Henry Ford dancing with his wife,
"the believer"

Truck from the new Rouge complex,
Dearborn

Suburbia

"Virtually all of urban Detroit is as weak on vitality and diversity as the Bronx. It is ring superimposed upon ring of failed gray belts. Even Detroit's downtown itself cannot produce a respectable amount of diversity."

- Jane Jacobs, 1961

Marshall Fredericks
"The Spirit of Detroit"
1958

"Now the Lord is that spirit and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

Diego Rivera,
"Detroit Industry murals",
1932-1933

Occupy Detroit, October 14th, 2011

Early automotive assembly line

Abandoned house

Henry Miller,
"The Air-Conditioned Nightmare",
1939

"The Capital of the new - planet, I mean, which will kill itself off - is of course Detroit."

The Renaissance Center

"A statement that speaks for itself"

Robocop

"Serve the public trust, protect the innocent, uphold the law."

Anecdotes from Detroit

Sille Storihle

There is a lot of writing about Detroit these days. Portrayals of the city range from the optimistic outlook that Detroit is turning into a post-industrial arcadia to an image of a city left to decay. Many hope that this city will rise from the ashes of capitalist exhaustion and prove that man can live with and not against nature. On the other hand, many are obsessed with the images and accounts of the city as ruin, as an industrial graveyard. Account that feed into a gloomier outlook on the city and the future of Detroit. I found myself drifting between these two narratives, looking for pockets of spaces that challenged them.

I first came to Detroit through the Chrysler advertising campaign *Imported from Detroit*, where the car manufacturer tries to re-brand the Motor City that has "been to hell and back". The advertising campaign advanced the slogan "Imported from Detroit" and promoted a local patriotism built on its past as the jewel of the Golden Age of Capitalism, a blueprint for the rest of the world to mimic. Public art works, such as Robert Graham *Monument to Joe Louis* and Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry murals* came to represent the slogan with a Mexican Marxist suddenly selling cars through a Super Bowl advertising campaign. What is the role of artists in a city like Detroit and in a system of capitalism that accelerates through an overproduction of images?

Henry Miller also wrote about Detroit. It was one of many stops on his journey through the United States. In *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* Miller describes Detroit as "the capital of the new planet", "the [capital] that will kill itself off." For Miller, "Everything [was] too new, too slick, too ruthless" in 1939 in Detroit. Now in the city over 70 years later, very few things appear new and slick, with the exception of General Motor's headquarters down by the waterfront. Also known as the Renaissance Center, this slick building raises questions about Detroit's worst eyesores: Is it the masses of abandoned buildings or this erected glass fortress that was deemed "a statement that

speaks for itself". It does not just speak, it roars.

Miller claimed that the United States offers "no hope for the artist", "America is no place for an artist: to be an artist is to be a moral leper, an economic misfit, a social liability. A corn-fed hog enjoys a better life than a creative writer, painter or musician. To be a rabbit is better still." The city Miller predicted would "kill itself off" has now become a haven for artists that seek out new grounds and potential places to build a practice and uphold a quality of life. Miller found shelter in Paris, and the artist for whom there was no hope in the US has now found a new capital.

This new capital attracts artists like myself, who receive short-term opportunities to stay in Detroit. This recent trend has turned the city and its citizens into an object of study—artists do not go to Detroit only to make art, but to make art *about* Detroit. Some come to contribute and build up the post-industrial arcadia through social and community-engaged projects; others reinforce the same old stigma of a city in ruin, producing "ruin porn" of dilapidated buildings and abandoned factories. I found myself drifting for five week in Detroit, looking for Miller's slickness, for the brightness and ruthlessness he criticized so harshly.

A couple of years before Miller came to Detroit, Diego Rivera completed his *Detroit Industry murals,* offering

a glimpse into the Rouge complex situated in Dearborn, the birthplace of Henry Ford and his empire in the Detroit metropolitan area. The mural is located in the Detroit Institute of Arts and was commissioned by Edsel Ford, Henry Ford's son, and painted in the darkest days of the Great Depression. It offers some slickness, depicting the Ford complex and the magnificent inventions that enabled the production of cars, the progress of mankind, as well as the potential dangers of man's desires for technological innovation. Many workers at the Rouge plant heavily criticized the mural for glorifying the life in the factory at the time it was painted. Many members of the United Auto Workers experienced the mural as a cover-up of the adverse conditions of the workers, the dirt and discrimination. They did not need a polished image of their working conditions, they needed better conditions.

The old Rouge complex has been torn down and a new factory, made to fit the new millennium, has been built. The factory houses 6 000 workers and is considered a pilot for environmental auto manufacturing by cleaning storm water, renewing degraded soil and bringing fresh air into the factory through vents. The plant has the world's largest green roof and an exhibition that shows how the historic Ford Rouge Complex has become a sustainable manufacturing plant. It is promoted as a progressive, green car manufacturer creating low emission

trucks. I am still contemplating the idea of low emission, when I know that the Ford Motor Company spent $ 7.3 million on lobbying in 2009. Is the green car company acting as a responsible corporation or are they just using the advertising strategy of our times, the color green?

