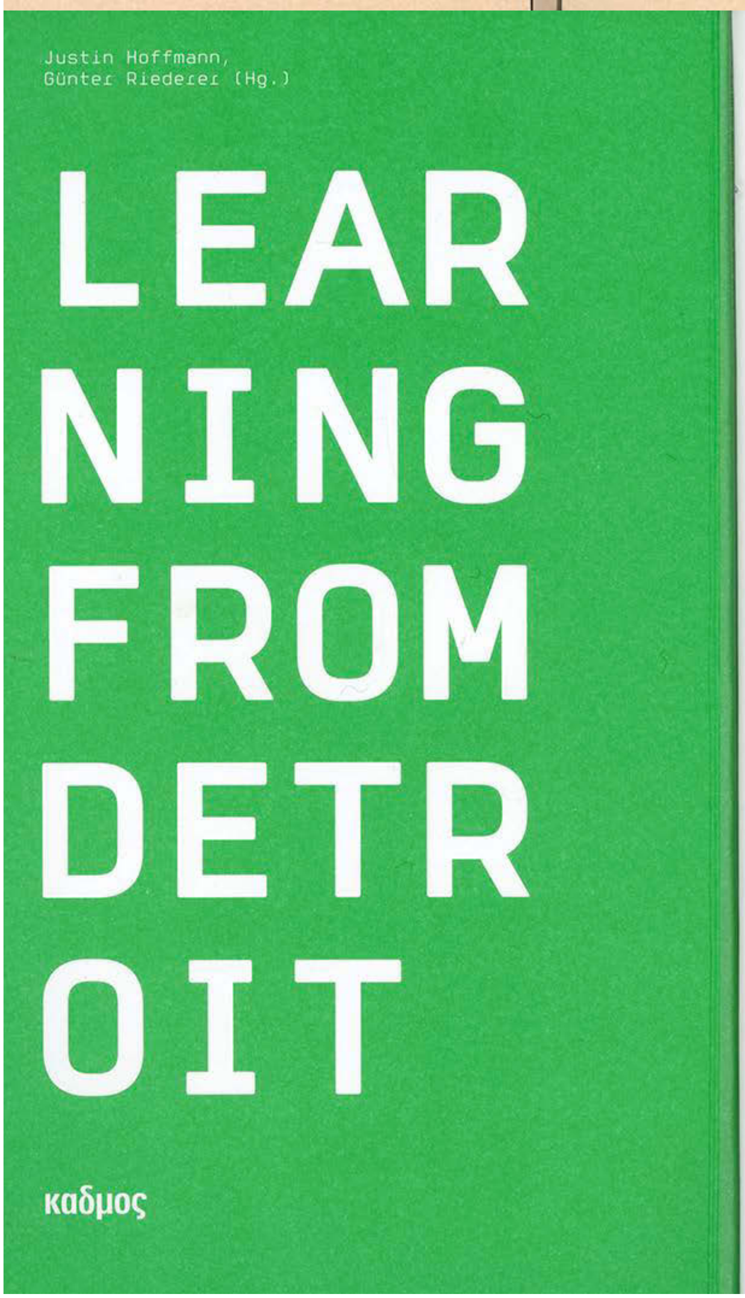

LEARNING FROM DETROIT
NEUE STRATEGIEN URBANER
KRISENBEWÄLTIGUNG

LEARNING FROM DETROIT

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Eröffnung »Learning from Detroit«,
Kunstverein Wolfsburg, 23. Mai 2013

Was kann Wolfsburg von Detroit wirklich lernen?
Einleitende Bemerkungen zum Projekt »Learning from Detroit«

