

## **Scott Hocking: Detroit Stories**

Edited by Andrew Satake Blauvelt  
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The first museum retrospective exhibition of artist Scott Hocking's work, *Detroit Stories*, launched at the Cranbrook Art Museum in November 2022. Hocking emerged as a prolific chronicler of Detroit during the early 2000s, having documented the city's enormous vacancies and scrapping subculture through photography and ephemera. Today, he is one of Detroit's most important multidisciplinary artists and is internationally recognized for his site-specific installations that scrutinize local histories, industrial capitalism, and the process of entropy. The catalogue accompanying his retrospective, *Scott Hocking: Detroit Stories*, combines Hocking's new and previously published writing, academic essays by Andrew Satake Blauvelt and Michael Stone-Richards, artist interviews, photographs, historical illustrations, and didactic text. The book's table of

contents appears on page thirty-nine, its chapters do not include corresponding numbers, there is no index, and Hocking's artistic practice is not presented chronologically, all of which imply that the overarching structure is intentionally experimental. As such, *Detroit Stories* stands as one of the rare catalogues that is seriously inventive and idiosyncratic, much like the artist himself.

*Detroit Stories* opens, somewhat unexpectedly, with "Description of the River of Detroit" by Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, one of France's earliest explorers to the region during the early colonial period. "It is only the opponents of the truth who are enemies of this settlement," he says, "so essential to the increase of glory of the King, to the spread of religion, and to the destruction of the throne of Baal" (2). His words provide an Edenic picture of "d'etroit" ("détroit" is

French for “strait”) as he witnessed it in 1701, temperate and complete with flora and fauna, all standing in marked contrast to the Detroit of today. This description is followed by a second prologue written by Hocking himself titled “A Nice Spot along the Water” (2009), which not only elucidates the long-standing Indigenous presence in Detroit but also the city’s collective hope for future renaissance. Hocking’s moving homage to his home produces fertile ground to narrate the multifaceted history of the region and its decades of deindustrialization, but it also provides a strong contrast to the idyllic vistas described by de la Mothe.

The autobiographical “Detroit Nights” (2018) is arguably Hocking’s most compelling and gritty script in the catalogue. Here, he maps his early life growing up in a working-class Detroit neighborhood, throwing rocks with a slingshot, playing with his friends in a local cemetery, and listening to freight trains pass in the night. The latter stuck with him, as it does with the reader: “Driving that train, going wherever, cutting through cities, towns, prairies, states. I imagined it as freedom. Traveling. Exploring. Escaping” (22). It’s a telling anecdote because it binds Hocking’s artistic practice to a category of nomadism since,

like the train, he too meanders through space and time, loading and placing various materials in one location only to do so again somewhere else indefinitely.

The text also outlines his maneuvers through the forsaken Studebaker and Fisher Body Plant 21 factories during the late 1990s, well before urban exploration was decreed a fashionable social activity. What resonates most is the artist’s meditative practice of walking the streets and rail lines at night, usually on his way home from scavenging for materials, taking long-exposure photographs, or fabricating clandestine installations. “Viewing the city on foot, from the railroad tracks, provided a unique, solitary perspective and directly connected me to the lingering industrial past,” he says. “Walking in general allowed me to observe minute details of the city, the things you miss while driving” (25). The irony of walking the Motor City is palpable, yet these lines offer evidence of his singular approach to art making—one that entangles anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, sociology, and more—making his practice refreshingly difficult to discursively categorize and contain. At its most elemental level, Hocking’s unrestrained independence and ease of movement reflect

a boundless freedom that few major cities in the United States but Detroit could allow or facilitate.

There are numerous photographs and installation images of Hocking's body of work featured in *Detroit Stories*, and these are often supported by paragraph-length didactic texts. For example, images from the series *Scrappers* (1999–2004), *Ziggurat and FB21* (2007–2009), and *The Mound Project* (2007–present) are accompanied by lengthy paragraphs of explanatory text written by the artist that illustrate the historical significance and lasting impact of each project. Regrettably, though, several of the color images, printed on matte Munken Print White paper, appear foggy, which a higher-gloss paper may have alleviated. Moreover, the didactic texts supporting the images occasionally repeat information included elsewhere. The repetition, combined with the artist interviews, critical essays, and articles, makes for a text-heavy catalogue. Nonetheless, the catalogue emphatically shifts away from being typical and moves toward something different and original. Conversely, as an academic research document, the vast amount of information available is immensely beneficial, and the book unequivocally stands as the most important publication on Hocking to date.

