

ARTISTS TALK

EDITED BY GERALD A. MATT



INTERVIEWS WITH:  
MATTHEW BARNEY  
CLARINA BEZZOLA  
JULIEN BISMUTH  
PETER BLAKE  
CANDICE BREITZ  
GLENN BROWN  
ELLEN CANTOR  
MAURIZIO CATTALAN  
CLIFTON CHILDREE  
DAVID CLAERBOUT  
DAWN CLEMENTS  
JEAN CONNER  
URS FISCHER  
SHAUN GLADWELL

GREG GORMAN  
F.C. GUNDLACH  
SUBODH GUPTA  
MONA HATOUM  
SCOTT HOCKING  
DOROTHY IANNONE  
ISAAC JULIEN  
JESPER JUST  
EMILIA KABAKOV  
RACHEL KHEDOORI  
BARBARA KRUGER  
MARCELLYS L.  
BASIM MAGDY  
MARILYN MANSON  
MCDERMOTT & MCGOUGH

ERNESTO NETO  
ULRIKE OTTINGER  
MIKE PARR  
SUSAN PHILIPSZ  
DANIEL PITÍN  
THOMAS RUFF  
KIKI SEROR  
RAQIB SHAW  
NEDKO SOLAKOV  
JAN ŠVANKMAJER  
TOMAK  
FRANCESCO VEZZOLI  
BANKS VIOLETTE  
NOT VITAL  
ERWIN WURM

VERLAG für MODERNE KUNST

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WITH A FOREWORD BY MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

## INTRODUCTION

*Linear texts have played only a passing role in the existence of mankind, "history" was only an interlude and we are presently in the process of a return to "normal" forms of life, such as two-dimensionality, the imaginary, the magical and the mythical.*

Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 1989

The forty-five interviews that follow are a selection from a large number of conversations, which I have conducted with artists in the course of my curatorial and art publishing activities over the past years. I was able, in most cases, to observe the work of the artists presented here for several years, through repeated personal encounters and as a consequence I invited them to be part of exhibitions of Kunsthalle Wien in Vienna of which I had the privilege to be director from 1996 to 2012.

"The artist is the primordial cell of the exhibitions-, communications- and distribution-structures of the model that is art—but it is ultimately carried by other persons, who hitch themselves up in the front of, or parallel to, this system," writes Christoph Tanner, co-editor of the *Manual of Curatorial Practice*. He is alluding here to the character of the "know-it-all curator and exhibitions organizer [...], who is in a position of either overload the art projects with an intellectual patina or to sink them at will."

Besides us, the ever-more frenzied curators, who may on occasion not see the trees of the woods anymore as we go wildly chasing after recognitions and distinctions, it is essential to concede to the artists themselves a public space or dialogue platform, as a counterweight to their hermeneutic and institutional consideration. In my mind, the interview is an especially suitable form of such a balanced communication between originator and distributor, also in the sense of an indispensable artistic source of information. "The right to tell a story is more than a mere linguistic act," says the philosopher Homi K. Babha. In a sense it also means that us curators should let art do more of the talking through its originators and to force it less to fit in with the framework of our own narratives.

In the conversations assembled here, the artists, in a manner both involved and eloquent, ironical and critical, whimsical and arch, refute the cliché of the speechless visual artist, whose language finds an outlet solely in the work itself. The conversations

also call to mind the fact that artistic articulation and the artist's medium cannot be separated. Or, to add another voice in this context, the dedicated Hamburg collector Harald Falckenberg noted in his book *Civil Disobedience*: "The task must be to protect and, where it is necessary, to recover, the specific quality, the stubbornness of art. Young art must not close its eyes to new techniques and new media, to social problems and questions of economic theory. But it should accomplish its forays into new realms by the means of art."

Just how such boundaries are overstepped by artful means is illustrated very clearly again and again in the ensuing conversations. Even if my aim in putting together this selection was not determined by any will to propagate particular artists or artistic directions, the question remains if perhaps there is a common denominator, which joins their work and which had me decide on just this selection. This query, then, directed at myself, I would like to answer in a twofold way, regarding my own personal views on the one hand and generally recognizable common features, on the other.

For me there is, first of all, the fascination emanating from the visual power of images that are strong enough to prevail against the flood of visual signs in our "pictorial society." A power, which does not merely command our attention for a short term, but is capable of inscribing images into our heads.

Beyond that, there is the power to unsettle current conventions of the present day, a power which causes other ways of seeing or even new perspectives to be set free in the viewer. Both these aspects are joined together, as I see it, in numerous works of all the artists speaking to us here—as different as the language of their images and the concepts and intentions standing behind them may be.

Quite different, too, are the expenditures, which stand behind these productions. While the works of Matthew Barney involve long time of planning and production, a high degree of labor division and correlating costs, artists like Scott Hocking operate with, by far, more economic means and mostly also sole-charge.

Which generally recognizable mutualities can be detected in the works of these artists, most of whom, incidentally, belong to a generation as I do myself born in and around the 1960s or are of considerable importance for that generation? As the list of artists show that the times when only male artists coming from and living in the rich industrial Western Anglo-Saxon and European G 10 states dominated the art world is over. Artists from emerging countries gain more and more importance as well as female artists became top positions in the art world. Some of the general tendencies of art production in the "age of digitalization" can be observed here as well, like the use of different media with an emphasis on film and video. This immaterialization is counterbalanced by a comeback of classical attitudes and means, by a desire and continuing interest in the direct relationship with materials of the art object, of authenticity and aura, of the relevance of art history and technical precision. Some of the artists are characterized as well by the fugitive, evanescent elements, which characterize

the appearance and disappearance of technical pictures on the screen; others lustfully experience the quality and character of classical materials like marble, bronze and oil colour. All the more easily—taking Theodor W. Adorno's idea of "Verfransung" as taken-for-granted—they can also switch their media, using, according to their needs, now photography and video, then canvas or installation, sculpture or performance. The so-called "handwriting," which was so demanded of the artist, has here been dispersed on a number of different media. It no longer articulates itself within a certain brush stroke or a distinct form of lighting, but in a subjective assemblage/bricolage. For this younger generation personality is seen as a wandering nomad—like a spirit, attempting to find through the media a self expression with its own dissemination.

