

# Fast Forward, Play Back: Encouraging Dialogue and Reflection about Detroit

How does one mark the 300th anniversary of a city in decline? An installation at the Detroit Institute of Arts<sup>1</sup> employed archetypal spaces of an elementary school and the experience of being a student to portray the evolution of the city. The engagement of place, memory and voice created an environment where citizens of Detroit and its suburbs could reflect on the complex condition of the city they currently live in, or near, in order to imagine its future. To create this work, the author, an architect, partnered with choreographer, Peter Sparling, and video artist, Terri Sarris.

How does one mark or celebrate the 300th anniversary of a city whose population has declined from 1.85 million to under a million in fifty years, a city that has for decades knocked down more housing than it has built, a city whose history is charged with racial tensions?<sup>2</sup> In his seminal book, *On Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs argues that memory is not a personal, subjective experience as Bergson contended, but rather in Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn's words it is "socially constructed and present-oriented, an instrument of reconfiguration and not of reclamation or retrieval."<sup>3</sup> His insights suggest that commemorations are potent vehicles for groups to reinforce their identity through the stories they re-enact and tell. If we apply this thinking to Detroit, it suggests that the tri-centennial celebrations had the potential to shape ongoing efforts to redefine and re-imagine the city's future depending upon which stories, whose stories, and how they were told. Both challenge and opportunity could be summed up in Zemon Davis and Starn's potent suggestion that "whenever memory is invoked we should be asking ourselves: by whom, where, in which context, against what?"<sup>4</sup> In particular, how might one galvanize the energies and commitments of those who inhabit the city of Detroit, as well as affluent metro Detroiters, who, though they no longer live in the city, still consider themselves bound up with the future of the city? How do such disparate communities, separated by race and class, come to see their mutual connection and interdependence? Can acknowledging the city as both

1. Museum visitors read blackboards written on by children, who were asked to describe their neighborhoods. On monitor, Dossin School principal describes a typical day in the life of the school. Suspended in the background are mylar shadow images captured from Dossin and its environs. (Photo by Dirk Bakker, Detroit Institute of Arts, 2001.)



shared and contested space help people recognize the city anew?

## 1951 & 2001: Two moments in Detroit's history

The first half of the 20th century was an optimistic time in Detroit with hundreds of thousands of people arriving to work in the booming automobile industry. In 1951 Detroit celebrated its 250th birthday

during a time of expansion. Planning began for a new downtown civic center and Cobo Hall convention center. The City-County building, The Detroit Historical Museum, The International Institute, and the Kresge Science Library at Wayne State University all were dedicated or inaugurated that year. In that same year, in a neighborhood on the Northwest side, the Ernest J. Dossin Elementary School opened its



*I came to Detroit to live with my father in 1950 from Pontiac, Michigan. At that age, I was kind of surprised at the racism in Detroit coming from Pontiac. I was 16... I thought that Detroit was going to be progressive. I was at Barbary Elementary... It was a classmate of mine, a white girl. They used to have Bunny hops back then... I will never forget her name, Pearl. But what happened was, I asked her to dance and so she did. I didn't know this at the time that whites didn't dance with blacks, whites just danced with whites: But we did and after a moment I looked around and we were the only ones dancing. What happened was, everyone was in shock. Blacks were in shock. Whites were in shock. I could feel the tension, so we slowly stopped.* **Jerome McDavid, Detroit Senior Citizen**<sup>5</sup>

doors. At that time, white Detroiters primarily inhabited the surrounding neighborhood, among them choreographer Peter Sparling, who attended Dossin Elementary from 1957 until 1964.

In 2001, Detroit celebrated its 300th birthday during a much less optimistic time (Figures 2 and 5). By the early 21st century much of the White community has fled from the city to the suburbs taking with them much of their wealth, leaving a city population that is predominantly African-American and impoverished. The city has a reduced population and a reduced tax base and struggles to provide services to an area that once housed a much larger number of people. Though enrollment in the public school system is down sharply, Dossin Elementary School continues to serve its local community. Now that community is almost completely African-American. In this context, the Detroit Institute for the Arts, a public museum located in the cultural center of the city, mounted "Artists Take on Detroit: Projects for the Tricentennial." Even though the DIA no longer has the resources it once had, it is one of the few Detroit-based institutions that the suburban (ex-Detroit) population still supports and visits on a regular basis and is a public space in which metro Detroiters and some inhabitants of the city interact.

