

A Soft Rebellion

Chloë Brown



Film still: *Dancing in the Street*, Chloë Brown, 2016

Since 2013 I have been working with what I term 'Soft Rebellions' as a way of questioning certain post-industrial cities in relation to my position as a woman born and bred in the city of Sheffield in the UK; cities whose 'reason for being', their industry, has transformed so significantly that the use of their nicknames: 'The Potteries' (Stoke-on-Trent, UK), 'The Motor City' (Detroit, USA), 'The Steel City' (Sheffield, UK), becomes a melancholy gesture that talks about the past, not the now, nor the future.

'A Soft Rebellion' questions what happens when the economic engines of a city slow down but the people don't. This research focuses particularly on the citizens, asking this question with optimism by rejecting the production of 'ruin porn' in favour of art work that is uplifting, celebratory, even life-affirming.

So far, the Soft Rebellions have been a series of actions and events that involve:

Dancing



Eating



Talking



and
Applauding



in places where it is considered transgressive to do so.

Dancing in the Boardroom (Turnin' My Heartbeat Up)



Film still: *Dancing in the Boardroom (Turnin' My Heartbeat Up)*, Chloë Brown, 2013

This film was the first work I made as a 'Soft Rebellion' and features two Northern Soul¹ dancers dancing with passion in the empty, once splendid Boardroom at the disused Spode Factory, Stoke-on-Trent, UK. This leads to collisions of meaning, not least the questioning of the sanctity of the Boardroom, a place where traditionally the Managing Director and the Board would entertain buyers and guests. In the film, the room is transformed into a ballroom, a dance hall, where uplifting music is played and a couple dances, absorbed in their own movements and thoughts.

Through this film and its installation as part of the British Ceramics Biennial in the Managing Director's office at the Spode Factory issues such as the class system, labour and norms of behaviour are questioned. Notions of the industrial ruin in combination with Stoke-on-Trent's prominence within the history of the Northern Soul movement are explored through the film making connections between Stoke-on-Trent and Detroit (from where the music largely originates). The work articulates with contemporary questions around site, dance and music as a way of addressing emotional responses to particular places.

The film was originally made in response to the 'Topographies of the Obsolete' research project (a site specific research collaboration between the British Ceramics Biennial, Sheffield Hallam University, Danske Kunstakademi, Copenhagen, Muthesius kunsthochschule, Kiel Germany, The Bergen Academy of Art and Design, Norway, Alfred University, USA, University of Newcastle and the School of Art and Design, Nottingham Trent University since 2012).