Another tendency, which is reflected here, is the inclusion of the narrative element, of the small, and frequently also personal story. The telling and inventing of stories—for a long time suspected of being the carrier-disease for ideologies—has long since been de rigueur again. In the construction of one's own stories or one's own history there can be found a moment of self-assurance, aimed at counter-balancing the loss of major social utopianisms. These histories possess both local and global colour. They frequently originate within one's own cultural and geographical associated area (the Kabakovs, Nedko Solakov, Ernesto Neto, Subodh Gupta among others), yet they are processed through the channels of global communications and subjected to variations, enrichments, embellishments in the course of their excursions through the networks and the permutations of an artistic consciousness, which draws the intensities from a physical and likewise virtual nomadic existence. These are the stories of contemporaries or witnesses of time, who are subjected to existential ordeals as they get caught up in the tensions between global experience through worldwide communications and a reflexive recollection of regionalism, between the dialectic of physical limitations and virtual infinity. Stories and histories become a kind of material at one's disposal, something that can be re-adjusted to the artistic consciousness like garments at a fitting, like body extensions for the completion of fluctuating personalities.

Private mythologies employed as a fabric can receive nourishment from the artists' own biographies like in the case of Matthew Barney, while in the case of Raquib Shaw it was the experience of two separate cultures. Matthew Barney's individual mythologies derive their power from the American dream, from cinematic history and classic mythology as much as from the iconography of popular culture. Traveling, too, offers material for private mythologies—gliding in and out of different milieus and cultures becomes a major theme like expressed in Not Vital's work. Travel and a nomadic life style are understood also as an attempt to bracket the world together, as a measure against the loss of the "real" world by shifting the artistic world into the digital sphere.

One other consequence, and by no means the least, of the sixties was its attack on ultra-modernism with the signal corps of pop culture. In the meantime that debate has abated, contemporary artists have learned to switch—metaphorically speaking—with

elegance and transparent ease between the ivory towers and the inner cities, creating the grammars of their expressive desires from ephemeral found pieces, biographical memory fragments and highly individualized archival research. "Heating up" artefacts, which had long been mouldering away in the lofts of oblivion, is a favorite strategy of subverting the innovational dictates.

The artists presented here belong, like myself, to a generation that acquired its socialization through films, television and popular music. The clarification of history and cultural signs resulted in a re-energizing process of archival spirits, particularly of the archives of popular culture. The ideological attitudes as well as the critiques of the ideology of ultra-modernism were conveyed to us via their transmission through the media. We were able, from this position, to launch questions, but had no answers yet to give. Ellen Cantor speaks of the possibility that everyone today is able to set up their own personal cosmology—that after the collapse of religion and morality in the ideological framework a kind of ideal utopian freedom could now be said to obtain; while at the same time the sense of security, of a clear identity, has begun to go into a tailspin.

Towards the political sphere, contemporary art is displaying a strong impulse towards expressing opinions and seeking confrontations—explicitly so in our case, for example, from a "veteran" of critical engagement, Barbara Kruger, or the culturally and politically conscious young Egyptian artist Basim Magdy.

But it is no longer the art of agitprop, there are no ideological camps, just a groping through the uncharted spaces of new attitudes of resistance, giving an often pre-verbal expression to existential possibilities within a world that would seem to find its ultimate rationale in the identification of target groups of consumers and the formatting of product lines. Such political works devote themselves to comparisons of cultures, to the working conditions in the developing world or to the anti-globalization movements. It is not art that knows the answers, but poses the questions.

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Gerald A. Matt, April 2014

# SCOTT HOCKING

IN CONVERSATION WITH GERALD A. MATT

GERALD A. MATT: *In Detroit, the Packard complex is one of your favorite places. Can you tell us something about your interest, and the overall fascination with this compound? What does Packard stand for? What does it mean for you and for Detroit? Moreover, what is your interest in the remains of the industrial world?*

SCOTT HOCKING: The Packard complex is huge. Anyone driving through Detroit along interstate 94 will see it expanding southward. I can't tell you exactly how big it is or how much space it covers, but it's safe to say it's the largest vacant collection of structures in the city. You can't miss it. It has been emptying and decaying for over 50 years. And after 100 years, it's collapsing on its own. The whole complex has become the poster child for post-industrial ruins. Scrapped, vandalized and urban-explored to death. To be honest, I never really liked going there because it was so well known, so well traveled. It became a cliché. I was more interested in hidden and forgotten sites. Packard was (and is) seen as the big, fat, shining symbol of Detroit's failures: The once mighty auto capital turned into a shrinking city of the future. But I don't see all of these new ruins as ugly remains of a better time. I don't have any personal nostalgic connection to the factory's heyday. To me, there is beauty in decay and transformations. I don't see it as necessarily good or bad; rather, I see it as the cycles of nature. As Packard became nearly totally abandoned, everybody would talk about how sad it was. It seemed like it was only a matter of time before the whole place would be

demolished, and I suddenly wanted to work with the site before it was gone. I guess I'm interested in showing that these languishing sites have potential—that they can be reborn, reused, and reinvented. And I think shaking up stereotypical perspectives, snapping people out of their pre-conceived negative or nostalgic ideas—this is really important to me. The Packard complex is a great venue for that.

