

Motown Review of Art

A blog about visual art (and from time to time other aspects of culture) in Detroit and its environs. Brought to you as part of a 2010 Kresge Artist Fellowship, awarded by Kresge Arts in Detroit, a program of The Kresge Foundation.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2010

The window of opportunity in Detroit



Scott Hocking, *Garden of the Gods, West, Winter*, 2009. (Photo: Scott Hocking, courtesy of the artist and Susanne Hilberry Gallery.)

I recently finished Jonathan Lethem's 2003 novel *The Fortress of Solitude*. (I try to read at least one work of fiction while on summer vacation each year and have a gnawing feeling that if I regularly read more of it I would be that much wiser.) The first half of the story is about the author's Brooklyn neighborhood, Boerum Hill, in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the second half follows the main character twenty years later. The earlier part is set in the context of the neighborhood's impending gentrification, in the twilight moment after the collapse of New York City's municipal budget (a watershed in the legitimation crisis of welfare capitalism that helped usher in neoliberalism) and the subsequent rise of the yuppified Big Apple of the Reagan Era and after. One of the book's main themes is the pursuit of a "middle space," that condition of being in between, the free zone created by the vacuum left in the wake of the demise of one regime of order and before the onset of another. That notion strikes me as an appropriate description of the current cultural moment in Detroit.

In the past few months, there has been a good deal of publicity about Detroit as a kind of DIY utopia, using the city's cultural producers of various stripes as cases in point. (See, for example, articles [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). And from a little while longer back, [here](#).) All of them share an impression of Detroit as a place where civil society has essentially broken down and into the breach of which intrepid self-reliant individuals have stepped. Thus the creators of *Soup*, a monthly fundraising dinner program, offer mini-grants to support creative projects in lieu of dysfunctional municipal arts councils, the urban agriculture movement reclaims abandoned property and provides sustenance for people in locations where major grocery-store chains fear to tread, and artists, going on the third generation now, repurpose

castoff artifacts and environments from all precincts of the city for use in a plethora of creative projects, retrieving the refuse of life for renewed existence in the refuge of art. (Among the most consistently stunning of the last category are Scott Hocking's monumental vision quests, such as *Garden of the Gods*, 2009, shown above, which posit the artist as a Sisyphean laborer of the noble-existentialist type, working in desolate sites for weeks and even months to erect installations created with the full knowledge that they will likely be destroyed either by humans or nature starting almost immediately upon completion.)

The most recent iteration of Detroit as the new frontier is the documentary hosted by Johnny Knoxville (of Jackass fame), *Palladium Boots Exploration #7: Detroit Lives*. (I've posted a link rather than embedding the video because it doesn't seem to have a "play" button written into the code and it starts up automatically, and I'm not sufficiently geek enough to figure out to prevent that from happening.) The video portends to offer a more well-balanced view of the city than has been portrayed in the conventional post-apocalyptic nightmares of much of the mainstream media. It does an OK job of it, looking at some of the younger cultural producers working in the cheap studio space the city currently offers. But there's still a lot of the typical spelunking through the postindustrial ruins in romantic wonder of it all, mainly as a way to showcase the sturdy yet fashionable Baggy Canvas boot (\$70) Knoxville wears throughout, the featured footwear style provided by Palladium Boots, sponsor of this and other "explorations."

One of the things noted in the documentary, and something I've heard especially from younger artists around town, is the desire to moderate the bottom-up growth that seems to be happening in order to "keep it real," that is, prevent the corporate shills from taking over and thereby spoiling all the fun. People who study gentrification may find that sentiment, however admirable and heartfelt, somewhat naive. The main interviewee in the *Palladium* piece, Toby Barlow, is the co-president and chief creative director of the Detroit office of one of the world's largest advertising agencies, a high capitalist enterprise even if it does allow its employees to wear hip streetwear to the office. The *Palladium* piece itself is viral marketing, using product placement and brand sponsorship to hawk "authentic" urban fashion.

But I don't want to be too much of a buzzkill. So I say, let's enjoy this middle space while we can. I'm sure Jonathan Lethem takes advantage of all the swank dining options, cool boutiques, and other action on Smith Street, which have replaced the abandoned storefronts and trash of the Brooklyn neighborhood whose lost time his fiction eulogizes.

