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DETROIT, WINDSOR, AND THE ART OF MAPPING URBAN SPACE

Detroit and Windsor are adjoining cities situated on either side of the Detroit River, a geographic feature that lends itself to the longest international border in the world, stretching across the continent between Canada and the USA. Today Detroit is a fabled city whose spectacular decline has become mesmerizing to a global audience, while right across the Detroit River the mid-size Canadian city of Windsor struggles in a more prosaic way to define its post-industrial, post-Fordist identity. In both places contemporary artists have been confronting urban degeneration through cartographic re-imaginings; this essay looks more specifically at Mike Kelley's *Mobile Homestead*, 2010, in Detroit, Kiki Athanassiasdis's *A Citizen's Abandoned-lot Design Consultancy*, 2014, in Windsor, as well as Lee Rodney's collaborative and interdisciplinary *Border Bookmobile*, 2009, which navigates a territory encompassing both cities, and both sides of the border. And if elaborate plans for "urban regeneration" are being plotted in corporate or government offices, these art projects insistently work with the urban environment as it exists in its present state.

The artist Mike Kelley (1954-2012) had achieved international fame when he returned to his hometown of Detroit to make *Mobile Homestead*, 2010 (Fig. 1). In fact, Kelley was raised in a suburb of Detroit called Westland, and *Mobile Homestead* is a replica of the ranch-style house his family lived in. This full-scale replica would eventually be deposited on an empty lot and become an art centre, but before that it was loaded onto a flatbed truck and driven through the streets of the city, beginning at the site where the original family home still stands. The road-trip undertaken by this newly-mobile family home was crucial to the artwork's impact; the artist himself has remarked that the journey enacts a reversal of that phenomenon known as "white flight" – the decamping of white people to suburban enclaves, and the abandonment of U.S.A. city centers to African-American and/or racially-mixed populations.



Figure 1 – Mike Kelley. *Mobile Homestead*, 2010.

Kelley's mobile architecture performs cartographically, initially by linking suburb to city center: the horizontally-oriented, one-story, white-painted structure with adjoining garage that was at home in the suburbs will become a stranger in town. Travelling through the city, this typical post-war house clashes, architecturally speaking, with Detroit's skyscrapers, apartment buildings, factories, and older housing stock. Also, Kelley's itinerary deliberately thrust the house in front of key automobile industry locales, including the historical themeparks started by Henry Ford himself to inscribe his automobile industry in a heroic lineage of American inventors and political Figures. And so, when one material fragment of the city is (symbolically) extracted from its assigned location and serially re-positioned with each street-by-street phase of the ensuing journey, the spatial and semiotic organization of the city is shifted.

Mobile Homestead's ultimate destination was mid-town Detroit just off Woodward Avenue, the city's main thoroughfare. The house now resides on one of the city's many vacant lots, this one

adjoining the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD, opened in 2006 in a converted car dealership). This suburban house awkwardly occupies its new site; it does not blend in; it remains out of place. But this sustained sense of dislocation is what gives *Mobile Homestead* its uncanny power. Also, this unusual abode for contemporary art implicitly challenges the type of aspirational, urban-regeneration plans that calls for expensive new art museums, as epitomized by Frank Gehry's silvery Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Instead of an eye-popping new building, or precious heritage architecture, both the erstwhile car dealership that is MOCAD and the single-family home that is *Mobile Homestead* were low-prestige elements of the urban environment (as art institutions they do inevitably accrue cultural capital).

Kelley and his sponsors did not have to look far to find a suitable vacant lot. If one consults a regular street map of Detroit, the same old street-names remain and the conventional urban grid appears to be intact. But the aerial perspectives and street-views that are now easily obtainable on the internet show the actual results of Detroit's entropic history: abandoned and collapsed buildings which are eventually demolished, resulting in open spaces everywhere. The city is being effaced. And so, whatever social, activist, communitarian and/or artistic projects are undertaken in Detroit, all occur under the aegis of an unstable cartography.