GM: *In which way is your work in the Packard factory symptomatic or essential for your idea of art and your strategies when you are working and creating in general?*

SH: At this point, I'm working site specifically with whatever materials are at hand. I get ideas from what I see and find, but also from what it used to be, and what it may become. I work as a sculptor and a photographer, so I often think of a project as both a sculptural installation and an elaborate prop for photographs. There are parameters that I can't change: I can't alter a concrete building too much. So, I have to be inspired by what I already see, and get ideas from the materials that are available—and then make something that can interact with the place itself. I don't think I can do something that's greater than the building or the structure—the site is often more powerful than any artwork I can make—but I'm trying to somehow collaborate with each space. I'm attracted to powerful spaces to begin with, so, doing something that will equal it, or in some way make it better is the real challenge. In a lot of cases, they are already so beautiful or interesting or dynamic or frightening on their own—they have so much character and history—to even attempt to make an artwork within them seems futile. I remember seeing a contemporary exhibit inside an old church once, with paintings along the walls. None of the artwork in that church was as interesting as the beams of the ceiling or the old walls themselves, and I think that stuck with me. I think you have to integrate with the space, work with the space. The Packard building has a lot of history, Detroit history. But to me, these sites can be used to talk about more universal ideas. Their power can be utilized in new ways, instead of lamenting the past.

GM: *How did you come across the building?*

SH: Well, I've lived in Detroit for most of my life. I've spent a long time exploring the city, beginning when I was pretty young. At a certain point I had no vehicle—for three years I was without a car in Detroit. And when you don't have a car in Detroit, everything slows down. When you walk everywhere, you really get a sense of the city that a lot of people don't. So, for me it was just a gradual learning process getting to know every different building on every different street to the point now where I have a map of the city in my head. I learned a lot about abandoned structures and where they're located. At first, they became almost like my hardware stores if I needed material, I would know where to find it. And free material is a hot commodity when you're broke.

I would also go to these places as a personal solace, as a place to get away from things. I loved the isolation and emptiness of places like this—they were the closest I came to a walk in the woods. The Packard complex is not hard to find because it's so massive, and I remember hearing about it through others before hitching a ride with a friend to see it for the first time (fellow Detroit artist Clinton Snider). It's located just east of every neighborhood I've lived in for the past seventeen years now, so it's become a common landmark to me. The entire complex is a series of reinforced cast-concrete structures, built over years—an Albert Kahn auto-industry template of sorts...

GM: *Albert Kahn—he was the main architect of the industrial age in Detroit?*

SH: Yes, and Packard was the first of many cast-concrete auto industry factories to come. It was built remarkably well. The columns change as more plants were built, eventually becoming these distinctive Kahn “martini glass” pillars, which remain standing even though the roof is collapsing. The whole design allowed for more open spaces, more room for the assembly line, etc.

GM: *When was the factory closed?*

SH: Well, there are many different buildings to the complex, and all of it has been dwindling in use since the end of World War II, really. It never regained full use. Packard was out of there sometime in the 1950's, but, like a lot of large auto plants in Detroit, they take on new lives as mixed-use industrial facilities, and eventually giant storage units. It wasn't that many years ago that the complex north of Grand Boulevard was still occupied and there were security guards at the gate. And there are still a couple of tenants to this day—though their legitimacy is debatable. Probably the most decaying area of the facility is where I ended up doing an installation: at the far, southwestern corner of the entire complex, on the 4th floor where the roof had collapsed. On the ground floor, across Bellevue Street, was a room where decaying television sets were stored in an abandoned section of the facility. And so, there's this aspect of recycling: I want to try and use only the materials that I find on site. In this case, hauling these television consoles up to the roof, placing them on top of these 13-foot high Kahn columns seemed like a simple but perfect idea. I didn't try to change it too much or over think it. And just like with other projects I've done, I am interested in how man-made objects, buildings, and structures start to revert back to nature. I'm attracted to the line, or threshold, where what's man-made, what is organic and what is natural becomes blurry. Do we even know what these things are anymore? When do they become nature again? So, I end up working within this ruined structure, building something that harkens back to ruins of other places. What the difference between a ruin and a monument? I think that I'm trying to change people's thinking about those

things, to make them think about rebirth, renewal and the kind of cycles that we go through instead of always thinking about the death and decay as an ending. To me, it really just leads to more things. And the way nature will infiltrate these spaces is really a heartening experience for me. It reminds me of how insignificant we are compared to the greater timelines, and how much respect we should have for nature.

GM: *I think it's very interesting how you deal with that change of something that was created by human beings back into something natural. When I saw you in your studio and had a look at the objects and the things you work with, you showed me concrete relics of a building, which changed by the influence of water immersion into something very natural such as stalagmites.*

SH: Yeah, one of the examples of this kind of natural transition that I think is quite beautiful is when the concrete structures like Packard essentially turn into man-made caves, simply through erosion and contact with the elements. Caves have stalagmites and stalactites that form when water seeps through the rock, dripping down and creating these kind of hardened mineral deposits: stalactites hang from the ceiling, and drip down to the floor to create little mounds of stalagmites. This is happening within all the abandoned factories, even the ones that have only been abandoned ten years. The particular site in the Packard building where I built the *Garden of the Gods* installation, I started to collect these stalagmites from the ground as artifacts. I collect and display them almost the same way a natural history museum would show conglomerate rocks or geological artifacts from a different time period. And once again, it shows that the line between man-made and natural occurrences becomes blurred. It is really a repeating cycle that becomes evident every time things fall apart and we put them back together again. I think, as an artist, all you really need to do is insert yourself and move something around, and suddenly you've changed its course. *You have to move something to make something.* Taking these stalagmites out of the building means they are never going to grow anymore, they've ended. Now they are artifacts. Now they're specimens.

GM: *But before it was nature. In a natural cave, stalactites and stalagmites would have been growing hundreds or thousands of years.*

SH: Yes, but not necessarily. People are learning a lot of new things and about how fast these things are made. I think in the years past they thought such natural transitions took a lot longer to be created. But they are learning actually through our own structures. Through the subways under Paris, they have learned that stalagmites have been growing quicker than they thought. But how would they really know how long it took to grow? They have to base it on science and sometimes science can be wrong.