The factory is constructed as a showroom and a stage for a renewed and green Ford business. Ford no longer needs artists to portray their factory in a positive light, they have done the job themselves, turning the factory into a museum. A platform above the workers offers a space where visitors can look down at the workers while they fulfill their tasks on a floor level assembly line. People no longer work alongside the assembly line, but literally on it, jumping on and off as car parts pass through. Supervisors are no longer needed to order speed-ups as the technological apparatus encapsulating the workers determines their pace. One can visit this sped-up site and leisurely pace above. The factory prides itself on transparency for the public, but things feels more closed off, obstructed by another slick stage with a modern-day performance. The new Rouge Plant is part of the Henry Ford Museum, a Michigan family attraction where the history of the United States of America is created and displayed, and the laborers have become a part of the exhibition.

There is also Greenfield village, another part of the museum complex offering time travel into the glorious history

of the United States. Visitors travel through a village built up around famous white men such as the Wright brothers, Thomas Edison and Henry Ford and their noble inventions. This is Detroit's Disneyland where vintage Model Ts and steam engines exemplify the foundations of progress, offering a perverse example of how history is made to be consumed by the masses and covering what the steam train driver proclaims is "*the* American historical experience." As if there was *one* singular American historical experience.

According to Jean Baudrillard, Walt Disney's Disneyland is "presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real." Henry Ford's Disneyland is presented to us as the past, but it exists in order to narrate the present. Disney's fantasy world and Ford's "real" world share the same logic as what Baudrillard deemed the joy of the social microcosm. Everyone arrives to the village in their cars, enter the park, share the warmth of the crowd, enjoy the historic ride, and then return to individuality, to the automobile and the isolation and freedom it provides. This is one of Detroit many "real"s, an instrumentalization of its past to reinforce the merits of its present project.

For some change, you can even take the pocket-size version of this United States history home. Machines in the museum offer the likeness of Henry Ford, various car models,

and the bus in which Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in Alabama in 1955. While you watch, the machine molds a lump of plastic into meaninglessness as the symbolic value of Rosa Parks is dismantled right in front of your eyes. All that is solid melts into a useless two-dollar artifact, the commodity value of civil disobedience. The museum exhibit creates the illusion that Henry Ford and Rosa Parks are products of the same machine, bluntly ignoring the civic conditions that made Ford into a pioneer of mass-production and Parks into a civil rights pioneer.

The troubling tour of the Ford empire ends at the gift shop, which sells the *United States Bill of Rights* and *The Declaration of Rights of the Women of the United States* on a paper they advertise as "looking old". The constitution has been conflated into an unreadable piece of paper made to look aged. Ten original amendments cancelled out by a slogan. There are no limits for what can be sold, and thereby erased, in the world of Henry Ford. Slogans infiltrate the whole experience: a massive banner proclaiming "Love for history" floats high above as you enter and an extensive selection of coffee mugs with the words "I ♥ History" and "History Buff" barricades your good bye.

With this grand narrative, artists are faced with a challenge. The role of art today is not solely to document a city in ruin nor to engage people in social activities, but to find

strategies that can subvert the dominant, linear story of progress. The newsreels from the 1920s tell one story, of society girls giving benefit dances and boy scouts going to Alaska, while the films made by the United Auto Workers (UAW) at the same time tell a different one, of workers, people of color and their struggles. The footage from The Ford Hunger March in 1932, also known as the Ford Massacre, shows four workers shot down by the local Dearborn Police and security guards employed by Ford. Over 60 workers were wounded and their main demands were that the rich should be taxed and the poor fed, as the Great Depression had hit the workers hard. The image of workers being slaughtered while protesting also contrasts the *Detroit Industry mural* Diego Rivera started just a couple of months later.

The museum exhibit presents a politically correct, nullified exhibition that reinforces the dominant narrative of progress and leaves it unquestioned. Detroit is either fascinated with the current state of the city, its ruins, or preoccupied with notion of itself as a post-industrial arcadia that can redefine urban economics and become a prototype for the future. What I saw in Detroit was a city obsessed with its own image, both in the art and in the corporate side. There was a common drive to find the real, the authentic Detroit, a will that overshadows many-layered images of the city and the complexity of its

history and daily life. Henry Miller's slickness still exists, but it exists in certain pockets obsessed with telling the story of Detroit and its position in the greater US. Most of the urbanscape is run-down, but it still sparks of newness, of some hope.

When the Occupy Detroit movement gathered to demonstrate on October 14th, they chose not to do it in front of the run-down train station nor the grandiose Renaissance Center. Instead they gathered in front of the "The Spirit of Detroit" sculpture, the image of a man holding a blazing sun in one hand and a figure of a family in the other. While the Chrysler ads used this sculpture as a mere illustration and identification, the demonstrators revived the sculpture with new meaning, altering the correlation between the city, its people and its art. Art that rejects representation often strives for a social formation, to construct a community when community cannot be constructed. But sometimes it emerges organically and temporarily, when the need to raise voice surfaces collectively, when limits have been reached and the possibility for action is obtained.

The mass of people protesting in front of a public sculpture refurbished the Spirit of Detroit, offering another image of Detroit, another real, one that is not contrived but a result of the time and urgency of the circumstance. Counter to Miller's claim, Detroit *does* have a soul, but it also has an image problem. It needs artists who resist the polarity of the city's

grand narrative and who are willing to insert something more subtle and nuanced into the picture. It is easy to veer towards ruin porn or a post-industrial utopianism—the challenge is to create a path that cannot be fixed.

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