The film can be accessed here: <https://vimeo.com/75807622>

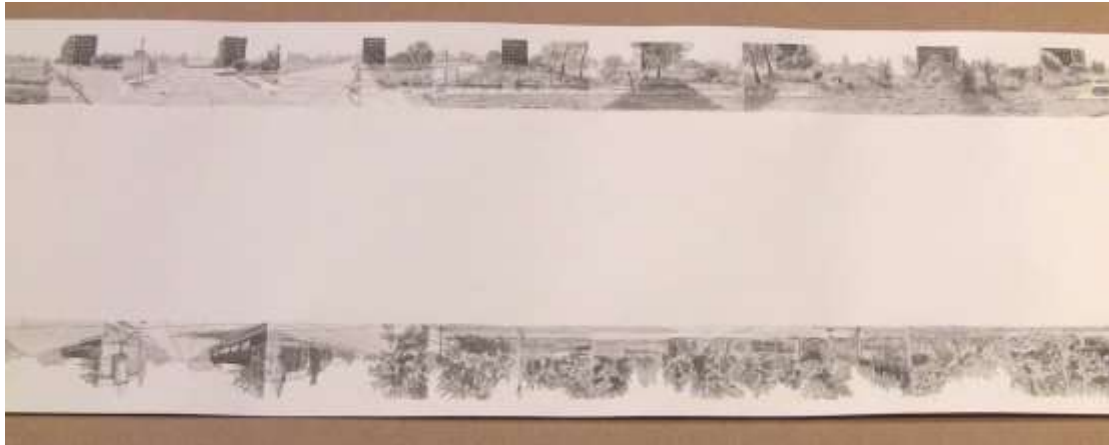
HD Video 2013

Duration: 07:37

Since August 2015 I have been visiting and working in Detroit to further extend this on-going practice-based research. Detroit is renowned for being the epitome of a city in post-industrial crisis but my interest in the city extends to the development of soul music during the 1960's and '70's due to my previous research into Northern Soul. Utilising artistic research methodologies I use this history to challenge, question and contribute to specific narratives within the city, working and collaborating with native Detroiters, including Martha Reeves, of seminal Motown group Martha and The Vandellas.

From Alfred Street to Temple Street, Detroit

¹ Northern Soul is a uniquely British genre that began as an underground club movement in the late 1960s. It arose out of the escapist desire of largely white working class young adults who worked all week in mundane jobs but at weekends travelled to north of England venues to dance all night to raw, rare, soul music produced in America's industrial heartland, particularly Detroit. These records were commercial failures when they were originally released in the USA, but those failures, and their subsequent rarity, became Northern Soul.



Detail: *From Alfred Street to Temple Street, Detroit*, Chloë Brown, 2015

Initially unable to visit the city, I began 'walking' down the streets of Detroit via Google Maps Street View from my studio in Sheffield as a visual way of trying to understand the city from afar. This resulted in an ink drawing entitled 'From Alfred Street to Temple Street, Detroit', which charts a route through Brush Park, starting at the scrub land where the Brewster-Douglass Housing Projects used to stand before being demolished in 2013; a place that was the childhood home to many Motown stars including Diana Ross, and Mary Wilson and Florence Ballard of the Supremes. The resulting drawing is almost 9 metres or 30 feet in length and takes the form of a scroll that re-imagines the route as a topographical observation, making connections between the once grand houses at one end of the route, the empty plots and often derelict warehouses and factories in between and ending at the world's largest Masonic Temple, which for me symbolizes a secretive and exclusively male authority.

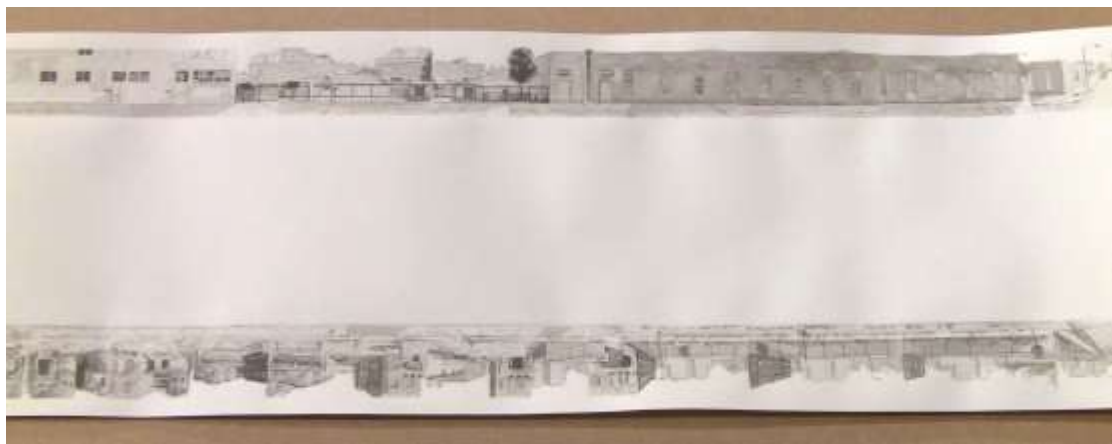
Ink Drawing, 2015

8 metres 81.4cm x 24.1cm

In the collection of The Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), Detroit.



