

Speramus Meliora

Monday April 6th, 2009

How to make art when everything is this fucked up?

These are our first days in the city. The weather has suddenly turned nasty, it is minus God-knows-what and there is a thick layer of snow on the ground. Homicidal icicles are forming from the blocked and damaged gutters. Our house has no heating. From time to time water pours through the ceiling because the waste pipes in the upstairs apartment have been broken for ages and the landlord has not got around to having them fixed. My friend Lado has to pull his mattress out away from the wall and sleep with his head at the other end to avoid getting dripped on. He has been running a fever for 3 days now.

Our porch is piled with the remnants of previous inhabitants; a broken rocking chair and pieces of once ephemeral material now scuffed and sodden. In our yard is a magnolia tree, just budding but thwarted by the snow, surrounded by junk - bits of an old boiler, jagged shapes of carpet scrap, plastic frames of indeterminable objects, the inevitable plastic bags wrapped tightly around harsh twigs by the icy wind.

But even if the weather relented, it would not be this clutter that prevented us from sitting out there anyway. We are laying low, doors and windows closed, trying not to attract attention. Though the houses around look blind, there is a sense that they are nonetheless all eyes and ears.

Tuesday April 7th,

On the street this morning instantly recognised as 'other', more than once I'm queried about the 'artists group' they've heard is coming? This either with a disconcertingly expectant grin - anticipating if not a transformation, then at least something temporarily uplifting - or with a somehow less unsettling, sceptical squint, 'Artists huh?' that'll just be the usual bullshit.

Someone has certainly succeeded in promoting us down the line - *New York Times*, CNN. The publicity grates, I feel as though we ourselves have fallen for some spectacular façade, a mirage of expectancies and now here we are in the freezing cold, figuring out how to make art out of nothing, and stay alive in the process.

Jimini Hignett

Wednesday 8th,

I have laid aside the list of possible plans, my '46 *proposals for Detroit*', with which I left Amsterdam. An implausible collection, unconstrained by the limits of either time or finances (*Dubai-style palm-frond island and heated Lake St. Claire; Reality soap swap scheme for temporary life-style exchange between residents of Grosse Pointe and inhabitants of Highland Park; Dismantling a wooden house and re-using the wood to build an ark, making the people of Detroit the 'chosen people' (instead of an abandoned one. Etc. Plus a title for the project - DESTROIT.)*

Here now, the magnitude of it all has hit me – the hugeness of the city itself, but also, the extent of the desolation, the depravation, the wretchedness. The sheer and utter hopeless enormity of the place.

Certainly this vastness, particularly after Holland with its claustrophobic lack of space, also inflames the imagination with the sense of infinite possibilities, a playground of opportunities. But I cannot feel comfortable simply playing here, turning a blind eye and encapsulating myself in the rare air of the artist's enclave.

Thursday 9th,

The very height of authenticity, next door to our left is a crackhouse. Sallow women with caved in faces come and go, scurrying, rodent-like. Through the night there is banging and screaming – 'Open the door bitch!' –noisy cars, their souped up exhausts pounding the walls, almost drowning out the rap music. After dark I fumble my way from kitchen to bedroom, afraid to turn on lamps for fear of showing, on the borrowed sheets that are hung as makeshift curtains, the silhouette of a woman alone. Our neighbours on the other side are unobtrusive people whose language I cannot understand and in the evenings there is the sweet smell of curry.

Mostly limiting myself to the immediate area. Standing hard on the pedals. Even in the daytime we stick out like alien tourists. Like fleeing prey on our bicycles – are we afraid, or just ashamed?

Friday, 10th April,

A few lots further along the street are houses burned to charred sticks, their roofs caving in, what's left of their windows boarded with ragged plywood. Their blackened contents spew out onto the surrounding lot and the pavement in front - plastic children's games; old vinyl records in brown paper envelopes; a plywood strongbox stencilled with skulls, its lock forced and zinc innards empty; smashed crockery with roses. Here we salvage saucers and spoons.

Jimini Hignett

Saturday 11th April,

Scavenging in Highland Park, an already looted neighbourhood, rummaging with bare hands through terrifying heaps of DNA swabs, scuffed fingerprint forms and dissolving Polaroid mugshots - a city of individual lives reduced to abandoned files of mouldering paper in the stagnant courthouse. The scene has such clarity as a symbol encapsulating a late-capitalist society gone wrong, that despite the traumatic post-apocalypticism, it feels disconcertingly like a godsend.

In our leaky apartment I swab the crumbling plaster off the salvaged mugshot negatives in the bathtub and feel despondency starting to ooze in.

How to go on? How to make art from these images of such pain, such abandonment?

Sunday April 12th,

I am having serious doubts about my continued participation in this project - such pretensions. Curators, like political administrators, need to have a convincing line of spin and to cultivate connections in useful places - in this case, the other face of Detroit - the MOCAD - museum of contemporary art, Univ. of Michigan, the media, etc. With politicians one is accustomed to expecting the worst, millions promised for resurrection of dying neighbourhoods resulting in prestigious superficial surgery, a great deal of photo-opportunity and very little actual benefit to those for whom the project purports to be intended. Another high status walkway and 23 more schools closed down.

Do I want to be part of a setup where art-bytes seem to be more important than actual art? Where clearly the temporary façade is more important than any actual improvement - to be seen to be doing something more important than actually doing anything. This is a world I am usually at pains to avoid.

No longer able to feel comfortable with a work ironic or cynical, or a sharp one-liner, I remain guiltily silent about my humorous word game - Destroit.

Monday April 13th,

Nerve-wrackingly lost, seeking out the cemetery adjacent to the collapsing Packard plant (dramatic devastation, spectacularly picturesque, inhumanly daunting) it is this strip of land, a burial ground separated from the broken factory asphalt only by the inevitable chain-link fence that moves me.

Here, on this strip of rubblely soil, bare earth churned by tyre-treads, among the headstones of teenaged men, I recall the official motto of the City of Detroit. It's Latin - 'Speramus Meliora, Resurget Cineribus' and means - 'We hope for better things. We shall arise from the ashes'.

Jimini Hignett

Wednesday April 14th,

Borrowing a jigsaw, a woolly hat, and the use of a yard, I saw up pieces of foraged plywood into a 9x6 foot billboard with fret-worked words. It's time this city's motto was re-appropriated – we *can* only hope for better things and, with all these charred ruins around, imagine some phoenix arising from these ashes.

Thursday April 15th,

We affix the billboards, in lieu of the standard plywood boarding-up, over the gaping windows of two charred houses, in neighbourhoods where I imagine hope requires no small effort.

Returning to our no-longer snowbound house one last time, I wrap remnants from the abandoned police station carefully between my clothes, and find myself handling them tenderly as if the fragile essence of those depicted somehow clung to these, their precarious photographic remains. Sometime I will know how to include them in a work, but for the time being they are too raw, too painful to be simply exposed.

Bags packed, I pull away the dingy sheet-curtains, and see that someone has cleared the trash, and that the magnolia tree is blossoming.

Jimini Hignett