ok.

Almost immediately upon returning home from viewing the legendary Amory Show in 1913, Ohio artist William Sommer (1861-1949) concocted an image using classical-style outlines of form and non-representational application of color, freshly encountered in the paintings of Gauguin and the forest, to inform the vision of his own backyard in the town of Lakewood, just west of Cleveland. The 1913 picture, *The Rabbit Hutch*, in which the universalizing concepts of a then dawning Modernism are melded into a precise view from middle America, marks the starting point of a remarkable group of paintings assembled over the past five years by noted

art collector Michael Hill and artist Ferenc Glasco. Taking its lead from a journal entry by Charles Burchfield, the Inlander Collection of Great Lakes Regional Painting was exhibited last fall in "A Place in Time" at the Cleveland State University Art Gallery and the Center for Creative Studies Center Galleries in Detroit, Michigan. The collection currently consists of over 100 works created between 1913 and 1968 by artists working within a 500-mile radius of the Straits of Mackinac.

Known to most in the art world as a pioneer theorist and collector of American folk art, less Steven Kapella, "Enter Folk Art," *IAAE*, February, 1984, Hill was initially drawn to the Great Lakes regionalists by virtue of their position as "Inland-Outsiders" within the Modernist mainstream. Glasco's attraction to the work stems, in part, from her expertise of excursions to the Pacific Northwest coast as an artist and the pedagogic conviction of outdoor painting in which, perhaps, the landscape figures prominently. For both, the notion of an aesthetic model in which cultural production is predicated upon specific community-based interactions seemed to offer a way out of the solipsistic circumstances of formalist reduc-



William Sommer The Rabbit Hutch 1913. Oil on board, 28" x 20".

tivism without embracing the pastiche or cynicism of Postmodern doctrine. With few exceptions (notably Burchfield and John Stewart Curry), the artists whose works are represented are names seldom remembered by art history today. During their lifetimes, though, many of these artists were eminent, receiving public and private commissions, exhibiting at regional museums, galleries, and artists' clubs, and sometimes Pennsylvania and New York, whose accomplishments are just now being acknowledged. More than just a group of objects and proper names, the Inlander Collection is a register of a specific place in time, an idea whereby the aesthetic, following Heidegger in "The Origin of the Work of Art," discloses a nexus of relations, at once physical, phenomenological, and cultural, that constitute a new bygone world.

In terms of revealing information through materiality, two aspects of the Inlander Collection are particularly salient. The first is the large number of works in the collection; many of them major, done in watercolor media. The immediacy of watercolor facilitates the method of working on a plain art and

the significant presence of works executed in this manner evinces the concern for interesting observed nature, which was an important characteristic of painting in the upper Midwest during this period. To be sure, records show an abundance of local and regional watercolor societies in operation in those years, which counted well-known artists among their memberships and art colonies, such as Obow at Saginaw or Lake Michigan, devoted to promulgating mastery of technique.

The second material aspect is the attention accorded to framing. In the same way that Giovanni Morelli proscribed authenticating the works of Italian Renaissance Masters by observing painted details such as hands and ears, the frames of each painting in the Inlander Collection serve to place them in proper context; but wherever possible, original frames have been retained or period moldings restored. Throughout successive pressings, changes in framing reflect evolving attitudes and tastes, from the glazed refinement of Arts-and-Crafts ornamentation early in the century through the elegant, architectural geometry of the Art Deco period to the rough, neoprimivist modernity of the years surrounding World War II. Consistent throughout, however, is the requirement of physical tracking the pictures from temporal spaces, creating an ideal place of observation, as opposed to affirming the bare wood-frame facades of unassuming houses, and the smokestacks and business districts of the local factory towns apace. The assiduous manner in which the curators duly note the state in which each artist worked, and carefully

investigate the location of the subject of every painting—sometimes with period and/or contemporary photographs of the actual sites—additionally impacts the awareness of place and time that is intrinsic to the Inlander project.

