

Entretien avec Dora Apel à Detroit en avril 2017 – extraits de retranscription

une introduction :

Dora Apel : So, I'm an art historian. I do modern and contemporary, but I would say that most of my work, more and more, is really about contemporary visual culture so I look at, so it's very interdisciplinary.

I look at contemporary imagery wherever it's found. Media images, artwork, things on billboards, advertising, whatever.

So, I've written five books, they've always been about traumatic imagery, so contemporary artists dealing with the Holocaust, artists dealing with issues of lynching. I looked at the whole history of lynching imagery. Lynching photographs. Contemporary imagery of war and the last book is on ruins.

So using Detroit as the main example but trying to talk about ruins in a much larger way and why we're all, it's a little loud here, why we're all fascinated and seduced by ruins, why everybody comes here to take pictures of the ruins, and why there's such an increased number of ruin images in books, on the Internet, everywhere.

And so I've been in Detroit now about thirty years, and I teach at Wayne State University, just up the street, so that's me. So now we're all introduced to each other, tell me about your project...

Léviathan : ... But there is one question that appears very often in the book. Each time they cross the road of another ship, the captain ask the other captain, '*hey, did you see the white whale?*'. And it's always the first question. He's only interested in the white whale. At the beginning he met people, told him the white whale didn't exist, although people have heard about the white whale but didn't see it, after other people see the white whale, other people try to catch the white whale and after they have lost one of their small boats and some of the people of the crew are died, so ... and at the end, the last question after the three days of the whale against Moby Dick, it's somebody, they are all in the water and it's '*oh my god, where is the ship?*' ...

The white whale :

D. A. : -So everybody's read Moby Dick? OK.

I'm working with you here. I'm trying to ... I don't know, it seems like maybe Detroit is Moby Dick, is the white whale, the race question in Detroit or something like that. Well, in terms of ...

D.A. - The white whale is the American Dream ...

Antoine Barrot - It is. Probably.

D. A. - So we're chasing the American Dream, but the American Dream ultimately turns on us and destroys us ... It doesn't exist anymore, if it ever did ...

A. B. - The American Dream as a concept is dead?

D. A. - Yes. In a word. Do I think everyone believes it's dead? No.

Techno music :

D.A. - I wrote a little about techno in my book, not a lot, it was invented not just by black people but by the sons of black auto workers, right?

So that's where the kind of sense of, you know, automated mechanisation that comes through the music, there's a direct link to the Detroit factories, and I think it's not an accident that techno was invented here at a time when the city was already going into decline and people were losing their jobs. It's one of those forms of music that was, that's like the perfect music for just, you know, just spacing out and forgetting everything. It's not the kind of music where people wanted to be seen while they're listening. Like techno parties were all in the dark, which is unusual. And in the abandoned factories. Like the Packard plant. Have you gone to the Packard plant?

What is a city/this city :

D.A. - Between six miles and seven miles, on Woodward, if you go east, there's a lot of abandoned neighbourhoods, and abandoned houses. But if you go west and north a little bit, there's an enclave of very wealthy, huge houses.

You know, for me, you were saying before there's many levels for Moby Dick, and also for Detroit, and I'm interested in all those levels too, but mainly my interest is the relationship to politics.

So, for me, if I were part of the project, the, yeah, the white whale is the American Dream and the captain who destroys it is the State and the corporations.

You know, because they're the agents of decline and destruction and so it seems to me that one way or another you have to work that in there.

L - Yes.

D.A. - And I suppose the crew becomes the Detroit population, most of whom are considered dispensable, or they don't care what happens to those people, and one of the effects of gentrification is increased indifference to the rest of the population. That whole area that's being rebuilt, mid town, downtown, that's basically owned by two billionaires.

... I think there's a larger question about cities. What is a city any more? There are urban theorists who are positing that cities don't exist any more, as we once thought of them and haven't for decades. That globalisation has caused a kind of, caused a barrier between city and suburb, suburb and country, disappear, because there are so many ways that everything is connected.

That if we wanna think about how to fix cities, we have to think in much larger terms.

So it's not even a question of how to fix Detroit by itself, it can't be fixed by itself, you can't even think about it without thinking about much larger regions and issues. So ...

L : - Did you say that, what you are saying, there could be a kind of relationship with the urban

farms that are coming in the very centre of Detroit, which is very unusual? With this idea of if you have to think to fix Detroit, it has to be done in relationship with the suburbs, with the country ...

D.A. - Yes, right. And it has to really, you would need regional reorganisation to get anywhere. Really you need a different economic system and ever since Trump has been elected, it's just terrible.

C.L. - You just said, try to fix Detroit. Don't you think that Detroit isn't the kind of city that doesn't need to be fixed but maybe that it can fix itself ? I think I felt that when we talked before that there is no model for this city, that this city has its own model, which is always renewing itself. I know it's kind of ...

D.A. - Yeah, yeah. No, I agree with you. The city was built when the car factories were built and that motor for the city doesn't exist. There is no industry here so the city has to be, the idea of a city has to be reinvented. And certainly for Detroit and there are a lot of people here trying to do that. I don't think that small groups of people can ultimately do that but you certainly have people trying.