Images of Detroit's ruination have been eagerly consumed by a global audience, but it is worth noting that the much-criticized genre of "ruin porn" is no longer possible once the dramatically collapsing buildings have been cleared away, leaving less-than-photogenic emptied-out parcels of land. Artists can, however, engage with these ruins or vacancies in more productive ways. As Michael Darroch notes, "in contrast to the image of Detroit as a stagnant stage for 'ruin exploration', urban interventions by artists with both local and international roots... might reconstruct disconnected stories and individual lived experiences whose traces are discernible only in fragments" (Darroch, 2015).

Mike Kelley's *Mobile Homestead* is exemplary in this respect. While it bespeaks an individual family history, in its new incarnation the erstwhile suburban home invites the local population to step inside; it is now meant to "represent the cultural interests of the community that exists in proximity to it" in the words of the artist (Kelley, 2011). Thus the uprooted, travelling, out-of-place "homestead" finds a place in the fragmented cityscape, reasserting the importance of public space and collective urban life. There is nonetheless an aspect of the re-born house that evokes the mysteries of private life: Kelley announced that a "labyrinthian" underground zone would be built underneath the house in its new location, not to be open to the public because "the lower levels are designed for private rites of an aesthetic nature" (Kelley, 2011). This strategy can also be thought of in relation to Edward Casey's comments about the representation of place; he writes: "the surveyor of place, the true topographer, concentrates on the depth of what he sees spread out below: he moves his body – not his instruments, much less his mind – down into the valley of the shadow of places" (Casey, 2002). For Casey, and by extension for the dislocated *Mobile Homestead*, the uniqueness and profundity of "place" stands in opposition to the utilitarian, measurable and commodified "space" of the mapped city.

Directly across the river in Windsor (less than a kilometer away at its narrowest point), the transformation of Detroit is no mere spectacle to be consumed virtually or from a distance. Indeed the economy of Windsor had been just as dependant on the automotive industry, and it too has faced urban blight. In 2014 the Art Gallery of Windsor put together an exhibition entitled *Possible Futures: What is to Be Done?* subtitled the Windsor-Essex Triennial of Contemporary Art (Windsor-Essex refers to a large area spanning Canada and the USA). The exhibition acquired a nickname, the "Rust-belt Triennial", and this persuasively evokes the rusting machines and factories that punctuate this extended landscape.

I want to isolate one project from this exhibition, entitled *A Citizen's Abandoned-lot Design Consultancy*. Here too (as with

Kelley's project in Detroit) we find an artist posing questions about what to do with the city's vacant spaces. Having isolated specific empty lots in the city center, artist Kiki Athanassiadis asked for the involvement of Windsor residents in a series of workshops. Participants were asked to "take a walk around the site", while noting details such as season, time of day, noise, views, air quality, special features, etc. on official-looking "empty lot data collection forms" (Fig. 2). Another such form proposed to "sketch something you find interesting at the site", and with this very wording confirmed that apparently abandoned and emptied-out sites continue to have interest and value. Here it is worth recalling Robert Smithson's insights about emptied-out urban space, voiced in 1967 when the conceptual land artist was living in Manhattan and planned an outing to the New Jersey town he had grown up in. Smithson observed Passaic's constellation of vacant lots, run-down factories and broken streets, and bestowed on them the term "monumental vacancies" (Smithson, 1967). Smithson saw a powerful entropic energy in these urban vacancies – rendered "monumental" because they shadowed the materially dense and symbolically rich metropolis. It must be noted that after a day spent in this location taking photographs and making notes, Smithson got back on the bus and returned to the big city.

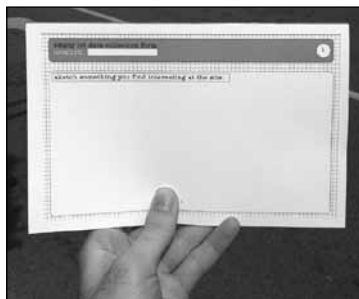


Figure 2 – Kiki Athanassiadis. *A Citizen's Abandoned-lot Design Consultancy*, 2014. Detail

What distinguishes 21st-century projects such as those by Kelley and Athanassiadis is that they recognize the aesthetic allure of urban ruination, but also participate in debates about how to reinvent those cities. Athanassiadis's identification of "citizens" is important here. While conventionally used in relation to nation-states, the concept of "urban citizenship" has taken in hold in recent years, pointing to cities as framing devices for negotiations over identity, immigration, democracy, public space, and other political issues. *A Citizen's Abandoned-lot Design Consultancy* initially seems to ask nothing more of its citizens than that they linger in a random empty lot. But the terms of this request are deceptively modest.