Works such as *Lake Geneva*, a 1929 painting by Jean Crawford Adams (1884-1971) and *The New Cincinnati Gas and Electric*, Louis C. Vogt's 1894-1938 watercolor of the same year, chronicle landmarks both natural and man-made that defined the life-world of the upper Midwest. In other paintings—Edmund Brucker's 1844 rendering of a human boy and his sled in a Cleveland back alley, *Big Cars*, and Roman Johnson's 1939-43 portrait of his father, Dad; for example—the distinctive characteristics of individual inhabitants of the Great Lakes region are depicted. Zolan Seewald's 11889-1914 paintings of one of Detroit's main thoroughfares, *Woodward Avenue* (and II of 1929 and 1931, respectively, also bear witness to the nascent historical transformation in which cable cars and ArtDeco skyscrapers would soon be supplanted by speeding automobiles and boulevard roadways as cities gave way to suburbs, a development fueled by government-sponsored subsidies of tract housing and highway construction.

In that it is essentially a painted diagram of space and time, the Inlander Collection should be understood as an exercise in cultural geography, the charting of a narrative embedded within the land. An important illustration of this is Olin Clarence Carter's 1929 *Coal Docks at Superior*, in which the artist portrays a northern Wisconsin mining waterfront with mountains of black coal dominating a simple red leading shed, a glimpse of steely blue water on the horizon, and a covering of woolen grey clouds, uniting earth and sky with a sliver of human presence in between, firmly situating the midwestern field of being in the landscape itself. Also significant is Roland Schweinberg's (1898-1950) unattested *Youngstown Mine*, circa 1930,

with its steel mill on one side of the foreground and church and civic groups on the other, and the town laid out in reading planes, succinctly recapitulating the shared values of a community living and working together at a point before the concept of public space was enfolded in the partitioning of topography into subdivision, shopping mall, and office park.

Another facet of the region's historiographic intellectual terrain is also conspicuous: the reappropriations of the mandates of modernity on the upper Midwest. As with the rest of the United States, the *Armsy Show* had been a wake-up call for midwestern artists to new modes in visual art, and whereas Impressionism was already being practiced in the Midwest at that point, other "isms" began to be syncretically articulated in the works of a number of the region's artists as the century progressed. Instances include the colonial Cubism of Margaret Newland, whose *Stuart Devlin's Zouze Candies* of 1947 was painted when the artist was only 17, as well as Edmund Lewandowski's 1950 geometric abstraction, *Factory Rooftops*. However, Bernice Berkman's 1940 *Flying on Hubbard Street*, a dynamic, colorful synthesis of futurism and Expressionism (with an obvious nod to Max Beckman) of two kids speeding down a Chicago avenue outside a boy-die, is arguably the most inspired.

As a document, the Inlander Collection might best be appreciated as a reverse-print of the American cultural landscape to come, serving retrospectively to advance a counterpoint to the emergent hegemony of Modernism and its ostensible Other, the mass market.

for allegiance to the military industrial complex against the forces of an "evil empire." In both instances, the effect was to merge local differences into an increasingly consolidated national monoculture. (That year also saw the first printing of Jack Kenau's classic *On the Road*, which, perhaps more than any other expression of Beat culture, helped to establish alienation as a mass consumable.)

Interestingly, one of the principal works in the Inlander Collection, a 1917 Buffalo-fied watercolor, bears a vestige of this mechanism of effacement and serves as a symbol of the ameliorative capacity of the project. When recently offered at a New York gallery, the painting was listed with the title *Building with Dorned Top*. Upon viewing the picture, Hall—who had spent considerable time in and around the southeastern Great Lakes sculpture professor at the University of Kentucky and later in connection with his research in American folk art—immediately recognized the subject as a brick kiln indigenous to the Ohio River valley. This knowledge, coupled with research into and understanding of Burfield's aesthetic practice and approach to the designation of his works, resulted in a retitle of the piece to *Black Kiln in Arlurum*, restoring the particularity of the image in place and time and, more importantly, recovering the semiological resonance of a significant midwestern icon.

As a document, the Inlander Collection might best be appreciated as a reverse-print of the American cultural landscape to come, serving retrospectively to advance a counterpoint to the emergent hegemony of Modernism and its ostensible Other, the mass market.



Stuart Devlin's Zouze Candies, 1947. Tempera on board, 14" x 17".



Building with Dorned Top, 1917. Buffalo-fied watercolor.



Woodward Near Jefferson (Woodward Avenue), 1929. Oil on canvas, 20" x 34".

