

CUMULUS

From America

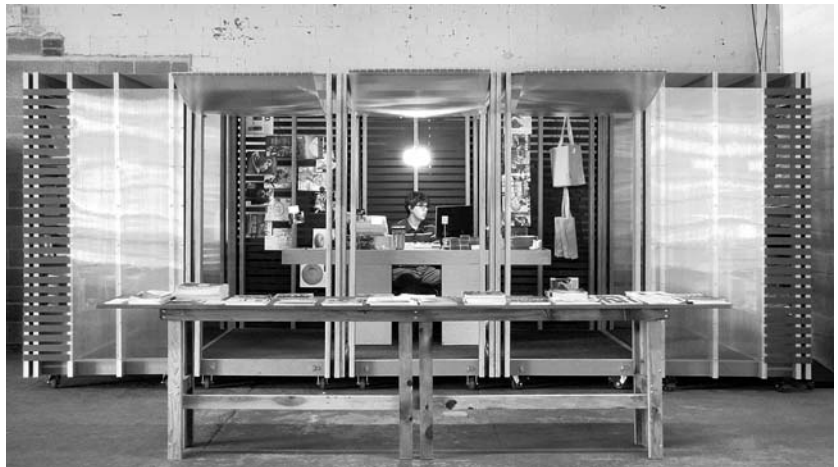
IN EVERY EDITION OF PARKETT, TWO CUMULUS CLOUDS, ONE FROM AMERICA, THE OTHER FROM EUROPE, FLOAT OUT TO AN INTERESTED PUBLIC. THEY CONVEY INDIVIDUAL OPINIONS, ASSESSMENTS, AND MEMORABLE ENCOUNTERS—AS ENTIRELY PERSONAL PRESENTATIONS OF PROFESSIONAL ISSUES.

LYNN CRAWFORD

PUZZLING OUT DETROIT

If, as Vladimir Nabokov says, curiosity is insubordination in its purest form, what does it mean that people are less curious than opinionated about Detroit?¹⁾ Views of the city tend to be strong, and categorized: Great (sports, music, proximity to Canada, big-hearted people, historic architecture); Bad (crime, cars, car companies, decay, poverty, new architecture). Neither view is entirely untrue. At the same time, neither expresses a real sense of Detroit, its sprawling metro region, the intricate and bizarre relationship between the city and its suburbs, the scope of cultural activity, or the significance of the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD), opening there.

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MOCAD bookstore / Buchhandlung, design: Steven Mankouche, Abigail Murray.

(ALL PHOTOS: MOCAD, DETROIT)



NARI WARD, *WHITE FLIGHT TEA BAR*, 2006, ceiling tiles, green tea, tables, seats, Styrofoam cups, thermoses /
TEE BAR WEISSE FLUCHT, Deckenplatten, Grüntee, Tische, Sitze, Styropor-Becher, Thermoskannen.

MOCAD occupies a twenty-one thousand square-foot former auto dealership, which stood empty for decades. The space has been described as raw, battered, cavernous, vagrant, generous, spare. The museum opened on a shoestring budget to large crowds, in October 2006, with a skeletal staff, a dedicated group of volunteers, the art critic and historian Marsha Miro volunteering as acting director, and the stated mission: bring contemporary art consistently to the city. Its initial exhibitions and programming (particularly its music series) have been strong. Interdisciplinary art is being imported, shown, viewed, and is—perhaps above all—

generating discussion around the specific issues facing the Detroit cultural community: diffusion and isolation.

Thanks to the auto industry, urban and suburban planning, spontaneous and reckless development, Detroit is deeply segregated, and not only along the lines of race and class. Consider its cultural scene. Pockets of remarkable activity percolate; some intersect, many others do not. Goings-on are diverse and, while often parallel, occur in locations so widely spread out that discovering them can require serious, if not aggressive, inquisition. An apt analogy is Georges Perec's depiction of the art of jigsaw-puzzling. Until a puzzler

tracks down that master piece, that link between the other ones on the table, there is a condition of dispersion.²⁾

The area faces another problem: lack of steady global dialogue. While Detroit art institutions and galleries host well-attended contemporary art exhibitions and lectures (Coco Fusco, Roman Signer, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, Dana Schutz, Cai Guo-Qiang, Fred Wilson, to name a few), the fascination is not mutual. Very few international art figures, in fact very few people at all, express interest in the city or take time exploring its streets, venues, nooks, fields, crannies. The artist Ingo Vetter, who came to Detroit as part of

MOCAD'S second show, "Shrinking Cities," described feeling like "a visitor to a city that knows no tourism."³⁾ Such absence of outside attention contributes to a sense of disconnect with the contemporary art world.

