



Connection Through a Chain-Link Fence

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Fig. 1. Plywood hearts outside Mill City Museum drummed out a new rhythm for passersby.



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**We were human beings,
first: whole selves
experiencing an array
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Do you remember when the quarantine started, how your world sounded different?¹

Bird calls – once drowned out by the commotion of the city – briefly lifted the blur of loss in Minneapolis. In March 2020, their songs woke up the senses, in the same way the smell of smoke later settled into our neighborhoods during mornings of the uprising. And then, in the summer months following the murder of George Floyd by members of the Minneapolis Police Department, a choir of plywood hearts rattled together on a chain-link fence (fig. 1, pp. 54–55). *History at Heart*, a series of four outdoor installations by a small exhibition team at the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS), was a reflection of our rapidly changing world. In a matter of weeks, and as layers of grief and loss compounded in complex ways, the project transformed to meet the moment.

Before George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020, the idea for *History at Heart* was simple: a pandemic memorial. In the first month of lockdown, our team wanted to create an informal, inexpensive installation for Minnesota's grim upcoming milestone of 1,000 deaths from COVID-19. It was our way to reach out to visitors through the museum's doors, closed by the quarantine. It was an opportunity to create an

unpolished, open-ended, and vulnerable exhibition. And a much different approach than our usual collections-based history exhibitions held inside our galleries. Like many museums across the United States, MNHS faced massive layoffs to offset the financial losses incurred by the temporary shutdown of its 26 historic sites and museums. As the leadership team tried to stop the bleeding, remaining staff members tried to imagine new ways to serve our communities, such as the *History is Now* digital collecting initiative.² We were, not surprisingly, burnt out by work deadlines and too much to do by too few.

The death toll surpassed 1,000 in Minnesota on May 30, 2020 – five days after George Floyd was killed. The horrific act of police brutality and ensuing protests shifted the mindset of our exhibition team members. Regular work deadlines felt overshadowed, unimportant. We weren't museum workers in the way we were before. We were human beings, first: whole selves experiencing an array of emotions amid a city in mourning. The team also knew – in our own hearts – that *History at Heart* couldn't be silent. Like grief itself, the project's purpose had to expand beyond COVID-19.

Would the museum be a space for our whole selves to exist that summer? To listen to



Fig. 2.

Shaurya, age five, gave words to the city's grief in the wake of George Floyd's murder.

that inner impulse to *do* something? And if so, what kind of action would we take?

It Is Okay to Start Small

“No more growth or scaling up before actually learning through experience.”

—adrienne maree brown, author of *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017)³

In her work, Detroit-based writer adrienne maree brown introduces the fractal – a complex pattern created by a repetitive process – as a way to imagine a better world.⁴ She compares small-scale solutions to a fern in a forest. Like a fractal, the fern retains its shape as the smallest fronds grow and reverberate and increase in size. According to brown, social justice movements are also fractals: a repetition of local marches and

street art that ignite larger action around the world.⁵ In a very different way, and on a much smaller scale, the iterative process of *History at Heart* became its own tip of the fern (fig. 2).

A Rapid-Response Installation Meant Trying a New Process

Chain-link fences held different meanings that summer. They still stand as reminders of the uprising, marking damaged buildings in the Twin Cities.⁶ At the time of this writing, city workers installed a new fortress of fencing around the Hennepin County Government Center. The barricades remained for the trial of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who knelt for 8 minutes and 46 seconds on George Floyd's neck. Fences also stood at all four installations of *History at Heart*: Mill City Museum, a MNHS-managed site in downtown Minneapolis; Split Rock Lighthouse,



Fig. 3. Simple, handwritten conversation prompts asked questions, such as, *Who will you remember? What do you do differently now? What does safety mean to you?*

a MNHS-managed site that safely reopened on the shore of Lake Superior; Hallie Q. Brown Community Center in St. Paul; and Sabathani Community Center in South Minneapolis. As both barriers and creative platforms, fences invited reflection on issues of control and process for our exhibition team within the museum.

Typically, MNHS follows a multiyear design process for most of its exhibitions. Methodical, but hardly nimble, it's a process that helps us to think things through and create meaningful experiences. Last summer, as the death toll and tensions escalated, we didn't have much time for in-depth historical research or vetting for an exhibition about what was happening around us. Instead: 10 presentation slides with pencil sketches, developed over a couple of days. Without the usual padding of designer bells and whistles, our pitch for buy-in from MNHS leadership cut straight to the chase:

Why are we doing this?
Who is it for?
What is it about?
When will it open?
Where should it be?

History at Heart took shape. The team drew inspiration from actions we saw happening organically and repeating in the city: colorful paper hearts with messages of solidarity in neighbors' windows. We wanted to temporarily fill the physical and emotional distance between our homes. We didn't know what people would draw or write on their hearts, or if we would receive a negative public response. The concept for *History at Heart* was loose enough to allow some wiggle room for the exhibition team to iterate. Cardboard was the first strategic choice. An innocuous material: affordable

in our minimal budget, of course, but more importantly, impermanent. To create hearts that could withstand a Midwest thunderstorm, however, we had to think about durability. Our exhibit designer switched to plywood and hired a local maker in the Twin Cities to create the pieces.