BLACK PETER WILLIAMS'S HUMOR

By Vincent Carducci



PETER WILLIAMS
Painted in 2001, 60" x 60", 60" x 60"
All titles are the artist's, courtesy of Renaissance Gallery

EVEN IN THESE SUPPOSEDLY POLITICALLY INCORRECT TIMES, FEW THINGS SEEM TO EVOKE FEAR AND LOATHING QUITE LIKE THE MINSTREL TRADITION

An iconography that registers the conflicted nature of racial representation within American culture, minstrelsy as it is understood today—that is, as a parody of black mannerisms typically performed by whites in blackface—is thought of in many quarters as akin to the swastika in its irredeemable connotations. Yet Constance Rouike, in her 1983 classic *American Humor: A Study of the National Character*, puts forth that minstrelsy originated in the earliest days of the nation as a burlesque of whites and their manners by "the Negro in a revolt which was cryptic and submerged." It is thus related to the cakewalk dance of a century later, where blacks mimicked the stiffness of white body carriage, a dance that was also taken up by whites in imitation of black expressive forms. (The early documented white minstrel of the 1830s and 1840s, such as Thomas Dartmouth "Jim Crow" Rice and Dan Emmett, were in effect the *Blax* Beiderbeckes, Elvis Presleys, and Beastie Boys—white entertainers who emulated black styles and cultural forms—of their day.) It was only later, particularly after the Civil War, that what Rouike terms the "highly stylized figures" of minstrelsy familiar to us today were developed by white performers in sublimation of dread over the perceived threat of miscegenation both biological and cultural.³

In the last decade, with the embrace of popular culture and "reaganian" practices made available by the Postmodern turn, a number of contemporary black artists have sought to deconstruct white humor, which signals a return to the genesis of the minstrel form. For one group of artists, most visibly and recently represented by Kara Walker and Michael Ray Charles, the disreputable images of popular bigotry—nappy-headed pickaninnies, do-ragged mummies, barefoot jiggaboos, etcetera—become an "in your face" confrontation of the legacy of racial oppression, which "pure" aesthetic and political correctness equally obscure. These images seek to clarify lines of demarcation between oppressor and oppressed, which have been blurred in the "post-integration" era. This strategy has been effective for viewers in the higher, illi-white reaches of the field of cultural production known as fine art, although risky in its doublemasking of the well-hate that dominant culture propagates.

Truer to what purposes distinction I term "black" minstrelsy in Renee Cox's *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, which last season created something of a stir when it was displayed at the Brooklyn Museum. In the work, a multi-paneled photograph of the artist nude, assuming the position of Christ with outstretched arms at the center of the composition, proclaims the presence of the other within a representational code whose function is in part to posit whiteness as utterly natural and not constructed. In her first major New York gallery solo show this past fall, Cox furthered this device by inserting herself



into a whole series of archetypes of Western art. In this she follows Robert Colecott, who in paintings such as *Katzen Taters* and *George Washington Carver Crossing the Odorous* has cast Euro-American art in blackface since turning to figuration in the 1970s after two decades of Abstract Expressionist assimilation.

Detroit-based painter Peter Williams combines the tactics of deconstructing the popular iconography of racist oppression and appropriating the conventions of European artistic representation. In bringing these two strategies together, he interrogates dominant culture to reveal its role in forming personal and social identity. Williams conflates high and low culture, reclaiming the black minstrel tradition whereby blacks lampoon white characteristics to break a cycle of self-hate. Williams's work is notable in the way it updates the iconography of repression to include newer, subtler representations of race on the one hand, while seamlessly incorporating the devices and methodologies of traditional easel painting on the other. This results

In a more heightened level of reflexivity than is usually found in the work of many of his contemporaries who are concerned with the same themes.

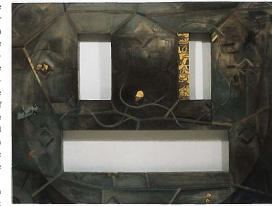
A "baby boomer" idyll informs Williams's understanding of the dilemma of dominant culture for people of color. Born in Nyack, New York, in 1952, Williams grew up in an ostensibly typical middle-class American household. His father was a successful real-estate broker in the suburban market where the family lived and his mother was a stay-at-home mom. Like other children of the 1950s, he watched "The Mickey Mouse Club" and other media representations of an idealistically homogenized society. As was not unusual in bourgeois American households, the topic of race was comparable to that of money, that is, taboo for family conversation. It was years before the artist was called on to grapple with his racial identity.

