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the arts

07/20/04 Beauty in Abandonment - Scott Hocking:
a Shrinking Cities profile



Interview with Scott Hocking at his studio - 7332 Oakland, Detroit, Michigan; Summer 2004



An artist can offer a new vantage point from which we can view our world. Monet changed how we look at color, and with a literal change in perspective, Georgia O'Keefe transformed delicate flowers into majestic landscapes. For some time now, Detroit artist Scott Hocking has been opening people's eyes to the beauty that can be found in the midst of decay. With "[Relics](#)" he and Clinton Snider rummaged through abandoned homes and buildings and turned their finds into a compelling monument to our forgotten history. More recently Hocking's work has consisted of rusted metal surfaces, all too commonplace in this city. Through his presentation, metal rescued from the scrap heap becomes as compelling as lushly painted landscapes.



As a contributor to the "Shrinking Cities" project, Hocking has an even larger task in front of him than elevating the status of scrap metal. As we reported back in December (see our [archives](#)) Shrinking Cities is an international collaborative art project funded by the German government intended to study the conditions that led to the shrinkage of four cities around the globe, including Detroit. By presenting the information as an art exhibition, the project's creators hope to promote understanding and offer potential solutions for growth in the future.

Hocking describes Shrinking Cities' research objective as to "create a bridge between the scientific approach and a more creative/artistic perspective." By involving artists, sociologists, psychologists, musicians, performance artists, writers, poets, people from all walks of life, they hope to create different solutions than might otherwise be gleaned from a singular disciplinary approach.

More than just being an artist in Detroit, Hocking's work with found objects, decay, and memory make him a natural fit for inclusion in a project which is grounded in exploring the environment and conditions of a place.

Hocking's rationale for working with found materials comes out of a personal philosophy that such things as new paints and canvases are more of a privilege than a right. Therefore, his means of dealing with that issue is to make art from whatever is on hand - "I don't like wasting things." Making art from old things both produces no new waste and finds a use for existing waste. This is more than just recycling, as he indeed finds and presents beauty in things other people see as ugly or wasted, and thus they never even take the time to look at them. "You can find beauty everywhere even in decay." Work made from discarded materials also brings with it an aspect of its former use, adding another level of significance to its new function.



Hocking's work is also characterized by making art from what's at hand in the environment. In Detroit this means rusted and otherwise discarded objects. In another location, his work might retain a similar sensibility but guided by its own particular aesthetic. (He spent the month of June doing an artists residency on an island in Toronto, an environment that will no doubt evoke a different feel than his Detroit works.)

Overall he describes this approach to art making as not being just about Detroit and wastefulness, but as a "balance between opposites." "We struggle with the duality of our existence, and these artworks are intended to build bridges between them. ... Life is trying to keep a balance."

While many artists' endeavors begin and end in the studio, a good portion of Hocking's work begins with him Indiana Jones-like exploring abandoned buildings and other ruins to find inspiration. Fears of homeless people, falling in a hole, or tetanus might stop most people from venturing into such locales, but despite a healthy respect for realistic fears like a roof caving in, Hocking risks the danger: "I seek to really live - risks, excitement, drive me. If I find a 200 pound object on a roof and I think it's beautiful, I have to find a way to get it."



Although exploring primarily on his own, Hocking encountered company while wandering into abandoned buildings. He came across scrappers, people who like him were seeking scraps of the past to use for the present, but unlike him they were using these things in order to survive. These people serve as the focus for his Shrinking Cities' project. They present an extreme example of an alternate means of survival, through the collection of scrap metal, aluminum siding, tin, bronze, copper wire, nickel, iron, some wood, motors, bricks, cast iron radiators, just about anything with material value that they can haul in a shopping cart and sell.

Scrapers constitute an entire subculture, with virtually no interaction between the mainstream of society. In Hocking's experience, scrappers are all black men, (this is not to say that women don't do it, just that he never encountered one.) They live a somewhat homeless existence, pushing a cart around almost every minute of everyday, not even stopping to sleep.

Hocking equates their struggles for survival with the story of Sisyphus, who was condemned to eternally roll a rock up a hill only to have it roll back down again. Like Sisyphus, these men labor endlessly for a reward that is barely enough to survive. Hocking speaks of their determination and ingenuity with great respect: he rescued that beautiful 200 pound metal door (mentioned above) from the roof it was on with the use of makeshift pulleys that had initially been constructed by scrappers for their own purposes and subsequently left behind. They often have cleared the way for "urban spelunkers" like Hocking to make their own discoveries, "I owe much to these men for making such sites accessible and laying down somewhat safe paths."



Scrapppers are caught in a unique dynamic. As it is technically illegal to buy scrap out of shopping carts and there exist few alternatives as to where to sell their hard earned goods, they are at the mercy of businesses that can and do take advantage of them. They function as a valuable, but essentially invisible and silent member of the economic stream.

Scrappping is not unique to Detroit, as "Scrappping will exist anywhere that people need to find a way to survive." However, "The exceptional thing about Detroit and the other Shrinking Cities is that there is so much abandonment, that they constitute a larger niche and thriving subculture. [By his estimation, there are "easily hundreds of cart-pulling scrapppers in the city."] This serves as an example of ecological cycles linked directly to the health of the

architecture of a place. Scrapppers exist in abundance where there is less abundance - as cities stop shrinking they [the scrapppers] will have to do something else."

Turning all of this human research into a collaborative art exhibition involves more of a back and forth between curator and artist than typically transpires. The curators must exercise a high level of editorial guidance, which means that the artist always has to defend the work and its merit. Hocking characterizes this constant, intense dialogue as a "breath of fresh air" not always present in the art world. Through this discourse a balance is struck between the objectives and expression of the individual artist and the overall concept of Shrinking Cities.

Hocking's exhibition will focus on all aspects of the scrapppers' existence through photographs, objects, and accompanying text that documents his research. Together all this information chronicles their survival against adversity and how that parallels the overall environmental factors of the city.



At the Shrinking Cities exhibition, Hocking plans to display two shopping carts that he purchased from scrapppers. He equates the shopping cart with "consumerism" in its typical function, while in the scrapppers' hands it is transformed into a means of survival. The cart serves as a portrait of a single man - his home, his goods, his source of income - all his means of survival. Hocking intends to hang the carts from the exhibition hall ceiling, balancing a burned cart filled with copper wire whose plastic coating has been melted off with a second cart filled with an equivalent weight of bags of 50 cent caramel corn, the delicacy of choice of one scrapper named "Country Boy."

In addition to his time spent interacting and observing scrapppers, some years ago Hocking also found out how first hand how scrapppers are perceived by the larger culture. In the process of gathering bottles from abandoned buildings throughout the city (for a project that would go on the lawn of the DIA), he reached through a window to grab some bottles to put in his cart and cut himself badly on jagged glass. Unable to do much about the bleeding, he finished filling up the cart and went on his way. As he pushed his bottle-filled shopping cart down John R, sporting a shaved head, wearing no shirt, and bleeding profusely, he heard car doors lock as he hobbled past. He thought, "They think I'm a bum, they don't know that I'm not."

It's easiest to lock our doors and turn our heads away from things that we don't understand, things that make us uncomfortable, things that we don't want to acknowledge. By confronting these issues and turning them into something able to be displayed in a gallery, Hocking does the legwork for an audience not comfortable traipsing into abandoned buildings or talking to men pushing metal-filled shopping carts. In some ways he acts as a "middle man" - bridging cultures and creating understanding where fear and misconceptions prevail. His work creates a new awareness and with that perhaps a chance to reveal previously unseen beauty as well. - Nick Sousanis

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