We also recruited a small coalition of allies across departments at MNHS – those who remained after layoffs and furloughs – for support. Each brought their own skills and professional networks to the project, developed through previous partnerships with community centers like Hallie Q. Brown and Sabathani. Our supervisors minimized the typical quantity of exhibition review and approval meetings, sending the team straight to the top. After we pitched *History at Heart* via video conference to the director of MNHS, a green light sent us hurtling toward production and fabrication.

On Saturday morning, July 18, 2020, we opened our first installation along the fence of Mill City Museum, a little over three miles north from the large, community-created memorial known as George Floyd Square.⁷

Simplicity Allowed the Installations to Evolve

History at Heart was simply designed, and much of it was made by hand. A felt banner with visible stitches for visitor instructions, including pockets to hold blank plywood hearts and permanent markers. A bottle of hand sanitizer and a plastic bucket for “used” markers, to try to keep visitors as safe as possible during the pandemic. Unable to meet at the office, the team gathered on our exhibit designer's front porch, writing the conversation prompts on larger plywood hearts (fig. 3). We started with three

languages – Somali, Spanish, and English to reflect the local demographics – and paid community partners added Ojibwe and Hmong translations as our needs shifted at different installation sites. The conversation prompts and experiences shifted, too, depending on input and choices made by project partners (fig. 4).⁸ Hallie Q. Brown Community Center in St. Paul – an African American, nonprofit social service agency open to all – requested that we deliver their batch of hearts in advance for higher-risk elders to safely write messages at home. They also screened *A Breath for George*, a short film of songs, poems, and

reflections by New Dawn Theatre Company, at their opening installation of *History at Heart*.⁹ The only thing that stayed constant: a brief introductory graphic panel that publicly named the murder of George Floyd and the many layers of grief from COVID-19, inviting people to express whatever they wanted.

Four thousand hearts. A number four times larger than we had originally imagined to commemorate the first 1,000 deaths to COVID-19 in Minnesota. A number that grew as word-of-mouth and social media response took off, as requests for additional

Fig. 4.

The *History at Heart* toolkit installed by the tennis courts at Hallie Q. Brown Community Center.



Fig. 5.

A memorial to one visitor's mother.

installation sites extended the lifespan of the project. It was liberating to feel that we could install anywhere that had a fence, that the museum could live outside the walls and outside of our control.

Our Team Provided Supplies, but People Made History at Heart Their Own

At the first installation outside Mill City Museum in Minneapolis, the hearts seemed to breathe together, cascading in the wind. Our team took shifts perched on a street curb to observe the activity with informal evaluation worksheets, but also to take it all in:

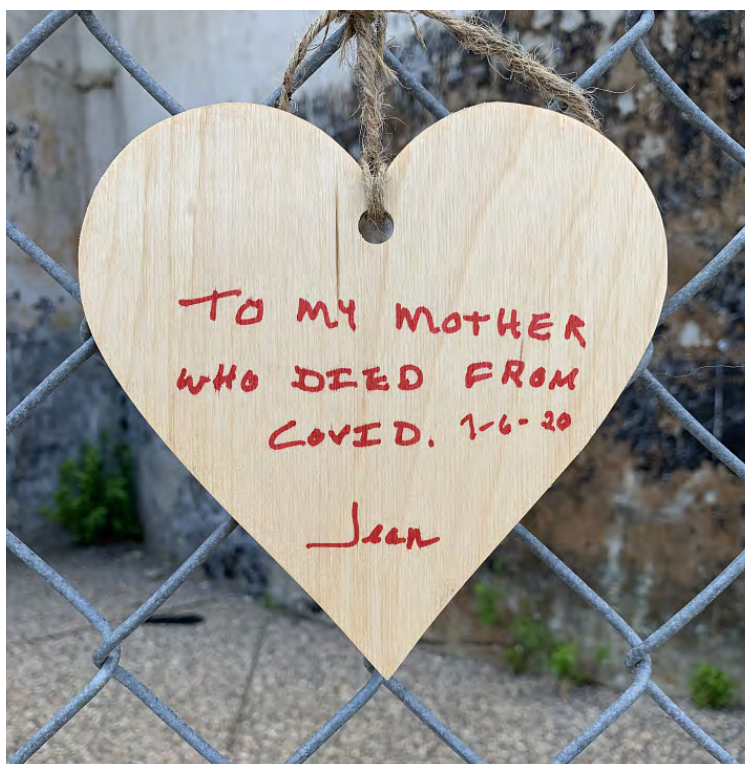
“395 hearts [on the fence] at 10:59 am. Only 4 wooden hearts left in the pockets when I arrived. No clean markers available. Overheard one comment, ‘I would make one but everything is touched by humans.’”

—notes from a team member, two days after opening

“Just when I started crying as I’m reading some of the contributions, I’d come across one that’d make me snort-laugh. A chain link fence covered in sadness, worry, hope, encouragement, and much needed humor.”