GM: *And these specimens from Packard grew in twenty or thirty years?*

SH: I don't even know, it could be ten. Someone could be walking in the building and kick one out of its place—one moment it's growing, and then it stops because the drip is not hitting it anymore. If it's been sitting in the same place long enough, it might grow to an enormous size. I had an exhibit where I focused on one specific building: the Roosevelt Warehouse. It's an old post office turned public school warehouse, next to the famously vacant Michigan Central train station. I found monstrous stalagmites in there, but it turned out they were big because they were growing over books and other debris. So the books were shaping them, making them very tall and hollow inside. It all depends on what is underneath. I collected dozens of stalagmite-covered objects, and hundreds of other artifacts from that building. It became a sort of archaeological dig of the future. All of the specimens were categorized and named, based on what I imagined future archaeologists would come up with. It was a bit pseudo-scientific, and mocked the tendency to classify and organize through the scientific method. Once again, I think I was trying to say that we are not that much different from humans of the past, and it's silly to think we are superior. People want to categorize and organize things, because the natural world is infinitely organized. The whole installation was about that.

GM: *Yes, nature is organized.*

SH: Yes! It looks disorderly, and it is quite chaotic. But you are right, it is ordered. And, despite our attempts, I don't think it is possible for man to recreate that kind of chaotic order. We've always tried to make sense of it though. Looking at belief systems of the past and seeing different ideas through different times, I feel like we live in our own mythology nowadays, just like the mythologies of the past. I think the Western scientific thought is our current mythology. But, I do not think of that as a bad thing, but that also means that the mythologies of the past are not bad either. Myth is not a bad word. It is how we make sense of the world. I feel all these things are interesting ideas. But who is to say that one culture's ideas are better or more progressive? Isn't it all about perception anyway? I have always been interested in ancient and prehistoric wisdom, the same stuff that I was taught to laugh at by my science teachers—ha! I'm just as interested in astronomy as in astrology. I'm much more interested in alchemy than chemistry. The woodcuts and symbolical art connected with alchemical engravings is just amazing. Anyway, I'm often inspired by what nature can do and it's hard to imagine improving upon it. Displaying certain artifacts and specimens is really my admittance that I can't create anything nearly as interesting.

GM: *You present the relics you found in the factories by putting them into boxes in a gallery*

*or museum. At the same time you do installations in the buildings, which are temporary, which will disappear maybe with the building itself, or will change with the decay of the building. So what is this relation between the ephemeral and the lasting, between the installation and the photographic documentation of the installation, between the installation in situ and the presentation of the relics in the artwork in the gallery?*

SH: I think this is a really important aspect of what I am doing. I think over the years it's become less and less important to me to possess the objects that I create. It is important for me to make the object, because I feel very strongly about the process. But the object itself is not the most important thing in the end. It's also an exercise in letting go: letting go of control, letting go of possession. Working like this leaves a lot up to chance—and trusting in that element of chance. I think that's why it is okay that these are all temporary site specific works that end up possibly being destroyed, whether through natural erosion, decay, vandalism, the building falling down, being torn down, being boarded up, or renovated, etc. No matter how, they will come to an end and, and the photographs are the only things that live on. Just goes back to the natural cycles again. Still, even though the photographs of these sites and my process are documents, I really do see them as artwork that will live on, not just documentation. I'm envisioning the photo from the moment I start working. I'm composing the whole photo series in my mind. So each project really becomes two different works with two very different audiences.

GM: *The people who see the installation are very different from the people who see the photographs or objects in an art show. How do different people react to your work in different contexts? Can you tell us more about your work in those factories and abandoned places?*

SH: I think that is another aspect to working on site as opposed to in the studio that I like: You really get to see how different people from all walks of life respond to art. When you are in the art world, you can get really tired of the insular quality of it all. The people who understand, or think they understand, or who know their art history, always come to the same places to see art. When you start to make something in public, you start to interact with, hear responses and get reactions from people who normally would not see art. I'm interested in any response. I am interested in everyone's opinions and I think some of the most remarkably surprising comments come from the most unlikely sources. So, for me, the interaction with a guy who scavenges for metal in an abandoned building, a homeless man, a factory worker, or anyone who comes across these pieces, is just as interesting as my interactions with someone who sees a photograph inside a gallery—sometimes even more so. You are right, they're seeing different things, and they're seeing a person building something versus a photographer. I think that kind of dynamic is interesting to me because I like to keep find-

ing out what different people think about different kinds of artwork. I think working on site and losing that control over what is going to happen is a wonderful exercise in trust: Trusting your process, trusting your ideas and trusting what is going to happen. In the same way, I am interested in people finding these objects and thinking, “Wow, what the fuck is that and where did it come from?” I am also interested in the guy who comes along to scrap metal, and decides he is not going to destroy the strange sculpture because, although he doesn’t know what it is, he would rather just leave it there. Those little simple choices are really amazing moments for me.