Gregory Wittkopp : - You should experience the suburbs in some way as well. I mean, this relationship between the city and the suburbs, between black and white, between poor and rich... Detroit is in Wayne County, the next county north is Open County. Open County is one of the wealthiest counties in the United States, you know, and just that contrast in crossing an eight-mile road.

I think even with your ideas of the romanticism, in many respects I think many people are going through, they're trying to obtain this magic moment where Detroit was this centralised city, which actually really never existed.

You've already seen that there's the downtown, but when they went to build the new art museum, they built it five miles away from the downtown, when in another twenty years, they went to build the headquarters of General Motors and the Fisher Building, they built it another five, another two, three miles north, and there's this whole history of us actually never being a centralised city.

I think it has a lot to do with this radial city plan that was kind of always, you know, starts in Detroit, but these spokes kind of go out to infinity, out in all these directions.

And so I think it would be interesting to follow a couple of these spokes. You know, take Woodward Avenue and just drive all the way to Pontiac. And over the course of thirty miles you just slice through everything. Or take Michigan Avenue to the Dearborne and the factories, to the Henry Ford plant, you know, and experience that. You know, you should take Jefferson Avenue all the way east to Lake St Clair and see where the wealth was located at the turn of the last century.

You begin to see then a larger picture. You should also, if you haven't already, you should

experience Lafayette Park, the Mies van der Rohe complex, and in part because there's so many layers to that.

One hundred years ago it was an area called Black Bottom. Black was not a racial designation but referred to the soil, but it became the centre of the African-American community. It was kind of Detroit's Harlem. It's where jazz and everything had its birth ...

D.A. - It was also Paradise Valley ...

G.W. - Yes, yes. Both names. And then it became the victim of so many cities. You know, the racial politics of urban renewal. It is targeted because it is a black community, it's levelled, with the idea that this new development is going to rise there.

But they didn't actually have the plans in place yet so it sits vacant for six, seven, eight years until they finally get a Chicago developer interested in it, you know, and then creates this Mies van der Rohe complex there, which in its own way then becomes the only place in Detroit that for several decades was an integrated community.

I mean, it was meant to be a middle-income environment but from the beginning there was a black middle class and white middle class. But we're moving into this new complex that was built on the ruins of a black community and you follow the cycles of this.

If you ignore the politics of what created it originally, it exists from about 1960 really until five years ago, as kind of this very interesting, integrated model community within Detroit, but right now it's going through a new transformation where just wealthy whites are now moving into this.

Five years ago you could buy a Mies van der Rohe for 100,000\$. You know, where in the world could you live in that type of architecture ? And now those same places just five years later are selling for a half a million dollars. Of course its attracting board members that are buying places there because they're still making a statement that they want to be part of what's going on in Detroit.

But, of course, they in their own way become part of the problem as well because it's displacing now. It's gentrification that's happening within this area, which of course has then these layers of gentrification and urban renewal on top of it. So, that's something you need to experience as well. So now there's this block that is very popular, you know, but it in my mind represents a lot of what Detroit has gone through, you know, representing this interest at least of a young white energetic population that sees Detroit as the new Western frontier. A place that you can, for pennies, buy an old building, turn it into a restaurant, turn it into a distillery, turn it into a cocktail shop and actually be kind of successful.

D.A. - Well, you know, you have major corporate interests who are also seeing it as a frontier for entrepreneurial speculation. You got Chinese investors who've come to Detroit who are looking to buy up who know what? Big bunches of land and houses. They don't wanna live here, they don't

wanna start businesses, for them it's just investment so that's the problem with it, it turns into speculation, speculative investment.

A.B. - When you take this speculation, to me I see it as another way to a future catastrophe and in the end the population will always be ...

D.A. -The loser ...

G.W. -You know, the schools are still terrible, the neighbourhoods are still terrible. Unless you're in the downtown area, everything around it ...

D.A. - It's what Dan Gilbert did too. He bought up a lot of properties and didn't do anything with them for quite a while until he started attracting people to rent space from him. He owns like 90 properties.

G.W. - Right, and he's already enormously wealthy but ...

D.A. - And what does it mean for one man to own a whole city !

G.W. -You know it's like the, it's still, I cannot fathom the fact that the bridge between the United States and Canada is owned privately. I mean, this isn't a government entity. This is a private investor. ... We have a very weird system...

Romanticism :

So, I don't know if you've talked about this, but I deal with the theme of romanticism in my book. Well, so, my claim is that the proliferation of all this ruin imagery is a form of romanticism but it's not like 18th century, 19th century romanticism.

It's what I call the de-industrial sublime, and it's a way of containing and controlling our own anxiety about decline, but distancing ourselves from it through representation, which aestheticizes and allows you to master it in a safe way through distance, through time.

But of course the de-industrial sublime has a relationship to the romantic sublime, but the romantic sublime was about, you know, in many ways, it was about preparing the West and in particular the British, to become the new masters of the world. So through the Grand Tour they would go and tour the decline of other countries, allowing themselves to feel superior.