### Dialogue across difference: Students and School as temporal bridge

Delores Hayden argues, "Places make memories cohere in complex ways. People's experiences of the urban landscape intertwine with the sense of place and the politics of space." She calls on architects, landscape architects and urban planners to acknowledge the "connection between the history of struggles over urban spaces with the poetics of occupying particular places." By locating places "where narratives of cultural identity, embedded in the historic urban landscape can be interpreted to

2. Aerial view of Detroit's Central Business District. Every empty lot you see was once built out. (Courtesy of United States Geological Survey.)

3. Choreographer writing, erasing, rewriting over his dancers performing on site in the school. (3 & 4, Video still by Terri Sarris.)

4. An aspiring photographer, this Dossin student's collage shows her photographing a volcano in Hawaii.

5. Dramatic implosion of Hudson's Department store, the heart of Detroit's downtown. Many Detroiters argued it was impossible to move forward while it still stood. For many ex-Detroiters Hudson's symbolized the city that once was. (Photo by Kirthmon F. Dozier, Detroit Free Press, October 24, 1998.)

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...dreams carried over into the day  
 riding on buses  
 sticking on walls  
 shattered or broken  
 windows on vacant buildings  
 showing little chance

opposite paradigms  
 needing a bridge wider than  
 the ambassador  
 cleaner than Belle Isle  
 stranded  
 to stretch out  
 like silk threads

to bead people into pearls  
 and find a way  
 to transport themselves back  
 forward  
 and into a picture  
 beyond their view

**Regina M. Reid<sup>5</sup>**

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project their largest and most enduring meanings for the city as a whole” she suggests we can ultimately reinforce “our sense of common membership in an American, urban society.”<sup>6</sup>

Our goal was to create a structure that encouraged reflection and dialogue about different experiences of Detroit, along with respect for these different experiences and a sense of interdependence. Our hope was to strengthen in our audience from both within and beyond the boundaries of Detroit, a common desire to see Detroit improve, though there might be substantial disagreements about what might constitute improvement and how one might make improvements.

At the core of the installation was the experience of being a student in an elementary school, a place where people’s “sense of place and the politics of space” intertwine, a place intimately connected to the health of its surrounding neighborhood. Site of

childhood and site of memory, site of socialization and site of anticipation, a public school is both a highly charged space symbolizing the potential for equality and upward mobility and a private space imbued with childhood memories and the development of individual identity. Elements chosen and made by--school chairs, blackboards, shadow images-- shaped the museum environment suggesting the space, objects and activities of an elementary school and its surroundings (Figure 11). Through his own memories of experiences in the Dossin School, Peter Sparling represented the White community and its connection to Detroit. His experiences were represented in choreography videotaped as it was performed in the school. Underscoring the common experience of schooling, as well as racial tensions in the history of the city, we videotaped current Black students in Dossin Elementary sharing their aspirations for the future in collage workshops conducted by the author.<sup>7</sup> Video artist Terri Sarris interwove the taped performances of Peter’s dance troupe and the interviews with current Dossin students into five short videos displayed in the installation. Each video was situated in an archetypal school space: entry, hallway, classroom, gym, and auditorium. In these videos, photographs and sounds of the building itself played an important role in helping people see both commonalities and the differences between

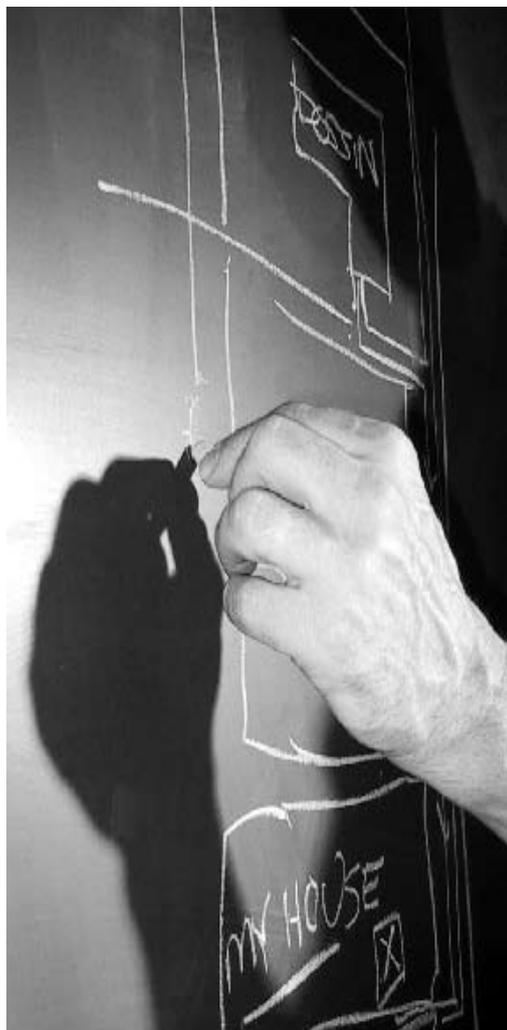
6. Dossin School gymnasium with glass block wall. Peter and current students doing cartwheels. (6-10, Video stills by T. Sarris.)

