



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALI LAPETINA

MSR

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Practice and care.

How did you become engaged with contemporary art practices instead of more historical periods?

First, allow me to say that I was fortunate in the mentors I had both as an undergraduate and a graduate student in philosophy, poetics, and art history. I initially started the graduate study of philosophy of art with a wonderful teacher and professor of aesthetics called Michael Tanner in Cambridge. He would say, rather sardonically, that one could be forgiven for thinking that most philosophers who wrote on aesthetics or philosophy of art had evidently never experienced a work of art. He would insist that to think effectively about philosophical questions on art one was duty bound to stay abreast of contemporary developments in art - dance, music, fine arts, poetry, opera (he is one of the great interpreters of Wagner's opera), no less than hybrid forms such as performance - in order to escape the temptation of thinking that there was some essence to "Art" that could be settled once and for whole. One of his key ideas was that certain concepts become collapsed, that is, can no longer function as they were once supposed to, and so could no longer command attention from new audiences. That the purpose of art was thought to be, say, uplift, or beauty, would be examples of concepts or beliefs which obviously, in a late modern or contemporary context, could not possibly be thought to explain anything about what makes any art practice viable or compelling, that is, pose a challenge to a thinking or affective consciousness.

At the time, that is, early graduate studies, I came under the definitive influence of the great Cambridge teacher and poet J.H. Prynne - a kind of Webern of contemporary poetry. There are many ways in which I could talk about Prynne's impact on artists - the ceramic artist and writer Edmund de Waal, for example - and writers such as Iain Sinclair, Peter Ackroyd, and generations of students both in and outside Cambridge, students who would go on to become fine poet-scholars - D.S. Marriott, for example - but let me foreground one aspect: one learns from Prynne that artistic forms are always historical, and as forms they engage with the world (Prynne, for example, has never had any time for the semiotic concept of the arbitrariness of the sign and speaks always of reference, that is relatedness to a world, as an inescapable problem) but finally such forms are only significant in the legibility they permit to contemporary configurations. What I mean by that is that for Prynne's students artistic forms are precisely forms of knowing and being bearing their own epistemology and ontology and so can never be understood as merely instances of material conditions. The interaction is everything.

I would eventually attend the Courtauld Institute of Art in London for my PhD on Surrealist thought and psycho-analysis and philosophy. The Courtauld is as ideal an environment for the study of art and its histories as one could imagine possessed as it is of a very fine museum, situated in central London within walking distance of all the great museums and the finest galleries of contemporary art. It is also visited by contemporary artists and curators of note. Again, I was immensely fortunate since one of my examiners was the late Malcolm Bowie,

then Marshal Foch Professor of French at All Souls, Oxford, and the leading scholar of his generation in contemporary French thought and theory. Malcolm was an aesthete of a sober kind - nothing flamboyant - with a deep love of opera, Haydn, and modern European and French literature and theory, and like Prynne, but in a different way, always emphasized that contemporary forms of aesthetic experience required a living historical present to have any sense as well as viability - though today one might speak of sustainability. What one means here is that certain thinkers as well as artists - say my old friends Edmund de Waal and the sculptor Rachel Whiteread - were acutely aware that there was never in the modern age anything inevitable about the continuation of art, and so the contemporary developments of art and its discourses had to be taken as so many evidences to be examined. (I am, for example, always struck into puzzlement, when there is talk about "creativity" as though this is something obvious and straightforward and a good.)

I mention Edmund and Rachel, both artists of international stature, not only because we were friends in England, but as a way of saying that the artist's studio - and the artist for me is a singer, a dancer, a choreographer, a ceramicist, a composer, as well as one who lives a certain way as can be seen from the great studio of André Breton - the studio of the contemporary artist, that is, has long been part of my reflexes.