That's not possible with the de-industrial sublime because now it's your own backyard and it's your own country, and so you can't feel superior to it, so it creates an anxiety that really only allows a limited mastery through the aesthetic representation.

There are people who complain that ruin imagery, some ruin imagery aestheticizes, and other ruin imagery doesn't, but that's a false argument because representation by its nature aestheticizes, it can't do otherwise.

And its purpose is to aestheticize on one level, allowing you to take pleasure in the image and that's how it controls the anxiety. So, the romantic sublime was also about mastery of what was terrifying.

People tend to think that it was nature that was sublime, but it wasn't nature, it was the mental mastery ...

So one thing you should be aware of, and you probably are, is that there's a kind of resentment in Detroit, of outsiders coming in to look at the ruin. And you can understand why.

You know, it's an ongoing debate. The whole ruin porn debate is people resenting people that come here and take photos. You know, I argue against that ... I think that the ruin porn debate is not a useful debate. I think because it's not a question of who has the right to take photos or to come and look. It's a question of why is everyone interested. What does it all mean?

L. - We're interested in the fact that people say the American Dream is dead because when we come from outside, from France, we still have this reflex that show this American Dream, we see this American Dream.

D.A. - Yes, and so do Americans but they're becoming increasingly disillusioned. I mean the people who voted for Trump, the poor white working class, they're the ones that are most strongly trying to hang onto it, because they're the ones for whom it has failed, and they want to believe in this fantasy that Trump can somehow ... they're worked hard all their lives and the belief is you work hard all your life, you'll be rewarded, and it's just not true any more. And that's why they keep voting against their own interests, because they wanna believe their own fantasy. So, you know, there's definitely a certain amount of racism involved because they believe that other people have used the resources that they should have gotten, but it's all part of the same failure. That there isn't enough for everyone, that they wanna be first. If there was enough for everybody you wouldn't have that kind of racism.

A. B. - You talked about fantasy and when we saw your talk you talked about ruins and the power of ruins on the mind of people and I was wondering if it was the same scheme ... was it the same scheme as kids tales like Grimm, you know like scaring young children to let them learn how to react when they ...

D.A. - See, I think kids who grow up in a depressed environment, for them it's normal, so they're not scared necessarily, or they know where the dangers are but it's still normal, but what it does is, it depresses human potential. So if you grow up in a relatively privileged environment it means you have access to healthcare or education, or maybe you travel with your family, you know, so these kids have none of that and you learn that life isn't that valuable, and if you really want to make a lot of money then what you really have to do is deal drugs. That's the problem with growing up in these environments. You know, kids see death and abuse and suicide and alcoholism, you know, all of that is normal. You know, it exists everywhere but there's no remedy for it. I guess what you're growing up with is a lack of hope, so what does that do to personal aspiration and desire to

be creative, you kind of lose that, so it's ...

A.B. -The hope is written everywhere in the city, on the walls, it's everywhere.

Why here ?

L. - And you're from Detroit? Or ...

D.A. - Not originally, is that what you're asking? No, I grew up in New Jersey on the east coast and went to school in New York before I moved here. I lived in New York City for a few years ...

L. - And you came here because of teaching, or ... ?

D.A. - No. I actually came here to be a political activist and then I worked, I did various things and then I went back to school and got my PhD and became a teacher.

L. - You came here as a political activist, why Detroit?

D.A. - Why here? This is where the working class was. I came in '79 so there were a lot more working class than there are now ...

L. - And you were a part of a specific group when you were ... ? And what is their name?

D.A. - Spartacist. They're in France too.

L. - Spartacist? Like Spartacus?

D.A. - Like Spartacus but with a -cist on the end. Spartacist League. It's Trotskyist so ... it follows the teachings of Lenin and Trotsky. The name actually comes from Rosa Luxemburg and Carl Leibnitz' organisation.

As a conclusion :

G.W. - I mean, if you take the Woodward one ... I mean you already know part of Woodward and then you go through all these suburbs. I mean, what's interesting to me in all these developments like Woodward, so most of this area 200 years ago was quite swampy, marshy, you know, a lot of water, er, with the exception of one sandy ridge and that ridge is essentially where Woodward Avenue is, so even when this was quite swampy and marshy there was a sandy ridge and that was a kind of, initially the path of the first Native Americans, then it became the first rail road line, then it became the first road, I mean, there's a portion of Woodward Avenue by the [?] plant that was the

first segment of concrete road, so all of this is on Woodward Avenue, so once you cross over 8-mile Road and you hit the suburbs these, they are cities that existed 100 years ago because they were stops on the railroad, erm, but they ...[waitress/tip chatter]

Anyway, when you go through the suburbs you see that kind of Ferndale is the centre of the LGBT community in Detroit, then you come to Royal Oak which is kind of the college scene, then you eventually make it to Birmingham, which is a very wealthy suburban area, erm, [?] Hills, which is where Cranbrook is located and then you end up in Pontiac, which is kind of a small Detroit. It has all of the issues that Detroit does, race, declining industry, to you kind of go from, you slice through all of this, and when you get to Pontiac, Woodward actually goes around in a circle, you know, you start coming back down again.