Installation view: *From Alfred Street to Temple Street, Detroit*, Chloë Brown, 2015
Exhibition: *Dancing in the Boardroom*, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD), Jan-Apr 2016



Detail: *From Alfred Street to Temple Street, Detroit*, Chloë Brown, 2015

Dancing in the Street

In August 2015, I visited Detroit for the first time to make a short film collaborating with people from the city, filming them dancing along the route of my drawing *From Alfred Street to Temple Street, Detroit*, whilst listening to the song 'Dancing in the Street' on headphones. The title of the film refers to this song by Martha Reeves and the Vandellas, released by Motown Records, the famous record company founded in Detroit by Berry Gordy. Suzanne E. Smith, in her book also entitled 'Dancing in the Street', relates that this song is connected to the 1967 riots (or rebellion) in Detroit leading to it becoming, for

some, the soundtrack to the unrest, with the lyrics even being misinterpreted as a call to riot. The act of dancing in the street in my film questions this idea, acting as a playful subversion – a ‘Soft Rebellion’ - where the dancing appears to be a form of liberation from conventional ways of being, a subtle nod towards the misreading of this most joyful song.

The film can be accessed here: <https://vimeo.com/154508784>

HD Video

Duration 02:40



Film still: *Dancing in the Street*, Chloë Brown, 2016

The Detroit Dinner Service



This subtly subversive event/performance took place in one of the Lodges in the Masonic Temple in Detroit on the 4th of April 2016. The event comprised of a dinner party for 12 inspirational women – women who are responding to the negative situation in Detroit with positivity and creativity – and centered on a meal prepared by the Detroit-based chef and food activist Alison Heeres. The choice of location for the dinner party is significant – it took place in Palestine Lodge that included Henry Ford in its' membership as well as other key figures of the industrial patriarchy in Detroit. The dinner-party-as-art questions the failure of this hidden exclusively male power in relation to the severe situation the city finds itself in, through an event that is exclusively female, in order to draw attention to the largely Do-It-Yourself initiatives that these women are developing, in response to this situation.

The guests included artists, poets, activists, filmmakers, urban farmers, journalists, writers, the founder of the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD), Marsha Miro and the world famous Motown singer Martha Reeves of Martha and the Vandellas. The guest list was also designed to reflect the current demographic of Detroit, with a population of approximately 80% people of colour.



The meal was served on a bone china 36-piece dinner service that I designed, also entitled 'The Detroit Dinner Service'. Made in Stoke-on-Trent, it uses my drawing 'From Alfred Street to Temple Street, Detroit' to decorate the dinner service, referencing the traditional use of images of classical ruins on china tableware. The set used during the dinner party is now in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA).



Each woman was given an apron to wear throughout the meal that referenced the ceremonial regalia worn by freemasons. Rather than being made of leather, (the freemasons preferred material), I made the aprons from fine white linen, decorated with purple and green ribbons, the colours of the suffragettes.

A Toast to Detroit

During the evening the women were asked to deliver a 'Toast to Detroit'. Audio recordings of each toast were made and the imminent production of 'A Toast to Detroit' as a 12-track vinyl LP record, one track per 'Toast', represents the only document of the event that took place. Since it is a limited edition

artefact this allows the work, and therefore the idea, and ultimately the voices of the women involved, to be disseminated to an audience outside the event itself. This LP will be pressed at Archer Records, the only remaining original record press in Detroit that once produced Motown and Northern Soul records.



Martha Reeves delivering *A Toast to Detroit*

The research's originality lies in its interdisciplinary approach to the field of artistic research and place making; through a unique methodology that examines the role of community as a narrative voice in order to contribute and communicate new perspectives on how we constitute identity. The research situates itself in relation to particular works that examine the role of the female voice in narrative identity, particularly in relation to Judy Chicago's seminal 'The Dinner Party' 1974-79. 'The Detroit Dinner Service' event sought to highlight and question a number of historical and current issues relating to Detroit as a post-industrial city, echoing the experience of many post-industrial cities throughout the world.