Posted by Vince Carducci at 2:28 PM, Thursday, September 9, 2010
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<http://motownreviewofart.blogspot.com/2010/09/window-of-opportunity-in-detroit.html>

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2010

In the footsteps of Scott Hocking



Get In My Car & Drive: Nowhere in Detroit (Episode 1) from [Kristen Gallerneaux](#) on [Vimeo](#).

In response to [my most recent post](#), which included a link to [the video about Detroit released last week by Palladium Boots](#), I received a message from Kristen Gallerneaux, a folklorist/artist currently living in Oregon.

She included a link to a video she shot last spring titled *Get in My Car and Drive: Nowhere in Detroit (Episode 1)* embedded above, featuring artist Scott Hocking. The 15-minute video opens with a brief segment of drive-by cityscape and then cuts to Hocking in his studio talking about the influences on his work. But most of the piece consists of following Hocking into and around the Packard Motor Car Plant to see his monumental installation, *Garden of the Gods*, 2009-10.

According to her email, Gallerneaux's procedure was to allow the artist to take her on a "field trip" to a significant place that informs the work. She isn't so much trying to convey a particular point of view about her subject as to simply track him and thereby understand something about him. This process and the effect of it in the video reminded me of French anthropologist Bruno Latour's actor network theory, a research technique that seeks to map out relations that are both material and semiotic, that is, bound up at once in things as well as concepts. One of Latour's more controversial claims is the agency (the term social scientists use for the capacity to act) he gives to nonhumans, including inanimate objects. The word Latour has coined for this is "actant," the node in any network of relations that exerts force on another part of the mesh. Thus a ringing cellphone is as much an actant in my network of communications as my desire to place a call to my mother.

In this sense, Hocking is an actant in Gallerneaux's ethnographic network in the same way that the Packard ruin is an actant in Hocking's aesthetic one. There's more to it, of course. One needs to factor in the various apparatuses of technology, from the car and the road, and all of their accompanying networks, that took Gallerneaux and Hocking to the site, to the digital camera and its networks of production and distribution that enabled the scenes to be recorded, to the networks of communications and their various actants that enabled me to post and comment on the resulting digital file and for you to view it. There are also the social networks within which the material actants circulate and upon which they exert their own force.

When I mentioned this to Gallerneaux in an email, she responded that in fact at the time she began filming Hocking she had just finished reading Latour's essay, "On Technical Mediation," which was her introduction to the author's work. So Latour and Hocking are both actants in the network connecting Gallerneaux and me. Their status in this relationship is both material and semiotic, in the case of Latour through written words and the ideas they convey and in the case of Hocking through his physical person as well the art he makes and responses they provoke.

While actor network theory (typically abbreviated ANT) is relatively new, the idea behind it isn't. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor W. Adorno writes about the dual nature of artworks, that they are combinations of physical matter and animate spirit, material things that embody expressive concepts. The two aspects are dialectically connected as ANT recognizes is similarly true in the larger horizon of our experience.

Gallerneaux, who received an MFA from Wayne State before moving to Oregon to study folklore a couple of years back, also has footage of Stephen Schudlich and Alana Bartol she's currently editing. What's more, she is scheduled to shoot Kristin Beaver this spring. Some may remember Gallerneaux's exceptional MFA exhibition at the WSU Community Arts Building Gallery in which she presented a project called "Revenant Archive," an installation using research she conducted on the visual culture of the paranormal and its history. That work has been ongoing and a website is under development to document it. In the meantime, check out Scott Hocking, ANT style.

Posted by Vince Carducci, editor at 12:44 PM

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<http://motonreviewofart.blogspot.com/2010/09/in-footsteps-of-scott-hocking.html>

nsousanis said...

Haven't had a chance to check out the video yet, but this piece is great, Vince. Always directed newcomers looking to get a sense of the city to Scott - though never took one myself. Sounds like a great project and Latour is quite sharp. Thanks - Nick

September 27, 2010 6:14 PM