Justin Hoffmann/Günter Riederer

Autos im Gewächshaus

»[…] ich hing über Wolkenbetten und wohl über dem Michigansee, dann riß der Himmel auf, Detroit lag im Sonnenschein, Automobile wuchsen wie Pflanzen unter Glas, Edsel Ford wandelte mir zu Füßen und durch sein Reich, er sah die Motorkräfte sich finden, sah Räder zu Räder kommen, er stiftete eine Million für eine Universität in Berlin und schenkte Fünfhunderttausend für die Erhaltung des alten Klosters in Cluny […].« Mit diesen assoziationsreich das Naturschauspiel über den Wolken beschreibenden Sätzen berichtete der Schriftsteller und Publizist Wolfgang Koeppen über einen im Frühling 1958 im Rahmen einer USA-Reise unternommenen Flug von Chicago nach Boston. Mit seiner Anfang der 1950er Jahre veröffentlichten und von der Kritik gefeierten Romantrilogie »Tauben im Gras«, »Tod in Rom« und »Treibhaus« hatte Koeppen dem Zeitgeist der jungen Bundesrepublik auf eindrucksvolle Weise Ausdruck verschafft. Dann aber versiegte seine Schaffenskraft, und er wurde zur tragischen Figur, zum großen Unvollendeten. Statt den umfassenden Gesellschaftsroman der Bundesrepublik, den deutschen »Ulysses« zu liefern, den sich sein Verleger Siegfried Unseld so sehr herbeisehnte, verlegte sich Koeppen auf kleinere Stücke und Feuilletonistisches. Besonders angetan hatten es ihm in dieser Zeit Reiseskizzen, wie die im Jahr 1958 unter dem Titel »Amerikafahrt« im Goverts Verlag in Stuttgart veröffentlichten Aufzeichnungen. Koeppens Bild von den organisch wachsenden Automobilen stellt eine schöne Anspielung auf die typische Werkarchitektur von River Rouge dar. Unter den lichtdurchfluteten Sheddächern, die ihm als Gewächshaus erschienen, wachsen, gleichsam den Gesetzen der Natur folgend, die Autos heran. So ist dies auch ein Bild, das von einem unbeschränkten Optimismus getragen wird und von einer grenzenlosen Wachstumseuphorie zeugt. Zu diesem Zeitpunkt war von etwaigen Beschränkungen oder gar einem Ende des Karbonzeitalters nicht die Rede und auch noch nichts zu spüren. Autostädte – für die Detroit damals die Blaupause bot – sind zu jenem Zeitpunkt noch der Zukunft zugewandte Städte; dass sie einmal verdorren könnten, dass die Pflanzen, welche die Grundlage ihres Daseins darstellen, einmal vertrocknen oder sogar verschwinden könnten, lag Ende der 1950er Jahre außerhalb jeglicher Vorstellung. Ganz anders stellt sich die Situation heute dar: Detroit ist pleite. Die Stadt hat sich zum Synonym für urbanen Niedergang und Verfall entwickelt, sie steht für ein untergehendes Zeichensystem.

Das Projekt »Learning from Detroit«

Der Projekttitel »Learning from Detroit« spielt auf Robert Venturis Buch »Learning from Las Vegas« (1972) an und ist ähnlich provokativ gemeint. Es lässt sich auch hier die These aufstellen, ob man nicht gerade von jenen Orten lernen kann, die konträr zu ihrem Image auf originäre Weise scheinbar unlösbare urbanistische Probleme bewältigen. Detroit kann sowohl als Negativbeispiel als auch als positives Vorbild verstanden werden. Negativ im Sinne von: an dem drastischen Niedergang Detroits lässt sich erkennen, welche politischen und wirtschaftlichen Entscheidungen nicht getroffen werden sollen. Andererseits zeigt das Detroit-Desaster verschiedene Aspekte auf, die wegweisend für eine Krisenbewältigung sind. Zunächst kann festgestellt werden, dass das Sinken von Einwohnerzahlen keine Katastrophe darstellen muss, sondern eine Chance zur Umwandlung in eine bessere Richtung. Urban Farming und Gardening, Public Art-Projekte und neue öffentliche Räume für Kinder, Radfahrer oder Jogger sind Phänomene, die Detroit vorweisen kann und die