7. Institutional school clock.

8. Choreographer mapping his childhood route from home to school. Contemporary school children drew their own neighborhood maps on blackboards in the school and in the museum.

9. An archetypal classroom at the school site.

10. Children in Dossin gymnasium, mid-1960s.



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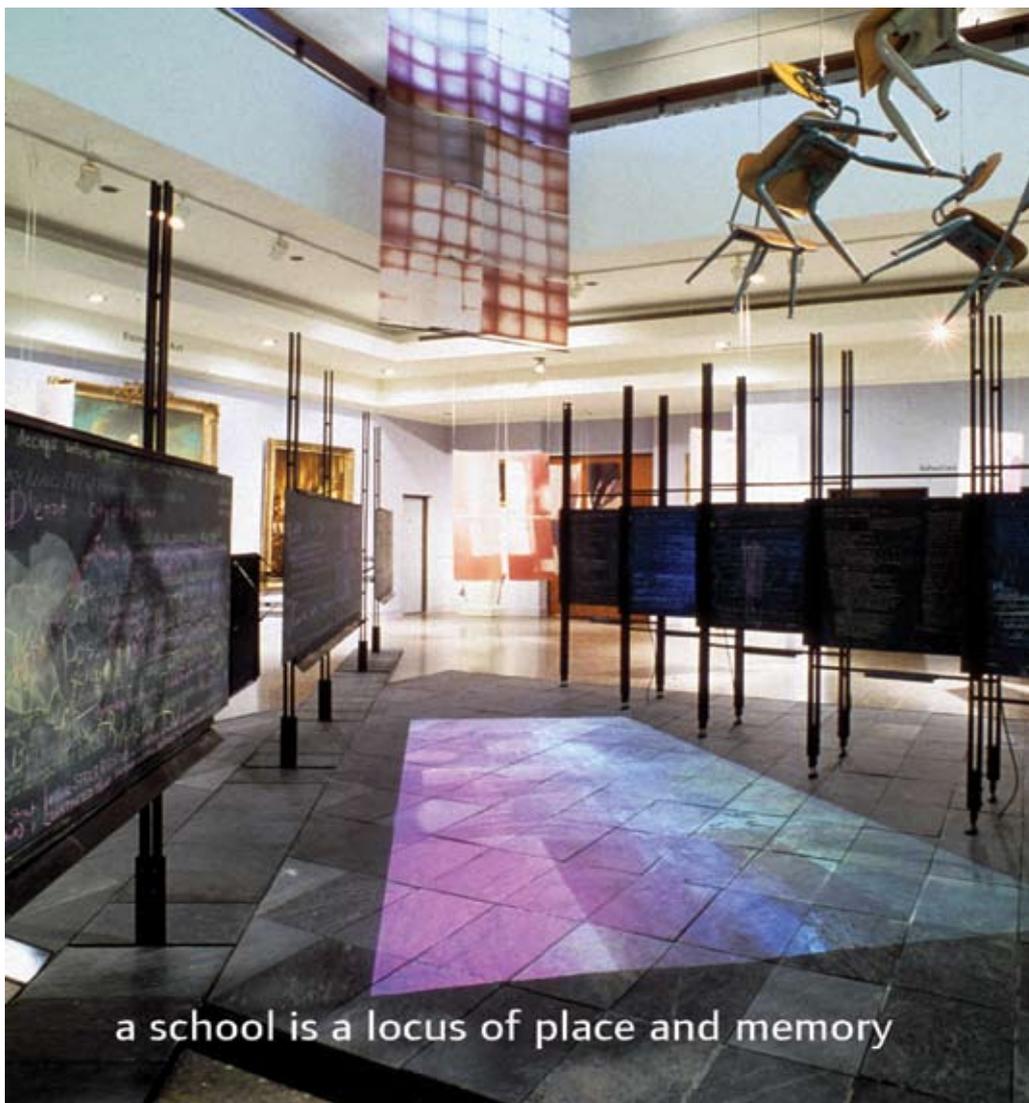


the experiences of suburbanites and residents of the city -- a new building in a booming city, the same building in a shrinking city that is closing schools; a predominantly White school body, a predominantly Black school body (Figures 3-4, 6-10, 12-14.)