The guests included:

Artist and activist Halima Cassells
Urban farmer Imani Foster
Journalist at The Detroit News and literacy activist Kim Kozlowski
Community activist at Pedal to Porch Cornetta Lane
Artist and founder of Poppo Packing Faina Lerman
Sculptor, rapper, designer Tiff Massey
Art critic and founder of MOCAD Marsha Miro
Writer and Detroit advocate Marsha Music
Film maker Rola Nashef
Poet Tawana Petty
Musician and ex Detroit City Councillor Martha Reeves
Literacy activist Lori Sanders

Other participants:

Alison Heeres: chef and food activist
Gwen Meyer: urban farmer
Christina deRoos: host, artist and deputy director of Kresge Arts in Detroit and former co-director of Spread Art
Grace Higgins Brown: artist
Chloë Brown: artist

The Clapping Piece



Film still: *The Clapping Piece*, Chloë Brown, 2016

'The Clapping Piece' is a series of filmed portraits of groups of Detroit people applauding in very particular way in their place of work. In 2016 at the private view of my exhibition at MOCAD I met soul icon Martha Reeves who had come to see my film 'Dancing in the Boardroom (Turnin' my Heartbeat Up)'. The conversation we had about her experiences with Northern Soul audiences at Wigan Casino in the 1960s and '70s has directly influenced my film 'The Clapping Piece'. She related that the audiences applauded in a unique way – starting slowly, then building to a crescendo before stopping abruptly. This is called 'The Wigan Clap' and when performed it is a powerful and uplifting confirmation by an audience in response to a performer. By asking certain key individuals or groups in Detroit to perform 'The Wigan Clap' I wanted to find out what happens when the city of Detroit is the focus of the applause and to see if this can become a form of Soft Rebellion, running counter to more negative responses to the city and acting as a form of positive rebellion against the situation it finds itself in. In June 2017 I returned to Detroit and filmed 29 individuals and groups of people performing 'The Wigan Clap'. Most of these groups or individuals are nonprofit organisations and activists working with the local community in a variety of ways, for example: Global Detroit (an organization supporting immigrant workers rights, positive impact and potential), The Empowerment Plan (aims to permanently elevate families from the generational cycle of homelessness), Alternatives for Girls (helps homeless and high-risk girls and young women avoid violence, teen pregnancy and exploitation), Detroit Horse Power (teaches urban young people to ride and care for horses as a way to develop critical skills that will set them up for future success), and Girls Rock Detroit (dedicated to fostering girls' creative expression, positive self-esteem, and community awareness through rock music education and performance). The result is optimistic, powerful and even humorous, showing another side of the city and the inspirational people who inhabit it.

You can see the footage here: <https://vimeo.com/230828080> The footage shown represents the raw material and the basis for an ambitious multi-screened installation.

Future Soft Rebellions

I have recently been awarded a significant public art commission for my home city of Sheffield and I plan to use the knowledge found through direct encounter with Detroit and Stoke-on-Trent to reflect back on my experiences of living in Sheffield, itself a post-industrial city whose whole reason for being is in question, following the loss of the steel and coal industries in recent decades. The commission will continue to develop the questions manifest in my work in a timely way given the current political situations in the USA and in post-Brexit Britain, and to bring further 'Soft Rebellions' to very relevant audiences living in these cities who share a common experience.

Chloë Brown
February 2018



Photo credit: Jeff Cancelosi
Artist's talk at MOCAD, March 2016

Chloë Brown is an artist and Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. She has an MA in Sculpture from Chelsea College of Art, London (1994), and a BA in Fine Art from the University of Reading (1987). She has exhibited internationally over the last 30 years including three international biennials (Istanbul Biennial, Mardin Biennial and the British Ceramics Biennial) with work recently included in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA).

Using a range of media including film, sculpture, book works and drawing, Brown's research examining the relationship to sociopolitical questions that focus on the post-industrial city from an auto-ethnographic feminist perspective. She has become interested in how acts such as dancing, eating and applauding can be seen as a playful subversion, a form of liberation. This was explored in her exhibition 'Dancing in the Boardroom' at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD) from January 15th to April 24th 2016 and has gone on to inform her ongoing research and practice.

She presented 'A Soft Rebellion' at the ASLE conference 'Rust/Resistance: Works of Recovery' held from June 20-24, 2017, at Wayne State University in Detroit.