von der Stadtverwaltung zunehmend unterstützt werden. Eine Krise dieser Art birgt bei genauerer Betrachtung auch gegenläufige Tendenzen. Ein massiver wirtschaftlicher Niedergang – und das zeigt Detroit – muss keinen Rückgang der künstlerischen und musikalischen Produktion bedeuten. Zudem wächst in Krisenzeiten der Zusammenhalt der Bewohner. Für verschiedene Formen von solidarischem Verhalten gibt es in Detroit zahlreiche Beispiele.

Reader und Dokumentation

Dieses Buch versucht beides zu sein: einerseits ein Reader mit Beiträgen über die aktuelle Situation in Detroit und seine Kultur im Vergleich zu Wolfsburg, andererseits eine Dokumentation der Ausstellung »Learning from Detroit« und der zahlreichen Veranstaltungen, die im Rahmen dieses Projektes vom 24. Mai bis zum 25. August 2013 in Wolfsburg stattfanden. Die Ausstellung entstand in enger Zusammenarbeit mit der Hamburger Kuratorin Kerstin Niemann, die seit 2010 eine Research Residence für Kulturproduzenten und Detroit-Forscher namens FILTER DETROIT leitet. Sie ist eine ausgewiesene Expertin der Detroiter Kunstszene. Der Schwerpunkt der Ausstellung »Learning from Detroit« liegt laut Konzept von Hoffmann/Niemann auf Arbeiten, die sich mit den gegenwärtigen Verhältnissen in Detroit insbesondere mit neueren Strömungen wie Urban Gardening, Public Art und anderen Veränderungen des öffentlichen Raums beschäftigen. Eine Sonderstellung nimmt in der Ausstellung der Detroiter Künstler und Fotograf Scott Hocking ein, der eine Woche vor Ausstellungsbeginn nach Wolfsburg eingeladen wurde, um vor Ort eine Installation zu produzieren. Er ging in Wolfsburg vor wie in Detroit – d. h. er drang in ein abgesperrtes, nicht mehr genutztes Areal (hier ein stillgelegter Steinbruch) ein, um dort aus den gefundenen Objekten und Materialien eine monumentale Skulptur zu errichten und Aufnahmen zu machen. Hockings Eindrücke können wir in seinem Aufsatz und seinen Fotografien nachempfinden. Drei wichtige Stimmen der aktuellen Literaturszene Detroits, jessica Care moore, Scott Hocking und Steve Hughes, lieferten Exponate sowohl für die Ausstellung als auch Beiträge für dieses Buch.

Lange Zeit wurde Detroit als Metropole der Musik bezeichnet. Der Beitrag von Justin Hoffmann beschreibt mit der Geschichte der Gründung des »Motown Labels« die Ursprünge des Mythos von der Musik-Stadt Detroit. Aleksandar Nedelkovski liefert eine Geschichte des Detroit Techno, mit dem die Stadt seit den 1980er Jahren verbunden wird und der weit über die Grenzen Detroits hinaus Musikstile auf der ganzen Welt beeinflusst hat.

