

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **FORMER MOCAD EMPLOYEES MAKE DIRECT APPEAL TO BOARD OF DIRECTORS FOR SUBSTANTIVE CHANGE**

*Nearly 40 former MOCAD staff demand the removal of Executive Director Elysia Borowy-Reeder*

**[Detroit, MI, July 3, 2020]** — This is an unprecedented time of change. Institutions of all types around the world are being forced to examine the role of racial and social inequality in society, and the art world is no different. In this spirit, and in light of the resignation of Ford Foundation Curatorial Fellow Tizziana Baldenebro, nearly 40 former MOCAD employees have made an appeal to its Board of Directors. The appeal is an effort to make the Board aware of the toxic behavior of MOCAD's Executive Director, Elysia Borowy-Reeder, and the detrimental effect it has had for years on the institution, upon people of color within MOCAD's ranks, and on Detroit's art community in general. This is a message of solidarity, with the ultimate goal of sparking true and fundamental change in the leadership of Detroit's premiere contemporary arts institution.

Thirty-nine former employees of MOCAD, an organization that has less than 20 people in its staff directory, have signed a statement demanding action and change by the board. The signers come from all across the organization: volunteers, part-time workers, career art workers, and bar/cafe staff. This statement highlights the abusive and retaliatory behavior of Borowy-Reeder, who has for a long time established a highly toxic and dysfunctional environment at the institution. The statement was sent to the MOCAD Board of Directors on Friday, July 3, and demands the removal of Borowy-Reeder. This comes following years of enduring this situation, which has severely affected the lives of staff members and the reputation of the institution in the community.

Staff has witnessed and experienced Borowy-Reeder's racial microaggressions, violent verbal outbursts, retaliations, misrepresentation of community partnerships, and tokenization of marginalized artists. Numerous complaints about her behavior have gone unheeded by the Board of Directors over the course of her leadership. Letters from resigning staff from former curatorial, education and financial teams went unresponded to as early as 2014. Letters such as one sent to the Board by Katie McGowan, former Curator of Education & Public Engagement, who detailed Borowy-Reeder's behavior, citing racist, classist, and erratic narcissistic examples of artist, staff and community partner treatment that caused McGowan's departure.

After years of mis-management, the time for action is now. The future of the institution is at stake. MOCAD has one of the highest staff turnover-rates at all of the arts institutions in the region. During Borowy-Reeder's seven-year tenure most full-time positions have been left by employees who endured unwarranted stress and mental anguish caused by the director's

treatment. Former Education Associate Augusta Morrison states, “I did not feel like I could speak my mind because she (Borowy-Reeder) was extremely defensive and controlling on every level. I did not feel valued. She made me feel small in her presence. There were countless degrading comments about the way I dressed and talking behind other staff members’ backs about their appearance and moral values. She is the reason I left MOCAD.” Many employees in every department at the institution suffered terrible and inexcusable treatment from Borowy-Reeder.

From 2019 to 2020, within the span of six months, three Black curators either resigned or were laid off from the Museum: Larry Ossei-Mensah, Maceo Keeling and Jova Lynne. Lynne had been recently promoted to Susanne Feld Hillberry Curator. When Lynne was promoted, Borowy-Reeder quietly absorbed the title of Chief curator for herself while appointing Lynne to the named curator role. Following Lynne’s promotion, the COVID-19 pandemic hit and MOCAD laid off a majority of its staff, including Lynne—MOCAD’s first Black female queer curator. MOCAD’s staffing priorities are questionable, not only for its curatorial team, but for its Black staff members, whose communities have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. While laid off, all full-time staff was nevertheless asked by Borowy-Reeder to continue to work, including Lynne who was expected to carry out her curatorial vision of highlighting the creative talent of international, local and regional marginalized artists. When MOCAD received federal money for payroll, it was suggested that Lynne return to work. However, with an untenable re-hiring proposal, including no proposal of compensation, Lynne decided to not return. Lynne states, “The current COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter and Labor movements have highlighted the colonial legacy of museums—which inherently and disproportionately impacts marginalized groups. As a Black woman, I already face many oppressive obstacles in the field. On our last phone call she said she ‘would hate for our relationship to sour’ should I not be able to fall in line with her requests. I took that note seriously, and determined that after all the racism, disempowerment, and oppression I faced and witnessed at MOCAD, I could not return under her leadership.” There was no public announcement of Lynne’s departure or any other staffing changes. MOCAD Board members did not take steps to contact Black curatorial staff to inquire about their departures and ways that the museum could move forward in supporting a diverse staff team.