Williams's dark-skinned father, a Belize native of African descent, was a "black blazer" real-estate agent who sold homes to blacks in "white-flight" neighborhoods. Williams's light-skinned mother could

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WILLIAMS CONFLATES HIGH AND LOW CULTURE, RECLAIMING THE BLACK MINSTREL TRADITION WHEREBY BLACKS LAMPOON WHITE CHARACTERISTICS TO BREAK A CYCLE OF SELF-HATE.

have easily "passed" for white by virtue of the fair complexion and other Caucasian features she inherited from her Irish grandfather. White observable traits of difference were therefore present in the Williams household, they were never acknowledged in domestic interactions. It was with genuine shock that the adolescent Williams first found himself the object of the term "nigger." The dichotomy of self-perception and social definition that Williams experienced in late childhood underlies all his artistic practice, but its position at center stage evolved serendipitously.



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PETER WILLIAMS
The Algiers Motel, 1966, oil on canvas, 52" x 100"

Precociously gifted (as a teenager in the 1960s he showed at the first Woodstock Festival art fair), Williams resolved early on to become an artist. He initially embraced formalist abstraction, an aesthetic promulgated in American art schools during the late 1970s and early 1980s. His highly worked geometric paintings of the time evoke those of English artist Sean Scully, replaying late Modern formalist concepts of painting, as-pure-object. However, the limitations of this type of formalist assimilation—a kind of aesthetic "passing"—quickly became evident to Williams when he relocated to Detroit in 1987 to join the art department at Wayne State University. The overwhelming blackness of Motown's urban population and its widespread economic desperation relative to the affluent white suburbs—according to the

2000 U.S. Census, Detroit is America's most segregated metropolitan area—contrasted with Minneapolis and Baltimore, where Williams lived as a student, as well as the Nyack of his youth.

The significance of Detroit as a crucible of Williams's aesthetic is exemplified by *The Algiers Motel*, painted in 1966, after nine years in the city. It takes its title from the 1967 Algiers Motel incident, one of the most notorious events in the history of Detroit's race relations. A prelude to the civil uprising later that same summer from which the city has yet to fully recover, this incident involved an all-white police squad who allegedly shot three black men to death and badly beat seven other people, including two white women. Williams

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PETER WILLIAMS, *The Algiers Motel*, 1966, oil on canvas, 52" x 100"

70 NEW ART EXAMINER

THESE STEREOTYPED IMAGES OF BLACKS PRODUCED BY WHITE PREJUDICE—DOPERS, HO'S, PIMPS, ETCETERA—FACILITATED DISINVESTMENT FROM DETROIT, LEAVING THE CITY A BURNED-OUT SHELL.

illustrates the scene expressionistically: there is a yellow potted plant with vulva-shaped flowers, a bandana-covered mammy carrying a *flapjacks*, and a Little Black Sambo hugging a watermelon. A woman looks out onto the street at a barely discernible group of figures, presumably the police. A black male suggestively holds a cigarette—perhaps a joint?—to his lips. An important detail is the miniature white man carrying a wedge of Swiss cheese, as if about to set a trap for a mouse.

Acknowledging the incoherent bigotry of "official" policies such as racial profiling, the painting displaces representations of self-determination with images of self-hate: the figures on the inside of the scene are stereotypes, refuted and therefore dehumanized with respect to the gaze of those outside who represent dominant culture. In addition to functioning as instruments of repression, these stereotyped images of blacks produced by white prejudice—dopers, ho's, pimps, etcetera—facilitated disinvestment from Detroit, leaving the city a burned-out shell where thousands of buildings stand empty and 60 percent of the residents live below the poverty line. Moreover, this iconography of disreput still resonates, in the gangsta persona constructed by blacks, for example, providing a bumper crop of fear and healing that "The Man" continues to harvest.