Andrew Satake Blauvelt's essay "When is Art?: Unearthing the Archive" is a fascinating and forthright survey of Hocking's major projects including *Found Slides* (1999–2004) and *RELICS* (2001–2016) that also examines the artist's media "of time, history, and memory" (59). Blauvelt persuasively summarizes Hocking's work in relation to the readymade, the archive, and—perhaps most poignant—archaeology. "For more than twenty years," he says, "Hocking has been busy digging—unearthing the remains of a city—and narrating stories about a place of historical traumas and triumphs, resurrections and deliverances, forsaken by so many and yet forgotten: Detroit" (55). By considering the artist's work as the study of human presence and the places and materials it leaves behind, Blauvelt lends further context to Hocking's unorthodox methods and procedures, which drift seamlessly from visual art to archaeology to creative nonfiction and back again.

The second essay in the catalogue, Michael Stone-Richards's "Retreating/Retracing Space: Scott Hocking's Diagrams of Visibility," sketches the linkages between Hocking's work, neo-Constructivism, post-Surrealism, ruin, and analogical impulses. It aims to situate

Hocking's practice within capitalism's opposing faculties to both enfranchise people and places and altogether corrupt them. Drawing connections between Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1982), T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), and the Mesopotamian flood myth (1700 BCE), Stone-Richard's affirmational text is wonderfully ambitious and dotted with memorable lines that get to the marrow of Hocking's complexity. For instance, "This is where a surrealist-inflected critical practice of ruins, spectrality and, in places of castles—*la question des chateaux*—the *question of factories*, becomes decisive in comprehending Hocking's practice, for it is only too clear that in his practice the factory becomes the figure of the intersecting forces and problems of ruination and social stratigraphy" (196). However, because it is so dense and analytical, and coupled with nearly fifty citations, the essay feels adrift in an exhibition catalogue but would be welcome in an edited collection.

Hocking's on-site interviews with Cranbrook Art Museum curator Laura Mott, titled "Trespassing into the Sublime: Site-Specific Interviews with Scott Hocking," records their gripping and frequently hilarious conversations while swashbuckling through

abandoned buildings and crumbling factories. Several of these outings revisit the locations of Hocking's previously installed works, including *Garden of the Gods* (2009–2011), and technically speaking constitute trespassing. While this fact might be controversial, it also serves to electrify the dialogue, especially when there is the very real danger of falling through the concrete floor or having the ceiling fall on your head. "All the doors are welded shut to prevent people from doing what we are doing; we have to break in through here," Hocking says. "Since the doors are welded shut, we are going to have to snake around stairwells based on what's been pried open." Mott replies, "Oh my God. . . . Scott, this is scary," to which he says, "Well, now you get a taste of what this is like" (137). In this drama, Mott enters the treacherous environments that Hocking is perhaps most comfortable in, those which he has become internationally recognized for, and the results are entirely consuming.

These candid interviews are integral to understanding the thorny processes and background finagling involved in creating major installations in government-regulated or privately owned buildings. More specifically, the account of the formation of *Bone*

*Black* (2019) is noteworthy because Hocking breaks down the bureaucratic red tape that can hinder production while outlining the logistical issues he regularly contends with. While there is some banter, Hocking's and Mott's informal yet detailed observations in regards to the project's historical references and conceptualization far exceed the more formal didactic text for the project. This begs the question whether or not it is more apt to include casual, unofficial discussions to describe an artwork over the traditional didactic message.

*Detroit Stories* is recommended for specialists and nonspecialists interested in the material and cultural history of Detroit, particularly in the areas of documentary photography, readymades, and installation art practices. This is not to say that it should be confined to a Detroit-centric readership, for it touches upon numerous subjects intersecting with commercial waste, ethnography, industrial decay, late-stage capitalism, urban renewal, and more. Though Hocking has been the subject of earlier publications, this impressive catalogue now serves as the largest and strongest repository of critical essays, artist interviews, autobiographical articles, and installation photographs on Hocking's prolific oeuvre. To this

end, it appears to bend the genres of the exhibition catalogue, edited collection, and catalogue raisonné, proposing a model for a nontraditional and stirring experimental publication for institutional galleries and museums.