Shared experience is implied through the body's intimate relationship to place and memory. Body memory connects us to place. Edward Casey writes, "If it is the body that places us in place to start with, it will be instrumental in re-placing us in remembered places as well." 8 Video recordings of the children's activities and the dancer's gestures situated in the school spaces were designed to enlist an empathetic "body memory" placing viewers in Dossin School and perhaps back into their own elementary school. Similarly, installation elements were designed to provoke consideration of one's own size and the body's potential or past transformation. Chalkboards hung at both adult and child heights offered surfaces that gave children new access and feel at ease. The five monitors "grew up" rising in height from the first to the last. Adults recalling their past stoop to view the first, while children imagining their future stood on tiptoes to view the last (Figures 1, 15, 24, and 27).

#### Adding layers: The Blackboards

Using salvaged school blackboards etched with the 1701 words of Cadillac, Detroit's founder (page. ?, Figure 26), the installation created a public forum inside the museum. Along one side of this plaza were video monitors with Sarris' five videos. In addition, there were surfaces on which some visitors—a senior citizens' group, students from a different elementary school, high school poets, adult poets—were invited to add their descriptions of their experiences of the city. Weekly, these inscribed boards were recorded and then erased. The on-going act of writing and erasing associated the blackboards with both the memory of school, the mechanics of human memory,



11. Eye-level perspective of the installation's central "hallway." Diazo shadowgram of Dossin's glass block windows ends the axis. (Photo by D. Bakker, DIA.)

12. Children in Dossin's halls, recorded during fieldwork.

13. Molded plywood seats in Dossin's auditorium.

14. Choreographer interacting with Dossin children during fieldwork. (12-14 Video stills by T. Sarris.)

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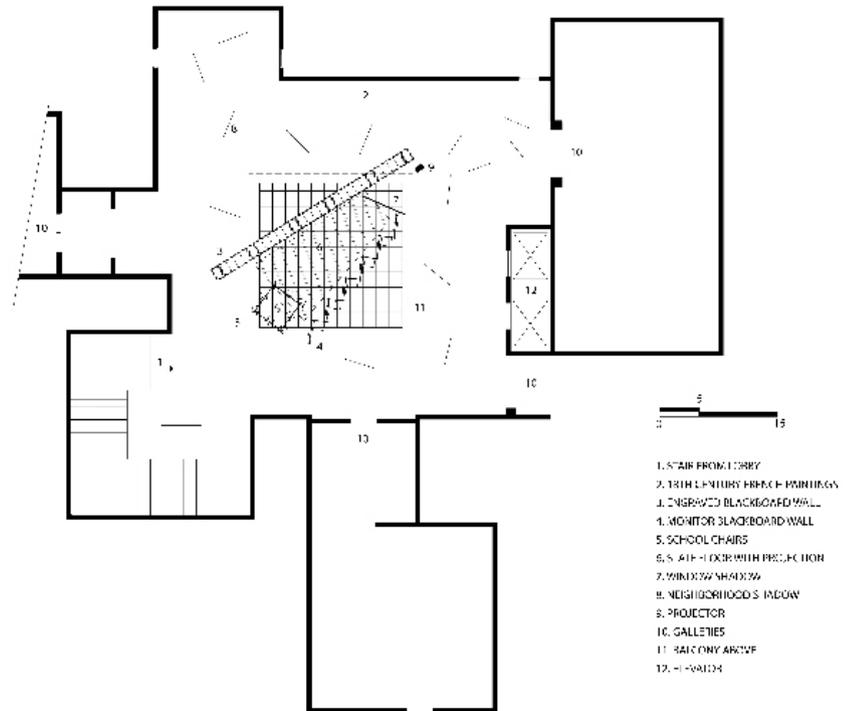
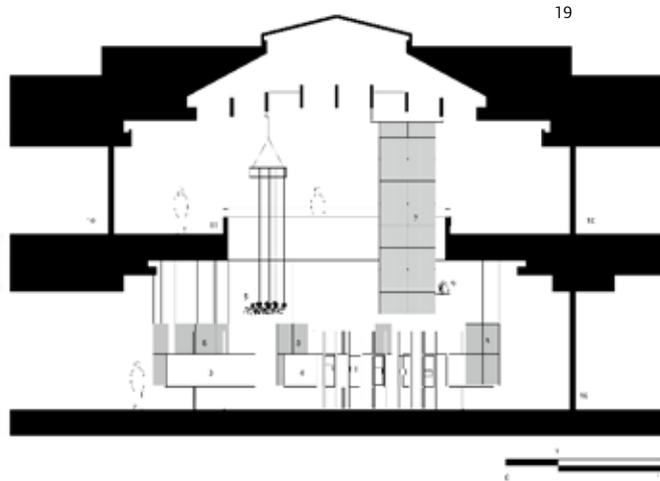