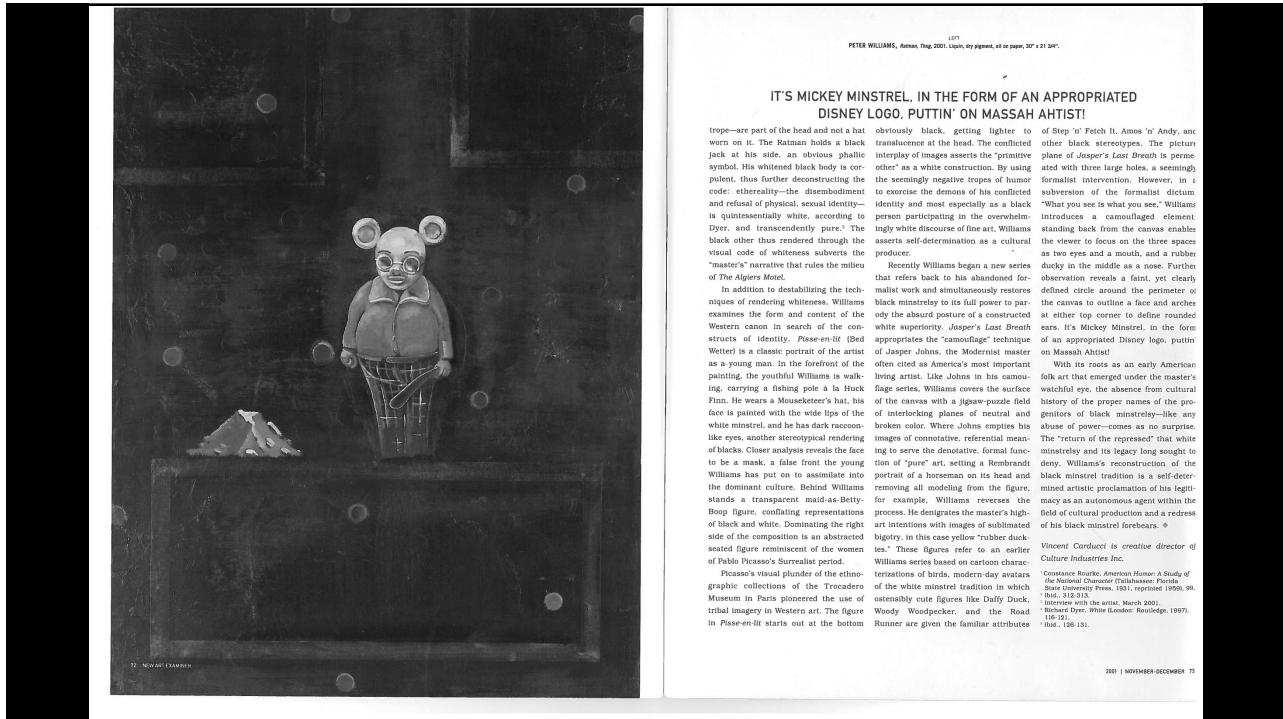
Yet—linguistic legerdemains of "post blackness" notwithstanding—much as Spike Lee ultimately concludes in his generally misunderstood recent film, *Bamboozled*, Williams recognizes that the symbolic power of what I term white minstrelry—the tool of repressive sublimation in which whites mimic black characteristics even while generally unaware of the form's subversive origins—is now *de facto* and *de jure* the master's province. Few have negotiated its treacherous terrain successfully.

In *Bamboozled*, the fates of the cynically assimilationist Pierre Delacroix, the cluelessly accommodationalist Manray aka Mantan, and the idealistically separatist Big Black Africa, each of whom confronts the double-mask of white minstrelry in his own way with the same deadly outcome, are cases in point. Williams's most recent work is an end run around this conundrum, returning to the burlesque of white culture at the heart of the black minstrel.

One avenue available to artists is deconstructing the code through which whiteness is conventionally represented. According to the English cultural critic Richard Dyer, a primary method for encoding the ideology of white superiority onto the apparatus of Western representation is by lighting subjects from above.⁴ In the recent painting *Ratman*, Thap, Williams confuses this code by commingling it with the debased racial stereotypes of white minstrelry—whites in blackface mimicking blacks mimicking whites—an aesthetic miscegenation, as it were. Here the clearly black figure, representing the artist, is rendered in white paint, appropriating the representational convention of racial purity to portray a black body in a reversal of minstrel carking, in which white people blacken their faces with burnt cork. The flat nose and thick lips of the figure are exaggerated in the fashion of white minstrelry; the "Mickey Mouse" ears—another white minstrel

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LEFT
PETER WILLIAMS, *Amos*, 2001. Oil on canvas, 30" x 31 3/4".