GM: *Tell me more about your installation Garden of the Gods at the Packard Complex. It seems that the space and the materials that you find in the space itself are the sources of your work. It has to do with a recycling process, but also with the construction of something new out of these deconstructed materials that have lost their function and meaning. Maybe you could talk about what you did at the Packard building with the columns and TV-sets, and how you use this as a possibility to address other projects, which in a way also reflect this recycling and creation process?*

SH: *Garden of the Gods* is the top floor of the southwestern point of the Packard complex (building number 92), where the roof has deteriorated and collapsed. Water gets through the tar, freezes, thaws, expands and cracks the concrete over the years, reaches the iron rebar inside and rusts it away until portions of it finally collapses and fall. After which, in some cases, the columns are still standing. Over the years I’ve grown to love this spot. I have watched it change: there used to be only a small portion of the roof collapsed, but now the roof is half-gone, and two collapses have taken out the three floors below as well. The mass of falling tar-covered concrete slabs and chunks has created a gardenlike landscape with these little spikes of metal sticking out everywhere. There are trees and plants growing, and in the summertime it is quite green. I love the juxtaposition between all the right-angled flat surfaces of the man-made structure and the rolling hilled chaotic mess of tar, rock, and earth. And, in the midst of it all, the freestanding martini-glass columns made me think of pedestals for the gods. It reminded me of the Roman Forum or Bernini’s Piazza San Pietro; yet, and the idea of the gods looking down on you from above. Also, when you are standing at the *Garden of the Gods* site, you are up pretty high, and you can see the landscape of Detroit, with the metropolis civic center off in the hazy distance. It is a godlike view. So, I decided to do my own version of the pantheon of the gods, with old T.V.s replacing marble figures. The room that stored the old television-sets was on the ground floor; there must have been 100 of them: crappy faux-wood consoles from the 1970s. I hauled them up to the roof, one by one, over the course of many weeks. I wish I could say I used my ancient Egyptian levitating powers to place them on top of the columns, but I’m cursed with the Detroit hard-labor work ethic. I got an old wooden

ladder from another abandoned building and brought it to Packard (Scrappers often leave ladders in these buildings). I had to lean the ladder against each column, and push each TV up the ladder as I climbed it, one rung at a time. I began on this process on an incredibly windy December day—gale force winds. It was crazy. But I did it. Alone—partly because I like to work alone, and partly because I didn’t want anyone to see how crazy it was. And that was it: my Greek pantheon for Detroit. Each column represents a different god from the classical pantheon. And they’re collapsing as well. I think there are pretty understandable connections between the idea of a television-set and a god. I think I am making a comment with this project, but I also feel like it is a very peaceful place. It is like a sculpture garden, a place I would like to come and sit in summertime and have lunch up here (laughs). And it continues to change. A month after my first photos, another portion of the roof collapsed, exposing two more columns. Really, the whole building is not going to last that much longer. So this project, like most of my projects, is temporary. Relegated to existing only in people’s memory and the photographs.

GM: *And did some of the columns collapse with the television sets on top?*

SH: No, they collapsed first, and I put the TV’s there afterwards, but the idea was to make them look like they collapsed together.

GM: *Have you ever broken through?*

SH: Fall through the floor? Not in this building, but I have before. I broke through a floor in a building in China, and it was very scary because I didn’t know the building at all. It was a concrete floor, but covered in plant and debris, and all of a sudden I fell through a hole. I thought maybe the whole floor would collapse. It was very frightening. But, the floor didn’t collapse and I was fine. I found out later that I just happened to step on one small hole in the otherwise solid concrete floor. The hole was covered in wood, which had rotted, and I somehow stepped in the right spot. It was enough to scare the crap out of me. I fell, and I caught by my arms on the beam, and my legs were hanging... But, it was fine in the end (laughs).

GM: *If you look at other artists or the tradition of the last twenty years, is there anything you feel close to?*

SH: Well, I am a poor student of art history. I’m a stubborn person, always wanting to do my own thing. So, I didn’t really agree with the theory that “you don’t want to reinvent the wheel,” and therefore you needed to know art history, so as not to repeat

it. I felt it was more important as an artist to believe in your ideas and if you seem parallel to other artists it is okay, you do not have to question that...

But there are certain artists that people have turned me on to and told me I should look at. Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smithson, Richard Long are good examples. People make lots of comments and comparisons, and I'm totally open to it. Even comparisons that I think certain people might see as having negative connotations, such as someone saying that I remind them of an urban Andy Goldsworthy—fine by me. The point is: its okay, its not the most important thing to me.

As far as influences that come to mind right now...out of all the artists who I've been inspired by for different reasons, I think sculpturally, I was first taken with David Smith. I was inspired by his tenacity. He was probably a madman and a pain to deal with, but I respect the fact that he would work so much. When I learned about how Christo would support his own ideas by selling his immaculate draftsman drawings, so that he could go and do whatever he wanted afterwards—I liked that too. I do not necessarily like the projects Christo has done all that much, but I like that he figured out a way to do what he wants. I like the way Mark Dion fiddles with naturalism and archaeology. And I like the way Matthew Barney weaves alchemy and mysticism into his own mythologies. There are many dead artists whose images and writings have definitely affected me, from Brueghel to Klee, but it all kind of threads together. I think I'm influenced by people I run into everyday, or things outside of the art world altogether. I'm consistently influenced by books; anything from an ancient text to a work of fiction to a magazine article in *National Geographic*. I get ideas from all around me, from my life experiences. These things probably influence my work more so than artists themselves or art history.

GM: *As you deal with spaces you also deal with the history of the spaces. In which dimension or in which way is your work narrative? Or, would you call yourself a storyteller?*

SH: I like creating a scenario, a situation, and a space where someone can come up with their own story. I am leading them into something, like an invitation. It's a mystery. I like that people have to come up with their own answer to how this happened, why this is there. In most cases what I have been creating are objects or images that I think (or hope) connect with our psyche, our unconscious, like the shape of a pyramid or an egg. Ancient symbols hidden in our memory, embedded in our DNA, through centuries, probably thousands of years. And they mean something different to everyone, but they always mean something. So when someone comes across a pyramid in an abandoned building, they can say, "its a ruin within a ruin." Maybe it can make them think about the abandoned building differently, because pyramids are ruins that are revered. It can be mystical to some people, or humorous to others. I guess I'm trying to create a Zen koan kind of moment for people who find these sculptures. I'd like

to break them out of the narrative that already exists in their minds—about Detroit, about decay, beauty, etc. Personally, I think our time is not so different than any time through history: This has always been happening, these ups-and-downs and changes. Every place changes, this is not that unusual and we are not that unique. These are ancient things combined with modern/contemporary things, and they will be future things. So, I like trying to catch people on that level whether they know it or not. But I really love the myriad possible interpretations. I saw a slide-lecture once where the speaker showed an image of my *Ziggurat* installation at Fisher Body 21, theorized I could be "saying that Capitalism makes about as much sense as Zoroastrianism," and then moved on to the next slide. I thought, wow, I love that synopsis! It's a very socio-political interpretation, but it could be true. I like that each viewer brings his or her own perspective and notions to it. I'm trying to present a broader idea, and by making things that are universal or perhaps sit within the collective unconscious, people can write their own story.