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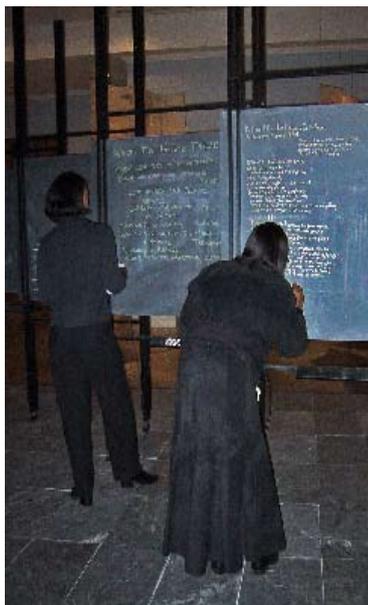


*When I go to school I see people walking around trying to find different kinds of jobs to keep clothes on there bodies to keep warm in the wintertime and keep there education and get good grades on there report card. So that they can find a good job where they can get payed more. And take care of themselves so that they can survive. And take care of other people that they love in their family. And when they do that they can be a hero. And a person that respect people. (sic)*

**Jessica Harrison, fifth grader, White Elementary School, Detroit's East Side<sup>5</sup>**

and the condition of the city's buildings (Figures 1, 11, 15-24, 25, 26, 28).

These stories of other schools, neighborhoods and observations about the city, in turn situated and framed the Dossin School as both an archetypal institution and a particular place. Students from an east side elementary school bore witness to people they love, the challenges of surviving a frightening and dirty environment that they navigated daily, and a school in which they felt safe. High school students described bus rides home past abandoned buildings. Senior Citizens recalled a bustling city with "lots of nice stores," a place where blacks owned nice houses, trips to Belle Isle, surprise at racism, and sadness for the loss of a vibrant downtown. Suburban college students voiced surprise at the warmth of Detroit's people and the excitement of the city. Poets attempted to capture the complexity of a city, that is, in the word of poet Andi Daniels' refrain, "not all bad, not all good."



Visitors absorbed these juxtaposed accounts triggering their own unwritten Detroit stories. Unknowingly, they too contributed to the activity of writing and erasure: Their body's shadows intercepted and hid the flickering dancers underfoot (Figure 28).

19 & 20. Plan & Section of Installation (Drawings by Smiriti Nayak.)

21. Shadow images frame view through installation towards 17th French clock. (Photo by Christopher Campbell.)

22. Poets Regina Reid and Karen Williams writing. (Photo by author.)

23. Gazing down from the balcony we see the installation situated within the 17th-century French gallery. Salvaged slate tiles etched with images of fallen leaves and Detroit street names anchor the work. Images filmed at the school site and in the local neighborhood are projected onto this ground surface. Reclaimed school blackboards at child and adult height are mounted on a tension-compression lattice wall system. Twirling above are nine school chairs, props for the dance performed on site. (23 and 24, Photos by C. Campbell.)

24. Monitors step up from low to high; adults stoop to view the first and children stand on tiptoes to view the last. The synchronized videos included testimony from teachers, staff, and children from the school site juxtaposed with the voice and dance of the choreographer alumnus.



a city is a collection of voices and spaces



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*Since you have directed me to render an account of it, I will do so premising that Detroit is actually but a channel or river of medium breadth... Its borders are so many vast prairies, and the freshness of the beautiful waters keeps the banks always green. The prairies are bordered by fruit trees which have never felt the hands of the vigilant gardener... In a word, the climate is temperate, and the air purified through the day and night by a gentle breeze. The skies are always serene and spread sweet and fresh influences which makes one enjoy a tranquil sleep.*

**Excerpted letter from Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac to King Louis XIV, 1701<sup>9</sup>**



## stories reflect the city's transformation

### Concluding thoughts

City space is shared space. City space is also contested space. The public space created by this installation in the city's elite municipal museum incorporated an infrastructure that allowed a range of citizen's voices to be heard. By juxtaposing these voices with places and images from different time periods and perspectives, "Fast Forward, Play Back" strove to engage viewers politically and emotionally with the past, present, and future of their city. The installation framed changes in the city between 1951

and 2001. The booming, optimistic, city of 1951 has been replaced by a primarily minority city in economic distress that is losing population, closing schools, and tearing down more buildings than it builds, while the surrounding suburbs continue to grow. It is this change that suburban "Detroiters" and the Detroiters who actually live in the city continue to struggle with and must address.