IT'S MICKEY MINSTREL, IN THE FORM OF AN APPROPRIATED DISNEY LOGO, PUTTIN' ON MASSAH AHTIST!

trope—are part of the head and not a hat worn on it. The Ratman holds a black jack at his side, an obvious phallic symbol. His whitened black body is corpulent, thus further deconstructing the code: otherality—the disembodiment and refusal of physical, sexual identity—is quintessentially white, according to Dyer, and transcendently pure.⁷ The black other thus rendered through the visual code of whiteness subverts the “master’s” narrative that rules the milieu of *The Algiers Motel*.

In addition to destabilizing the techniques of rendering whiteness, Williams examines the form and content of the Western canon in search of the constructs of identity. *Passe-en-lit* (Bed Wetter) is a classic portrait of the artist as a young man. In the forefront of the painting, the youthful Williams is walking, carrying a fishing pole à la Huck Finn. He wears a Mousketeer’s hat, his face is painted with the wide lips of the white minstrel, and he has dark raccoon-like eyes, another stereotypical rendering of blacks. Closer analysis reveals the face to be a mask, a false front the young Williams has put on to assimilate into the dominant culture. Behind Williams stands a transparent maid-as-Betty-Boop figure, conflating representations of black and white. Dominating the right side of the composition is an abstract seated figure reminiscent of the women of Pablo Picasso’s Surrealist period.

Picasso’s visual plunder of the ethnographic collections of the Trocadere Museum in Paris pioneered the use of tribal imagery in Western art. The figure in *Passe-en-lit* starts out at the bottom

obviously black, getting lighter to transience at the head. The conflicted interplay of images asserts the “primitive other” as a white construction. By using the seemingly negative tropes of humor to exorcise the demons of his conflicted identity and most especially as a black person participating in the overwhelmingly white discourse of fine art, Williams asserts self-determination as a cultural producer.

Recently Williams began a new series that refers back to his abandoned formalist work and simultaneously restores black minstrelsy to its full power to parody the absurd posture of a constructed white superiority. *Jasper’s Last Breath* appropriates the “camouflage” technique of Jasper Johns, the Modernist master often cited as America’s most important living artist. Like Johns in his camouflage series, Williams covers the surface of the canvas with a jigsaw-puzzle field of interlocking planes of neutral and broken color. Where Johns empties his images of connotative, referential meaning to serve the denotative, formal function of “pure” art, setting a Rembrandt portrait of a horseman on its head and removing all modeling from the figure, for example, Williams reverses the process. He demigrates the master’s high-art intentions with images of sublimated bigotry, in this case yellow “rubber duck-

ies.” These figures refer to an earlier Williams series based on cartoon characterizations of birds, modern day avatars of the white minstrel tradition in which ostensibly cute figures like Daffy Duck, Woody Woodpecker, and the Road Runner are given the familiar attributes of Step ‘n’ Fetch It, Amos ‘n’ Andy, and other black stereotypes. The picture plane of *Jasper’s Last Breath* is permeated with three large holes, a seemingly formalist intervention. However, in a subversion of the formalist dictum: “What you see is what you see,” Williams introduces a camouflaged element standing back from the canvas enables the viewer to focus on the three spaces as two eyes and a mouth, and a rubber ducky in the middle as a nose. Further observation reveals a faint, yet clearly defined circle around the perimeter of the canvas to outline a face and arches at either top corner to define rounded ears. It’s Mickey Minstrel, in the form of an appropriated Disney logo, puttin’ on Massah Ahtist!

With its roots as an early American folk art that emerged under the master’s watchful eye, the absence from cultural history of the proper names of the progenitors of black minstrelsy—like any abuse of power—comes as no surprise. The “return of the repressed” that white minstrelsy and its legacy long sought to deny, Williams’s reconstruction of the black minstrel tradition is a self-determined artistic proclamation of his legitimacy as an autonomous agent within the field of cultural production and a redress of his black minstrel forebears. ⁸

Vincent Caradact is creative director of Culture Industries Inc.
⁷ *Constantin Brancusi, American Master: A Study of the National Character* (Chickasha: Florida State University Press, 1931; reprinted 1996), 95.
⁸ *Ibid.*, 212-213.
⁹ Interview with the artist, March 2003.
¹⁰ Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 116-121.
¹¹ *Ibid.*, 126-131.