To answer your question more directly, though, it would be true to say that when I taught at Northwestern University my critical issues, problems, and preoccupations were in part historically conceived - you might say that through the study of Surréalisme with post-Surréaliste thought and French and German Critical Theory I was concerned with the avant-garde as a philosophical phenomenon, and whilst I knew a number of important artists as friends (the abstract painter Judy Ledgerwood, for example, with whom I co-taught my last class at Northwestern, "Can we still talk about beauty?") I was not in any significant way involved in the art scene of Chicago, though I knew the museums inside out, and still to this day visit the Art Institute of Chicago frequently. Once I arrived in Detroit, however, via Brooklyn, I immediately threw myself into the art scene beginning with MOCAD and the many artists whom I met through MOCAD: Scott Hocking, Michael E. Smith, Tyree Guyton, John Corbin (with whom I participated in the Rei Kawakubo exhibition, Re-Fusing Fashion, at MOCAD in 2009), Gina Reichert and Mitch Cope, the ceramicist and gallerist Paul Kotula whom I met through the novelist and art critic Lynn Crawford, and later the abstract painter and ceramic artist Addie Langford whom I would marry - and incidentally the first person that Marsha Miro employed at MOCAD! It was impossible not to see that there was something new and compelling emerging in the various art scenes of Detroit: new practices such as Social Practice, post-Studio Art, as well as hybrid forms between studio and post-studio (Susan Campbell's work is here symptomatic), including dance and choreography (here my meeting with Biba Bell has been very important for me), and not to forget, of course, the singular role

of urban gardening / farming in Detroit; and though I was wholly ignorant of Detroit Techno, after meeting Adam Miller and Nicola Kuperus (of ADULT.) I would begin to understand the role of music in counter-culture in Detroit from, say, John Sinclair's writings on the blues up to the invention of Techno and Afro-Futurism. Adam and Nicola are also amongst the most accomplished studio artists in painting and photography in the Detroit landscape. Friends such as poets Chris Tysh, George Tysh, and Christine Monhollen, and many gallerists such as Susanne Hilberry, George N'Namdi, and Michelle Perron and the Friends of Modern and Contemporary Art at the DIA all helped situate me on the history of art in Detroit post-Cass Corridor once I realized that though new and compelling forms of art were emerging in Detroit there was not yet an appropriate critical theory to capture or articulate the critical dimension of these practices and the historical experience underlying them. So friendships with artists here in Detroit were significant in definitively turning me toward more specifically contemporary practices as the subject of my work and thinking. (If I have always been engaged as a viewer in contemporary arts, especially dance and music, it would be fair to say that when I taught art history I essentially stopped at the generation of Beuys and Debord / the Situationist International as the end of the historical avant-garde.) I can put it simply by saying, This, the contemporary art scene, was the best thing going in Detroit.

Of course, it also mattered that I was teaching in an art school, the College for Creative Studies. After one semester of teaching there I felt that the type of traditional art history and poetics which I had been accustomed to teaching to majors and doctoral students in Art History and Literature / Critical Theory somehow were not quite what was needed and I began to sketch out a new pedagogical style. This is where the contemporary became once more important: in order to work out an effective way of teaching that did not simply repeat tedious academicisms I slowly realized that the genius of place was the thing, in other words, I realized that Detroit itself and its contemporary artist-practitioners was one of the ways not only to engage students but to establish an organic relationship with contemporary art at the international level. In other words, my teaching style changed because of my students and the fact that I came to know a generation of Detroit artists whose work has an international dimension and was part of a wider discourse. This work made a deep affective impact on me and it became a model going forward. From there, my work and teaching moved in the direction of Critical Studies which has become the accepted organizing principle at the great art schools of the West for addressing the meaning of the contemporary in late modern culture and art.

Are there any specific matters in critical theory your work is mainly concerned with?

One of the main claims of classical Critical Theory – that is, the post-philosophical practices developed by the Frankfurt School – a claim inherited from what in German is called Early Romanticism (the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, for example), is that art is inherently philosophical. Much of my work is informed by this tradition of thinking from classical Critical Theory to Stanley Cavell and Charles Altieri in America and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy in France. I do not think that one can talk about the experience of art without the phenomenon of transference, and here I have been long preoccupied with the work of psycho-analysts such as J.-B. Pontalis, Jean Laplanche, Wladimir Granoff and later Pierre Fédida – the generation of analysts, in other words, who broke with Jacques Lacan in the 1960's. As it happens, they have also, especially Pontalis, written superbly on Surréalisme. To be more direct about my current concerns, my work in Critical Theory is concerned with questions about separation, the enigma power (on my reading of late Foucault), violence, mimetic theory, Biopolitics, and questions of care, and more and more with questions of the transmission or break in transmission of knowledge. There is no doubt in my mind that my