### Project Team:

Architect and Artistic Director, Ronit Eisenbach; Choreographer, Peter Sparling; Video Artist, Terri Sarris; Composer & Musician: Frank Pahl; Structural Design and Video Animation, Chris Pomodoro.

### Writers & Performers:

Detroit Poets, Andrea Daniel, Rhonda Greene, Kristin Palm, Regina Reid, Karen Williams; Dossin Elementary School Third and Fourth Graders; Hannon House Seniors, Barbara Jones, Lena Eldridge, Warren Black, Jerome McDavid; InsideOut Literary Project, <http://www.insideoutdetroit.org/>; The Peter Sparling Dance Company; University of Detroit Mercy Architecture Students, White Elementary School Fifth Graders.

15. Local school children, senior citizens, professional poets, and museum visitors were invited to write about their experiences of the city on the blackboards. (Photo by D. Bakker, DIA.)

16, 17, and 18. Jerome McDavid, Hannon House, (left), Kristin Palm (middle) and Denita Gregory, (right), InsideOut contributed their thoughts. (Video still 16 by Allegra Pitera, 17 & 18 Photos by author.)

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### Sponsors and Partners:

The Detroit Institute of Arts; The Great Lakes Fabricators and Erectors Association, Don Makins, President, and D. James Walker, Jr., Executive Director; The University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture, Stephen Vogel, FAIA, Dean; The University of Michigan Arts of Citizenship Program; The Staff and Students of Dossin Elementary School, Margaret Sanford, Principal.

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### Notes

1. "Artists Take on Detroit: Projects for the Tricentennial," from October 19 - December 31, 2001 installations. For online catalogue: <http://www.dia.org/exhibitions/artiststake/index.html>
2. Many books were published around Detroit's tri-centennial contributing to an increased appreciation and dialogue about the city. Three that influenced my thinking are: Melba Joyce Boyd and M.L. Liebler eds., *Abandon Automobile: Detroit City Poetry 2001* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001); Peter Gavrilovich and Bill McGraw eds, *Detroit Free Press: The Detroit Almanac, 300 Years of life in the Motor City*, (Detroit: Detroit Free Press, 2000); and Georgia Daskalakis, Charles Waldheim and Jason Young, *Stalking Detroit* (Barcelona; Actar, 2001).
3. Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, "Introduction," *Representations*, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory. (Spring, 1989), p. 4.
4. *Ibid*, p. 2.
5. Quotes included in the margins are examples of testimonies chalked upon the blackboards during the course of the exhibit.
6. Delores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 11-13.
7. Will these students really reach their goals? There is much literature on the achievement gap. See Christopher Jencks & Meredith Phillips eds., *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, (Brookings Institution Press, 1998), or *The Education Trust*, <http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/>
8. Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp 189-190. See also his chapters on "Body Memory," "Place Memory," and "Commemoration."
9. Cadillac's description of the Detroit River, Oct. 8, 1701, Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, 33:111-12.

26. Nine school chairs suspended above the central installation space contributed to the overall place-making effort. (Photo by author.)

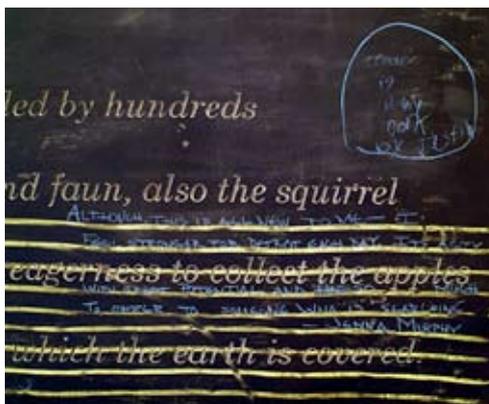
27. Blackboard with etched Cadillac quote. (Photo by D. Bakker, DIA.)

28. Choreographer with toy chair, suggesting the power of scale and embodied memory. (Video still by T. Sarris.)

29. Museum visitors experience the installation. (Photo by author.)



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