GM: *Detroit city is not the hot spot of the art market—it is far away from the big art metropolises like New York, London, Berlin, Los Angeles and so on. And Detroit is seriously affected by the changing economics of the world. Is Detroit a place for artists?*

SH: Yes, Detroit is not the Mecca of the art world, but it's kind of the perfect place to be an artist right now. You can afford a place to live and work, and there's so much potential and inspiration. Its changed a lot in the time I've been working here.

GM: *How do you manage to survive in that situation in Detroit?*

SH: It has been hard, at times. Like I said earlier, at one point I had no car for many years and prior to that I was homeless and living in my car for many months. I have had an interesting life; so maybe my background has prepared me for the unpredictable lifestyle of an artist. I'm doing pretty good these days—selling photos and getting exhibitions—but no one pays you to build a pyramid in an abandoned building; no one pays you to go haul televisions to the top of 13-foot columns. So it really has to be something I am passionate about. I think artists who end up continuing to do artwork are doing it because they *need* to do it. I have to do it, and it has nothing to do with my financial situation.

GM: *When you think about Detroit and artistic work, what is the first thing that comes to your mind? Is it about the fine artists like Mike Kelley or about the music scene like Madonna or Alice Cooper or something very different?*

SH: I definitely think of music. I grew up on Alice Cooper, Kiss's *Detroit Rock City*,



and all the Motown greats. But the first thing I think of, when it comes to Detroit and art, is much more basic than any specific visual artist or musician. I think of a place that breeds creativity. It's kind of mysteriously creative. I don't know why so much great music, art, design and inventiveness all come from here. But it does. Maybe it's a product of industry, and the work ethic passed down through generations. Or maybe it's a reaction to all this hard labor. But nearly everyone I know is creative in some fashion.

GM: *For Detroit, our show in Vienna, we chose Detroit as one of the cities that stand for essential economic, social, cultural and political changes in the world. A surprise?*

SH: Not really. There's an old saying, something like: *As Detroit goes, so goes the nation.* And I think it still holds true. What's happening here can be seen as a barometer. Corine Vermeulen, a Dutch photographer and another artist in the *Detroit* exhibition, titled a series of photos after a prophetic quote from Detroit's former mayor Coleman Young: "Detroit today has always been your town tomorrow."

GM: *When we started with the idea to do that show it was also based on the idea that we want to focus on several cities in the world, which maybe represent metaphorically the fundamental changes in the world, on a political, socio-economic, and cultural level. Detroit in the beginning was like a metaphor for us for the end of the industrial age. Maybe also still having in mind the movie Roger and me by Michael Moore that especially for Europeans made the whole area and the problems in Detroit well known. When we came to Detroit and did the first research and spoke with artists we found out that we have to be careful because it carries a certain cliché of an end. But there is also an enormous energy in that city and a future and there are enormous changes going on. How would you position yourself in that context?*

SH: What you indicated about this idea of the end of the industrial age, I would say, is even more specific: it will be the end of the automobile age. I think we are living in the midst of it. I feel like in Detroit people often focus on the last 100 years of history whereas so much has happened here over the last 1000 years. There always has been an interest in living in this specific place that happens to be a kind of temperate, unusually nice area, for our latitude between two lakes and a little river, and people have liked that for a certain reason. So even though the automobile age has kind of drawn people away from the river and the city itself, I think the reality is that there will be new reasons to stay here and to move back. The city was once a farmland, a trading post, a stove maker, and a cigar maker. There have been many transitions in Detroit. People were living here for centuries before the Europeans. I think it is important to focus on that, in the bigger picture. So I, and a lot of artists who come into the city to live

and work here, get tired of everyone focusing on negatives and the things that have gone wrong, and the notion of "we must fix these problems." As an artist and a creative thinking person I try not to think of everything as a problem, necessarily; but more so as a natural cycle. You don't fight it, you just go with it and you try to make the best of it. You try to find the beauty in places it normally would not be seen. Artists see the potential in Detroit. They see spaces and imagine how they can use them. They can do things here that they possibly cannot do anywhere else. I stayed here, even though like many people who grew up here, I wanted to get away at first. But then my attitude changed. I decided that I wanted to learn more about the city instead of carrying all of the stereotypes that were pounded into me as I grew up. Instead of leaving like so many people do, I wanted to try and question my learned ideas, not only of Detroit, but even more basic ideas of beauty. What is good and bad, and why do we see all these things as negative. I think that like many places that have become neglected or run down, in any city worldwide, artists end up being the ones who are trying to find the usefulness and the beauty of these spaces. Often it leads to a revitalization and renewed interest, and then people start to come back. So, to me this is not an unusual circumstance. Detroit just happens to be a shining example on a grand scale, because so many people have heard of Detroit and because it reached such an apex and crashed down so low in such a short span of time.