concern with questions of transmission – or break in transmission – has been definitively shaped by teaching in an art school, where, more than in other areas of the humanities, the status of what it is to teach and learn is much more fragile and always on show. It is one thing to go to college to learn the history of English literature, say; it is quite another to attend college with the idea that one will become an artist. It is a curious yet powerful thing to do – and more and more artist-thinkers are examining this idea. Of course, artists like Beuys made this a central concern and right now there are exhibitions in Paris (at the Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts) wholly devoted to the (im)-possibility of transmission in art / school pedagogy, and Creative Time, New York, in the context of the Venice Biennale, is also doing a conference on the theme of transmission and learning. I think the way in which the question of transmission is currently present in Critical Studies in art schools of the highest level is a symptom that our culture – our world – is undergoing a re-configuration of power and so the inherited concepts from a pedagogy worked out in past decades simply can no longer address the profound changes we are undergoing globally. (I find this a concern equally and powerfully shared by conservatives as well as progressives.)

I am well into my current book manuscript *Care of the City* which seeks to examine contemporary art practices (internationally and in Detroit) through a consideration of care, practice, and participation. Methodologically, I argue that Social Practice cannot make sense apart from a Biopolitics, that is, a technology for the control over life (not death) and the pressures on the very phenomenon of life (Bios) itself as human beings, having exploited to near-exhaustion the resources of the earth, themselves become resources (here one need only think of the attempt to copyright genetic material) to be exploited within an economy where technology has achieved agency; in this light, I comprehend both practice and care as evidence of a profound need to re-configure “community” and “participation” under pressure from newly birthed biopolitical configurations that have nothing to do with capitalism as traditionally understood – which is, of course, simply another way of posing the problem of breakdown / transmission.

Who are some of your favorite artists working today?

Amongst the contemporary artists most important to me are the film-maker Tacita Dean, the dancer-choreographer Anne-Teresa de Keersmaecker whose work I have followed since the 1990s across countries and continents; then Alfredo Jaar, one of the most powerful artist-thinkers at the intersection of Social Practice and cultural critique; Theaster Gates, whom I admire more and more, I think may well be the Beuys of contemporary art / Social Practice; Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses has taken on a certain exemplary status in my thinking; in painting McArthur Binion has become very important to me; in Detroit I have a profound admiration for the work of Michael E. Smith, Scott Hocking, Kevin Beasley (no longer in Detroit, to be sure), and the choreographer Biba Bell; living with the painting of Addie Langford has enabled me to understand the emergence of meditative forms in a manner I could not have imagined; the former Cass Corridor now New York painter Ellen Phelan I think may be one of the finest painters to have emerged from Detroit. The French artist Sophie Calle is someone whose work I find compelling, combining as it does a new kind of research and conversation, a kind of radicalization of the avant-garde conception of the everyday. The Belgian film-maker and installation artist Chantal Akerman, whose work I have taught regularly at CCS, is a limit for me, and I mean not only her monumental *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) but her oeuvre. A few years ago I returned to the films of Derek Jarman for the first time since I was a student and found myself transformed. Isaac Julien, part of Jarman's community of lovers and friends, has produced a body of work on blackness and queerness which I continue to value. More recently, I confess only in the past two years, I have begun to appreciate the British film-maker John Akomfrah whose extraordinary film, *Nine Muses* (2011), a meditation on the movement of immigrants to

England structured by Homer's Odyssey, I shall be teaching along with Wilson Harris' novel based on the figure of Odysseus, *The Mask of the Beggar* (2003). One of the most memorable aesthetic experiences of my life was listening to New Music Detroit perform Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* at MOCAD in the Summer of 2007. I was present at the filming of Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler's film-opera *KHU* in Detroit in 2010 and came away convinced of Barney's powers and his capacities for the invention and re-invention of symbolism.

“Our main aim is the creation of a distinctive critical language for talking about the art emerging in Detroit.”

Can you detail the origins and life of *Detroit Research*?