MOCAD is located in downtown Detroit, in a section of the city undergoing regeneration called Midtown. I use the word regeneration cautiously; there is no getting around Detroit's impoverished conditions. It has alarmingly high death rates, especially for young men, a significant homeless population, and a lack of real infrastructure, such as solidly funded schools, dependable transportation, and grocery stores. Its future remains uncertain and is dependent on some flow of suburban investment. While Detroit is one of the poorest cities in the country, some of its suburbs are among the wealthiest.

Even in MOCAD's earliest stages there was never a discussion of it existing outside of the city. It is the Detroit supporters, wherever they live and work, who have been essential in estab-

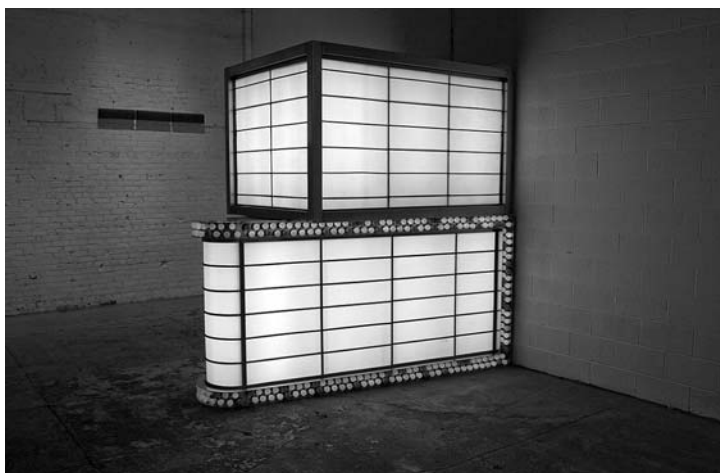
lishing its existence. Most of the museum's funding comes from local private donations (by individuals living in the suburbs but with businesses in the city or at least dependent on it), and while there is no single donor guaranteeing the museum's future, private donations have insured its funding up through its second year, and allowed it to hire a full-time director (this position is yet to be filled). The museum is working with different foundations toward attaining longer-term financing.

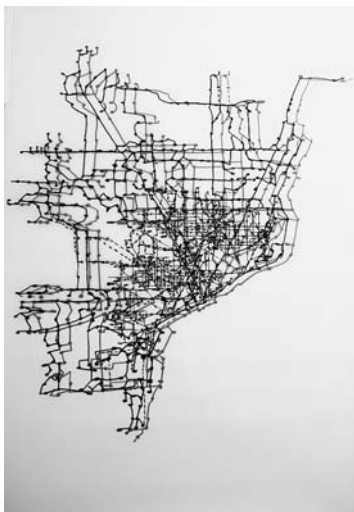
It is hard to get a sense of MOCAD and its place in the Detroit landscape without understanding some geography. The museum is on Woodward Avenue, just blocks from numerous vital arts institutions: The Detroit Institute of Art (DIA), whose blockbuster shows like "Camille Claudel and Rodin: Fateful Encounter" and shows on Ansel Adams and Annie Leibovitz were extremely well attended, not to mention its renowned Diego Rivera murals. Also nearby: Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History,

Wayne State University, College for Creative Studies, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the esteemed George N'Namdi Gallery, whose focus is abstract African American art, and the Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit (CAID). A few miles east is the Heidelberg Project, several blocks of sculpture and polka-dot covered houses (structures previously slated for demolition by the city). Woodward continues twenty-five miles north out of the city into Oakland County, through Ferndale (the location of many galleries), into wealthy suburbs such as Bloomfield Hills, the site of Cranbrook Art School and Museum. Detroit's basketball team, The Pistons, play at The Palace in Auburn Hills, a suburb even further north while the city's other three major sports teams—football, baseball, hockey—play in stadiums downtown. There is no efficient public transportation between the suburbs and the city.