—Instagram user @grimmandgrave

One of the first families to arrive tied messages for their daughter and sister to the fence. Messages to Zahara, a young woman who frequently ran along the Stone Arch Bridge near Mill City Museum, before dying unexpectedly that June. “[I]t was a beautiful opportunity since our love for Z has no place now,” her sister wrote in an Instagram



message to a team member. The memorials continued. Hearts for family members lost to COVID-19 (fig. 5), hearts for friends lost before the pandemic. Hearts for George Floyd. Wedding anniversaries. Love notes. Hopeful messages addressed to babies soon to be born.

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People worked on their hearts alone or crouched on the sidewalk in small groups. Some lingered with their hearts, filling the plywood with lengthy notes and intricate drawings. Some addressed systemic racism and white privilege in the city. Some wrote down their dreams for the future. Some left jokes with a tally of votes (“Do you like



Fig. 6.

At Split Rock Lighthouse, the hearts crowded the fence overlooking Lake Superior.

milk?") – an unexpected feeling of lightness and levity. It was startling to hear laughter in the street.

Scaling Up Toward a New Museum

In each installation of *History at Heart*, visitors of all ages rarely paid mind to our conversational prompts, and it didn't matter. What are we willing to let go or rethink in our design in order to make space for something new? People created their own conversations by tying their hearts near others in dialogue, or layering hearts atop one another in solidarity. As the second installation of *History at Heart* opened for tourists at Split Rock Lighthouse, and as the impending presidential election loomed, the hearts took on a different tone: "Trump 2020" and "Settle for Biden 2020" crowded alongside biblical verses on one fence (fig. 6).

At all four installations, people left notes of encouragement, of strength, of resiliency. No matter the language, the fences seemed to say: *We will get through this together.*

As this article goes to press in the fall of 2021, the American death toll from COVID-19 has surpassed 600,000 people. George Floyd's family settled their lawsuit with the City of Minneapolis for \$27 million. Just shy of a month after the settlement, on April 20, 2021, 12 jurors unanimously agreed to convict Derek Chauvin of murder. And in August 2021, workers at MNHS – like so many across the country – are gearing up to return to a peculiar life back inside the museum walls.

What lessons and experiences will we carry forward? What would it mean to create exhibitions with our dreams, curiosity,

determination, fear, anger, and joy? It's easy to return to the safety of "we've always done it this way" in exhibition design. But a global pandemic and uprising for social justice opened our institutional gate to a different kind of process: fast and responsive, experimental, human. *History at Heart* showed us the worth of the small step, the tip of the fern, the imagining of something new (fig. 7). In doing so, we gave ourselves a glimpse of the future: sounds of a museum meeting real life far beyond the walls.

The reverberations are only beginning. ■

1 The State of Minnesota reported its first confirmed case of the COVID-19 pandemic on March 1, 2020; Governor Tim Walz ordered a state of emergency on March 13, 2020 as cases climbed.

2 A few months before *History at Heart* opened, MNHS launched a digital collecting initiative called *History is Now* to record Minnesotans' experiences of the pandemic. See their contributions at www.mnhs.org/historyisnow.

3 adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017).

4 Ibid.

5 *History at Heart* and MNHS were not associated with two important street art projects happening concurrently in the Twin Cities: 1) The Urban Art Mapping's George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art Database, created by Dr. Todd Lawrence, Dr. Paul Lorah, and Dr. Heather Shirey with student researchers at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota; and 2) Save The Boards to Memorialize the Movement by Kenda Zellner-Smith and Leesa Kelly, in collaboration with the Minnesota African American Heritage Museum and Gallery, which aims to preserve and exhibit this history for Black communities in the Twin Cities. We encourage readers to check out: Urban Art Mapping at <https://georgefloydstreetart.omeka.net>; Memorialize the Movement at [www.memorializethemovement.com](http://www.memorializethemovement.com/www.memorializethemovement.com); and the Minnesota African American Heritage Museum and Gallery at [www.maahmg.org](http://www.maahmg.org/www.maahmg.org).

6 Josh Penrod, C. J. Sinner, and MaryJo Webster, "Buildings Damaged in Minneapolis, St. Paul after riots," *Star Tribune*, July 13, 2020, www.startribune.com/minneapolis-st-paul-buildings-are-damaged-looted-after-george-floyd-protests-riots/569930671/.

7 In June 2021, the City of Minneapolis reopened the intersection of E 38th St. and Chicago Ave., where community caretakers and volunteers maintain a memorial to George Floyd at the site of his death.

8 Interpretive writer Ami Naff (MNHS) and graphic designer Emily Marti (MNHS) collaborated with Laquita Davis for the introductory panel at Hallie Q. Brown Center.

9 *A Breath for George* was created in 2020 by the New Dawn Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota. For more information, visit New Dawn Theatre Company, www.newdawntheatre.org.



JENI O'MALLEY

Fig. 7.

History at Heart showed us what was possible if we pushed outside the museum walls.