After getting to know the range of art practices in Detroit, including the work of some very talented students at CCS such as Kevin Beasley, Tony Hope, Marissa Jezak, and Andrew Mehall and others – all art students studying for a Minor in Critical Theory with me – I started to teach two classes, *Care of the City: Detroit*, an introduction to Social Practice, and *Detroit, I do mind dying*, a cultural history of Detroit through African-American lenses beginning with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry Murals* placed in dialogue with the Rilke of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. (This is not as strange as it might sound as the class was also an introduction to microhistory.)

The more I taught and lectured about the contemporary scene in Detroit the more it seemed odd, a gaping hole, indeed, that there was no journal or magazine of record documenting the contemporary art scene in Detroit. That's when I sat down over dinner more than two years ago, with a group of friends and former students now become young writers and artists, to formulate what a journal devoted to the emergence and celebration of new contemporary practices in art making in Detroit would look like, as well as what we would cover. Addie Langford, Biba Bell, Kevin Beasley (via telephone from New York), Marissa Jezak, and Jessica Newberry participated in the conversations which led to the journal *Detroit Research* (Spring / Fall 2014). It took us some time to arrive at a structure that would articulate with what was happening on the ground – Social Practice, public engagement, experimental geography, as well as performance, post-studio art, ceramics, choreography, and critical theory – but once we did arrive at this structure we knew there would be flexibility. We also decided that we wanted the journal to have both a historical dimension – to commemorate key places, events, spaces, journals, etc. – and to be a forum for artist research. Something which also struck us is that Detroit has stunning private art collections many of which have long been open to artists but about which, in the end, very few people seem to have any knowledge, so we decided that in each issue we would also present an important art collection. In other words, the journal would try to present the economy of the Detroit art scene but to do so, crucially, in a national framework of the language of international art. With significant assistance from the Knight Foundation, and subsequently from CCS and a few friends, we were able to get to print and design a website. The journal was launched as a website on Feb 5, 2015 and formally launched as a book at a standing-room only MOCAD on March 12. We hope the journal will appear twice yearly in Spring and Fall. We have a fascinating set of future guest editors lined up.

But you ask about the life of the journal. In some respects the life of the journal will be shaped by its reception – who uses it, who finds it useful, etc. In another sense, we can keep the journal open – a key concept with me – and this we hope to achieve by having a guest editor for each issue. The upcoming volume 2, for example, will be guest edited by Biba Bell and will deal with dance / choreography in the widest sense. I think that many people will be surprised at the way in which Biba's take on social choreography gives a whole new way of looking at Detroit. The featured artist in this upcoming issue will be the ceramicist Marie Hermann – who, by the way, is a former studio manager of Edmund de Waal, though we only got to know her in Detroit! Her work is stunning and has contributed greatly to the local scene – but here is the thing, Detroit has some of the most important and distinctive collections of ceramics in the country – in volume 1 Addie Langford interviewed and featured the fine collection of ceramic sculpture of Tim and Marilyn Mast – as well as a distinguished tradition of ceramic art, and yet its contemporaneity is ignored in Detroit's principal art institutions, though curators as distinguished as Glenn Adamson from the Museum of Arts and Design in New York are fully aware of ceramic art in Detroit's tradition. An exhibition of ceramics as contemporary art is long, long overdue in one of our major museums!

Our main aim is the creation of a distinctive critical language for talking about the art emerging in Detroit. To succeed, that is, to reach an audience worthy of the attention, art must be exhibited, collected, and written about. It is the last that has been missing from Detroit, though there is every sign that there is a Spring in art writing in Detroit – Essay'd and Infinite Mile being fine examples, along with *Grand Circus* itself offering a distinct generational perspective. We also want to make the art of Detroit known outside Detroit. To this extent we were gratified to learn that as a result of volume 1 a collector and dealer in Paris became not only interested in Scott Hocking's work – he was the featured artist in volume 1 – but that dealer is interested in coming to Detroit to get to know the galleries and art scene; in addition, Glenn Adamson, the leading curator-scholar of his generation for crafts, and an admirer of the work of Marie Hermann, recently spoke of how the journal could help him think through the hermeneutics of craft work in Detroit. This is not a bad start, I think. ♦