One of the most alarming examples of the Director’s behavior comes from Erin Moran Martinez, MOCAD’s most recent Youth Program Producer who consistently encountered Borowy-Reeder’s pattern of tokenizing and exploitative behavior regarding the mostly Black and Brown Teen Council. From the beginning, Martinez attempted to encourage Borowy-Reeder to acknowledge and address this behavior, but to no avail. Publicly the program was presented as “for teens, by teens,” but the reality was far from that. Teen leadership and decision-making was regularly undermined and dismissed by Borowy-Reeder, even though teens were recruited to allegedly help develop and guide youth programming. In her final months at MOCAD prior to lay-off, and ultimately dismissal (allegedly due to the elimination of her position from COVID-19), Martinez battled for the integrity of the program as Borowy-Reeder appointed a wealthy donor’s child to the Teen Council. Meanwhile, all members on the Teen Council had previously had to compete for their positions through a rigorous youth-led selection process, which Borowy-Reeder relentlessly criticized, contested,

and politicized. Martinez says, “Elysia is a highly manipulative director, and that manipulation is rooted in the preservation of status quo power politics. Her main concern is optics and attendance numbers, primarily for the sake of donors, funders, and wealthy collectors. Whenever I challenged her racist, classist, adultist behavior, she would dismiss me, with the reasoning that she has more museum experience and degrees than I do, or that she has more authority by virtue of being the director. Not once did she meet with the teens, despite their invitations, to discuss their concerns, always finding an excuse to avoid being accountable to them. It was a very painful situation because many of the youth clearly recognized that they were being exploited to raise tens of thousands of dollars, not just for their program, but for the museum at large, all the while their voices were being ignored or actively silenced.”

Former Visitors’ Services Associate, Peter Sliwa, recalls a particularly bizarre and potentially fatal incident during one of MOCAD’s Summer Series concerts, “a performer had a seizure in the greenroom area. I called EMTs, got advice from them, and was being aided by a concert attendee with medical training. As I was going around to alert the proper staff, Elysia came up and I explained the situation.” Sliwa continues, “[Borowy-Reeder] demanded to know why I had not given the performer orange juice yet. When I tried to explain that Emergency Medical services had specifically told me not to give them anything to eat or drink, she spent about 5 minutes berating me for not believing her over the EMT dispatchers, called me incompetent, and stormed away, leaving me alone to help the concert attendee and performer until other staff members arrived. In nearly three years at MOCAD, I witnessed Elysia Borowy-Reeder insult, demean, and berate employees in front of staff, visitors, and board members. Her sheer lack of respect for her staff led many employees to quit, and they were often unable to share their frustrations out of fear that Elysia would use her connections in the arts world to harm their careers. On several occasions I saw staff reduced to tears because of her harassment, from front line employees to senior staff and curators. She created a culture of toxicity and fear, enabled and emboldened by the Board of Directors, who never once made any formal inquiries into her behavior and conduct.”

Troubling dynamics and situations like these are not exclusive to the experience of recent staff. These patterns have been repeated regularly during Borowy-Reeder’s tenure. Time and time again, she has driven away the crucial staff who have brought their talent, expertise, and good will to attempt to bring the institution “to the edge of contemporary experience,” as MOCAD’s mission says. The “adventurous minds” and “diverse audiences” who MOCAD hopes to engage with are not served by the current leadership. Elysia Borowy-Reeder has undermined the Museum’s mission through her actions and behavior.

After years of living in fear of retaliation, former MOCAD employees have organized to demand change. In helping MOCAD to better carry out its mission and present a contemporary art space that is FOR Detroit and FOR Detroiters, we affirm the following list of actionable items:

1. The Executive Director must cede her role and the Museum must conduct a national search for a new director, emphasizing BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) candidates, who will work for the city in which it stands.
2. The Board shall allocate one seat to an employee of the Museum who will be elected by all employees of the Museum to better represent employee experiences and interest to the board.
3. The Board shall allocate at least 1/3 of its seats to economically and racially diverse individuals from local communities, including youth.
4. The Board must actively re-engage with resigned/terminated employees. Said former employees should receive rehiring preferences should any positions that were eliminated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic become reinstated.
5. MOCAD must provide meaningful parental leave options and help foster an environment that is supportive of working families.