MOCAD'S first exhibition, "Meditations in an Emergency," curated by Klaus Kertess, was a stunning success in large part because Kertess and some of the artists in the show developed a relationship with Detroit and spent time exploring it. Three of the artists incorporated elements of the city in their work. John Pylpchuk used found materials in portions of his pieces. Nari Ward replicated an outdoor sculpture by the artist Jack Ward (no relation) noting the beginning of the influential 1967 black rebellion. Barry McGee tagged numerous sites and sprayed the word AMAZE along the south outside museum wall. Kertess deftly linked elements of Detroit with a broader landscape in his catalogue essay: "Emergency might not have come to mind were I curating an exhibition in another

JENNIFER BOLANDE, *UNTITLED TOWERS*, 1999, *fiberglas, aluminum, lights* / *TÜRME OHNE TITEL*, *Fiberglas, Aluminium, Lampen*.





KATHLEEN LEWIS, *CHOCOLATE CITY, VANILLA SUBURBS*, 2007 / *SCHOKOLADEN-STADT, VANILLE-VORORTE*.

er city, but the emergencies I had in mind are nonetheless global and not strictly Detroit-centric.”⁴⁾

The second exhibition, “Shrinking Cities,” responded to Detroit’s conditions even more than the first. This three-year (2002–2005) cultural-art initiative of Germany’s General Cultural Foundation began in Berlin; it was in the works before MOCAD even opened. The project examines what it calls “urban shrinkage” in selected international cities: Detroit, Manchester, Liverpool, Ivanoa, Halle, and Leipzig. The exhibition makes the point that while cities shrink they can also grow (though not always in ways immediately apparent), particularly if the superstructure recognizes and responds to such development. “Shrinking Cities” appeared jointly at MOCAD and, underscoring the distance and interdepen-

dence between city and suburb, at Cranbrook Art Museum. On weekends a bus traveled between the two.

MOCAD’s third exhibition, “Stuff,” consisted of works from the collection of Burt Aaron, based in Detroit and Ann Arbor. This has provided, so far, the grandest vision of what is happening in the current world of art. “Stuff” included seventy-three artists (among them: Santiago Cucullu, Fernanda Gomes, William J. O’Brien and Dike Blair). A large percentage of the work was made in the last decade. Themes within the show (imbalance, fluid units of time, location and identity, shifting points of space, calcified positions of power) parallel much of what occurs in Detroit. The appearance of such jarring works within the walls of an emerging museum at this particular point in Detroit’s history endowed the presentation with a novel sort of resonance.

The fourth exhibition, “Words Fail Me,” slated for fall 2007 and organized by Matthew Higgs, considers various uses and manifestations of language in contemporary art. Higgs plans to have a strong theatrical component in the staging (i.e. installation, lighting) of the work. Among the artists he will include: Martin Creed, Siobhan Liddell, Jack Pierson, Annelise Coste, and Kay Rosen. There is already much discussion around this fourth exhibition and speculation about the ways high profile curators, visiting from New York (i.e. Higgs and Kertess), will compare with one another when it comes to viewing Detroit, MOCAD, and organizing shows there.

A notable historic art moment for Detroit that took place in an inner city neighborhood was The Cass Corridor, during the previously mentioned 1967 rebellion. Artists responded to the

confluence of violence, rupture, and ensuing white flight by making things characterized by a strong sense of physicality. Their works were structurally complex, visually raw, and had an intentional lack of refinement. Frequently, objects found on the streets (board, nails, glass, wire) were woven into their constructions. Ellen Phelan, Ann Mikolowski, Jim Chatelain, Michael Luchs, and Gordon Newton are among those to emerge from this movement.

The late Sam Wagstaff, curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the DIA from 1969–1972, was a significant presence during this time, as he nurtured the talent he saw brewing in Detroit studios. Such involvement was crucial in establishing the work’s presence in Detroit and elsewhere. In this sense, Wagstaff functioned as Perce’s vital puzzle piece, a force able to harness activity in the cityscape and integrate it into a wider arena. We can understand MOCAD—newly operating as a hub, linking up various scenes and institutions in and around the city—as a project continuing, and updating, what Wagstaff began.

So what would that insubordinate project be now? Cultivate curiosity from within and about Detroit in ways that will launch the neglected city into a global arena that generates forms of engagement, dialogue, and exchange.

1) Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 41.

2) Georges Perec, *Life: A User’s Manual*, transl. by David Bellos (Boston: David R. Godine, 1987). This theme runs throughout the novel.

3) Ingo Vetter, *Detroit i.e. Infrastructure* (Detroit: MOCAD, 2006), p. 20. (Note, this is a different publication from *Detroit*. It appeared once and grew into *Detroit*.)

4) Klaus Kertess, *Meditations in an Emergency*, exh. cat. (Detroit: MOCAD, 2006), p. 16.