GM: *What about the music and the music scene in Detroit, is that of any importance for you? Is there a relation between the music scene and the art scene?*

SH: Yes, definitely. A couple of different creative directions you can go in Detroit. Some people can do both. I am a musician myself, but I stopped playing music once I started making visual art. Not necessarily because I like one better than the other, but neither were getting my full attention. I think some people have to choose, or else its like living two or three lives. I guess it's up to the individual. A lot of creative people get inspiration and develop here in Detroit. The problem has been that they rarely become successful here. As you have indicated, it is not necessarily the best art market, so they leave for New York or L.A. or other cities. Still, I think the music industry would often look to Detroit bands and even come here to scout for new music. The Detroit art scene, however, didn't seem to be on the art world map until recently. What seems to be happening now is that the visual art scene is catching up to the music scene, in terms of attention coming from outside.

GM: *It is true, our show in Vienna is a part of that. Also the fact that people like Matthew Barney or Jesper Just are coming to Detroit will create new links, which is good because it creates new energy and brings new people together. More and more artists seem to be inter-*

*ested in Detroit. Do they influence, do they change the situation in the city? Is there a contact between the artists in Detroit and the artists from the outside?*

SH: I think having high profile artists wanting to come here and work will lead to more interest from the greater art world, and more exposure for Detroit artists. It's already happening. There are more artists coming all the time. We're in the midst of a good momentum for the art scene right now—the ball is rolling. And the fact that these artists want to do projects here is a testament to the inherent creative potential of Detroit. Artists come here and get ideas. And yes, I think there will always be certain people who resist change. There are some artists who come from elsewhere, take what they want, and leave. And there are some long-time Detroit artists who bitch about all the newcomers. To me, that's just the nature of change. The irony is that the same quality about Detroit that draws people here will probably lead to gentrification, and eventually that quality will disappear. But I'd rather ride the wave right now, and see what happens.

GM: *You visited the exhibition in Vienna. In which way did you see yourself, your colleagues in Detroit, and also the city itself being reflected in the exhibition?*

SH: I thought it was a good balance of viewpoints and aspects of the city. Especially for people who only think of Detroit clichés. And the reaction from visitors seemed to reflect that. It showed the good, the bad, and the ugly. So, I thought it was a realistic reflection, part document, part fiction; artists from Detroit, working with Detroit, artists from elsewhere inspired by Detroit—a good mix.

GM: *You showed photographic parts from your works Relics (2001–2010), Ziggurat (2008–2009) and Garden of the Gods (2009–2010). Could you say something about the works and your selection?*

SH: *Relics* was originally made up of over 400 individual wooden boxes that added up to a room sized installation. I built it with my friend and collaborator Clinton Snider, in what was our attempt to show the history of Detroit through found objects alone. It's basically made up of thousands of eroding man-made objects, collected from sites throughout the city, and organized into grid like reliquary walls. It's a pseudo-scientific take on natural history museums of the future. And, like most of my work, it's an attempt to show that beauty can be found in unlikely places. The version exhibited in the *Detroit* show is a twenty-box excerpt, and just one of multiple site-specific reconstructions over the last ten years.

*Ziggurat*, like the *Garden of the Gods* project, is a site-specific installation and photography project, created in Detroit. Similarly to *Garden of the Gods*, it existed as an

installation, but it is exhibited as photographs. The main sculpture was a stepped pyramid built from 6,201 wooden floor blocks within Detroit's abandoned Fisher Body Plant 21. The old auto factory has been vacant since the '80s, and millions of these wooden blocks were buckled in organic patterns, from years of freezing and thawing. I worked on it for over eight months before taking the final photos in the summer of 2008. I probably would have kept building it too, but the Environmental Protection Agency boarded up and cleaned out the whole building about a month later. Pretty amazing timing really. And then, in true Detroit style, the Plant was once again abandoned and re-opened by scrappers about six months later.

And, of course, we've already talked about the *Garden of the Gods* installation. It is similar in its connections to the past, I think. Pyramids mean something to everyone, whether a good or bad connotation, they are archetypal symbols for sure. They have got to be one of the most ancient cosmopolitan man-made forms on the Earth, from Asia to Africa to North and South America. I'm fascinated by why this form is so compelling to us, and I think of it as perfect allegorical symbol.

GM: *If I approached you as a visitor, as a friend, coming to the city and I ask you, "please show me your favorite place," which place would that be?*

SH: Wow, that's a hard question, because I have so many favorites. I love Southwest Detroit, around where the Rouge River meets the Detroit River—Del Ray, Carbon Works, old Fort Wayne, etc. Then there are the old riverfront parks near the eastern border of the city. I am trying to do a project at one of them. And, there are a few specific buildings that I really love right now, like the vacant 38 story Book Tower. It's very hard for me to choose just one site, because I like so many places for different reasons...I think that, as you know, when I take people around the city, I try to get a sense of the person I am taking around, and share with them something that they might also appreciate.

GM: *But let us say, if it is not your studio, which place could it be?*

SH: Well, another reason I have a hard time picking one site because it often changes—trust me, over the years, it has definitely changed. So I will pick one of my current favorite areas, even though it's actually the transition between two sites: The sprawling Packard complex, with its many surrounding city blocks, and the transition from that into the neighborhood northward across the freeway: the I-94 Industrial Park Renaissance Zone, where all of the houses have been demolished, the streets have been blocked off, and the vacant land has become a natural topography again. I think that those two epitomize my interest in the transitions that are happening in Detroit. But it can be hard to show people these things, whether through imagery or through

experience, and not have them feel a sense of sadness or despair or nostalgia. To me it is important to present these things with the idea that it is not death, but rebirth. You look at Detroit's city motto, that we shall be reborn from the ashes, coined when the city burned over 200 years ago, yet I think it's still an appropriate motto today. Every kind of decay or ending is really just the beginning of something new. So in these same places that look like collapsing factories or fields where houses used to be I see the rebirth of plants and nature, trees and flowers growing and animals coming back, frogs living in swamps that used to be streets, birds coming to get the insects that live on the swamp. A strangely bucolic and peaceful place. It could possibly be turned into farmland but what is wrong with that? Why not? I think the places that I am most attracted to right now, my favorite places in Detroit, are the ones where this transition is most evident. I think that is quite beautiful.