At the end of this process, Athanassiadis's museum exhibition featured arrows on a map pointing to the locations in question, while wall-text posed the multiple-choice question, "What do empty lots allow for?" with the final answer being "imaginative play". Writing, drawings and photomontages completed by the participants proposed a ceremonial pathway, a public treehouse, a miniature garden, and other idiosyncratic creative responses. More generally it could be said that this artwork encouraged an embodied, sensorial attentiveness to the everyday urban environment. Moreover, these minor gestures represent a symbolic taking-possession of the city's apparently empty spaces. When the artist imitated a bureaucratic/ corporate-looking system she created a template for civic engagement, for urban citizenship. Faced with empty spaces on a map, there is public intervention, and even if this occurs at a micro-urban level, it does so in the context of a master-narrative of urban devastation that permeates the entire Windsor-Detroit area.

Lee Rodney's *Border Bookmobile* is a vehicle that operates on both sides of the Windsor-Detroit border, parking itself on street corners or empty lots from time to time, making available its bibliographic contents – books, magazines, pamphlets, old maps, and other printed matter pertaining to this particular region as well as to other border zones around the world. In fact the bookmobile is meant to be a site of information-gathering as

well as dissemination: the public drawn to this vehicle are invited to contribute their own memories and stories about these two cities whose identities have often been entwined, and about the border itself. While the *Bookmobile* has been included in art exhibitions, Rodney (a professor of visual culture at the University of Windsor) has described it as “a form of experimental research, pedagogy, and urban exchange” (Rodney, 2015).

Zigzagging back and forth, along and across the border, the *Bookmobile* could in principle pull over and open its doors at any given location, any crossroad, whether well-travelled or off the beaten track -- each of these stops becoming data inscribed on a map. Except that in a post 9/11 world this border like many others is the site of surveillance, geo-political power-plays and paranoia. And so the *Bookmobile* retains the memory of a time when the border was more permeable (until 2009 Canadians and Americans didn't need passports to cross), a time when the contiguous urban spaces of Windsor and Detroit could interpenetrate in countless ways.

Rodney and her collaborators made use of an actual vehicle – appropriately, the kind of Ford van that once rolled off assembly lines in the region. Photographic documentation shows this vehicle parked in front of abandoned and graffitied houses in Detroit (Fig. 3). But the project also included found and manipulated vintage photographs, introduced to create a fictional genealogy for the *Bookmobile*. One of these real-looking images shows children frequenting an ersatz “Detroit-Windsor *Bookmobile*”, probably in the 1950s. Another captivating black-and-white photograph shows a group of women in a row-boat, approaching the shore where other women stand next to a mobile library (Fig. 4). This is not a genuine archival trace of people casually crossing the Detroit River for the sake of books, but it is presented here as an evocative visual approximation of the oral histories Rodney gathered.



Figure 3 – Lee Rodney. *Border Bookmobile*, c. 2010 (in Detroit)



Figure 4 – Lee Rodney. *Border Bookmobile*, c. 2010

I want to suggest that this *Bookmobile* proposes a utopian cartography. The nomadic library is on the move and charting a territory through its unpredictable movements, while both accumulating and disseminating data. Because the border is a formidable political boundary, the *Bookmobile's* zigzagging ambition is a political counterforce. At the same time, the border is also presented as a zone within which information and ideas can circulate, and in this respect the nomadic library becomes a utopian machine. It is not only locations that are being mapped, but an unstoppable flow of ideas, words, memories and dreams.

The artists under consideration here might or might not incorporate conventional-looking maps into their projects, but I have been arguing that they nonetheless perform cartographically in multiple ways. If the city is thus reimaged, this is not done by mimicking large-scale urban regeneration plans; instead, there is a commitment to tracking everyday urban knowledge, something closer to Henri Lefebvre's idea of a "programme for repossessing 'moments', 'residues', art having ceased to be an end in itself... thus becoming a means of transforming the everyday". For these artists, mapping urban space has become synonymous with transforming the everyday city.

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