GM: *Some people say, especially in New York, that there is a lot of focus on Detroit, let us say as the "New Berlin." What is your opinion on that?*

SH: I feel that there is a similarity between Berlin and Detroit in the sense that they are both cities that draw artists. They have a dynamic energy and space to create and you can live cheaply. But I think it can be hard to make money in both cities. Or at least that's what my Berliner friends have told me: Berlin is kind of an artist capital, while Frankfurt is more of the moneymaking capital. I'm sure it's more complicated than that, but what do I know? On the surface, it seems like there are similarities, but I feel like there are many differences too. Maybe Berlin has just as many overcast days as Detroit (laughs). Berlin is a fascinating city for me, but I think it is a stretch to say that Detroit is the "New Berlin." I'd say Berlin is the "New Berlin," and Detroit is the "New Detroit."

GM: *What does the past of Detroit mean to you? Maybe on a more intuitive level, maybe in terms of pictures you have in mind?*

SH: I think the past of Detroit to me is my own past, my own history. I grew up with a father who was very interested in cars, an auto mechanic, and a weekend drag racer, among other things...

GM: Which cars was he interested in?

SH: He had a fixed-up Chevy Nova for drag racing, because he claimed it had the perfect weight ratio. And I had my own personal favorite cars too, of course. But I think my memory of Detroit is similar to what most people have in mind—it has to do with cars. Growing up, I had toy cars and posters of my favorite cars on my bedroom

wall. I helped my dad in the garage, and learned how to change my oil and brakes, etc. But I was learning it all reluctantly, because, in my heart, I really didn't have any interest in cars. Kind of blasphemous for a Detroiter, but I was not a car guy.

GM: *And what does the present Detroit mean to you?*

SH: Nothing to do with cars (laughs). In reality, what I like about Detroit right now is the "unknown." We're in the midst of a major transition and what happens next is a bit of a mystery. A while back, I realized that it draws me to Detroit...I think that people today have become obsessed with safety. And I think that this idea of making everything safe is connected to the idea of control. In the suburbs of Detroit, everyone has their individual house, their manicured lawn, their paved well-lit streets, and so many cops everywhere. They're afraid of Detroit because they watch the news on their HD-TVs and hear nothing but stories about murder, drugs, crime, and fires. They think if they take a wrong turn, they'll get carjacked. It's a mythology. People like this want to stay in a place that's safe—where they are in control and life is predictable. Well, I'm the opposite. The suburban American dream is sterile and boring to me. I love Detroit because it is unpredictable. It is not a controlled environment—it's a bit wild. And I crave that feeling of the wilderness, that feeling that suburban life has tried so hard to eradicate. I don't think that's really living. To me, life should be an adventure. Like when you're hiking through a forest and you come across a bear. Holy shit, that's when you truly feel alive! We may have eliminated wild animals from cities, but that feeling of heightened senses, of being aware of your surroundings, of living in the moment, that can still be found in Detroit. There's so much potential here, and you really never know what might happen. You can take chances here, if you're not afraid of the unknowns. I think we have lost a sense of our mystery in our everyday life, or we want to figure them all out. But those things intrigue me.

GM: *So that would be the answer to what the future of Detroit means to you.*

SH: Ha, yeah, I guess that's your answer. But Detroit has been so many things. Most people think of what's happened in recent history, but Detroit's been Detroit for 300 years—that's a lot more time without cars than with cars. We came back from a great fire that burned us to the ground. And before that, when Cadillac sailed through here, there were Native camps on either side of the river. They had been living here for thousands of years. There were earthworks along the Detroit and Rouge Rivers that were so old; the Natives only had legends about their builders. We still don't really know who built these things. Cadillac theorized that the lost tribes of Israel built them. Amazing, right? Humans were living along the shores here at the time of Christ. Ancient gardens and pathways lie fossilized under Michigan soil. Natives were traveling to

reap copper of northern Michigan between 5,000 and 8,000 years ago. I think that's mind-blowing! So, to me, this current transition is just another point on our long timeline. We're on the threshold of another rebirth, and it feels like a good time to be here. Specifically, I have a feeling that people will be drawn back to the water... After years of moving further away and spreading out from the city center, I think people are going to rediscover the river.

GM: What are you working on at the moment?

SH: I've got a lot projects in process, some in Detroit and some elsewhere. I'd like to finish my *Egg* project at the Michigan Central train station, but it is very well sealed lately, so it is postponed. I'm planning out projects with a former wooden pallet recycling center, building my own version of Stonehenge, called Pallethenge (ha). I'm trying to get permission to work with two former Nike missile towers along the Detroit River, where I'd like to build my own versions of the gods Nike and Ajax. There's a larger project I've been working towards that focuses on reinforced cast concrete structures all over the world, beginning with all of these Kahn structures here in Detroit, but branching out to anything from the Chernobyl sarcophagus to Nazi bunkers. And I'm ever-presently shooting a few different Detroit-based photo series, including one I'm pretty excited about titled *Bad Graffiti*. I've got a couple solo shows coming up, photos and installations, and a handful of national group exhibitions as well. It's going to be busy year.

GM: Are you going to stay in Detroit and if so why?

SH: I still have a lot of ideas here, and I'm still inspired by Detroit. I don't have any plans to leave, but I don't feel like I have to stay here forever. I guess I'm open to whatever happens. I know this place so damn well, yet I still learn new things all the time. And it's really amazing how much the city continues to change. Maybe one day I'll get sick of living here. But, at this point, if I can continue to travel and do projects in different cities, Detroit is my home base.

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This interview was conducted in February 2010 on the occasion of the exhibition *Detroit* at Kunsthalle Wien project space.

Scott Hocking was born in 1975 in Detroit. He lives and works in Detroit.



Scott Hocking with *The Egg* and MCTS, Detroit 2012