Zu Gast in Wolfsburg

Der Fotograf und Künstler **Scott Hocking** sieht sich als Archäologe der Zukunft. Seit über zehn Jahren arbeitet er in Detroit mit leer stehenden Fabrikhallen und verlassenen Landstücken, die als Vorlage für seine Fotografien dienen und deren Ausgrabungen und Funde er in seinen Installationen verarbeitet. Inzwischen hat er zahlreiche Artefakte zusammengetragen, die er benennt, klassifiziert und auf pseudo-wissenschaftliche Art und Weise ausstellt. Im Rahmen der Ausstellung »Learning from Detroit« lud der Kunstverein Wolfsburg den Künstler ein, vor Ort in Wolfsburg zu arbeiten. Über mehrere Tage besuchte er einen stillgelegten Sandsteinbruch zwischen Danndorf und Velpke. Der Sandstein diente als Werkstein für Mauern und Bauwerke, wie die des Wolfsburger Schlosses. Als einer der härtesten und resistenten Sandsteine Deutschlands entstand er durch Ablagerung eines Flussdeltas in dieser Region. Das Velpker Natursteinwerk war der letzte noch operierende Steinbruch der Körner Familie, er wurde in den 1990er Jahren verkauft und 2008 geschlossen. Hocking erstellte ohne eigenes Werkzeug mit dem, was er vor Ort fand, eine Skulptur, sammelte vorgefundene Materialien für die Präsentation im Kunstverein zusammen und dokumentierte seine Arbeit sowie seine Eindrücke von Wolfsburg in mehreren Fotoarbeiten.

Das Kooperationsprojekt »Learning from Detroit« kann nur eine Momentaufnahme der sehr lebhaften Kunstszene Detroits abbilden. Stetig kommen mehr Künstler in die Stadt, oder es entstehen neue Formen der Zusammenarbeit, weil die freien Flächen der Stadt unzählige Möglichkeiten bieten, mit neuen Ideen zu experimentieren oder einfach zu »machen«. Für Außenstehende manchmal schwer zugänglich vibriert die Kunstszene. Sie wird kontinuierlich durch die Menschen, die dort leben, stimuliert. Während sich die Natur die Stadt in Teilen zurückerobert, nutzen Künstler, Designer, Architekten, Aktivisten und Visionäre die leer stehenden Gebäude und Flächen, um Detroit nachhaltig wieder zu beleben.

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Scott Hocking
Steinbruch, 2013, verschiedene gefundene Materialien

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Ausstellungsansicht »Learning from Detroit«, Kunstverein Wolfsburg, 2013

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Scott Hocking
Steinbruch, 2013, Serie aus 21 Fotodrucken auf Fotopapier

The Quarry/Steinbruch

Scott Hocking

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»The Quarry/Steinbruch« is a site-specific project that I created for the exhibition »Learning from Detroit«, at the Kunstverein Wolfsburg in May of 2013.

Based on the history of Wolfsburg castle, local legends, ancient cairns, various mythologies, and the good timing of reading Andre Norton's »Iron Cage« while in-residence, the project was created within the grounds of an abandoned centuries-old sandstone quarry, that once supplied the same stone from which Schloss Wolfsburg was built. The resulting sculpture/photo series was finished over the course of one week, and the site-specific work was left to be destroyed over time—which it was, about two months later.

Along with exploring Wolfsburg and the nearby quarries of Velpke, I traveled to Berlin, to the former checkpoint at Marienborn, to Stuttgart and Esslingen am Neckar, and to many places in between. The following text chronicles some of my experiences over this short course of time, and how these experiences led to the ideas behind »The Quarry project«.

The first thing I can tell you, is that when I arrived in Wolfsburg, I had no clue what I was going to do. This is not unusual for the way I work: I like to come into a place blind, and figure out how to intertwine ideas as I begin to explore a site, its people, and its history. Coming into a city with a solid plan of action has always felt uncomfortable to me: how can I work site-specifically without ever seeing/feeling/touching/smelling/hearing the site? I can't. So, I normally suspend any solid plans until I arrive, and can put my feet on the earth and look around. Even when I know that I have approximately ten days to begin and finish a project. No problem!

That's not to say I hadn't done »any« research. I read about Wolfsburg on the Internet. Wikipedia, ha. But the truth is, American's don't know much about the German auto city, and the research I could do was minimal. So, I decided to wait until my arrival, and see what I could learn from experience. This was a good idea.

By the time I had made it to Wolfsburg Castle, I was a zombie. A flight to Frankfurt, trains to Wolfsburg, and a dysfunctional phone that left me somewhat stranded at the station. But finally, I was picked up by the lovely Jennifer Bork—who's small white car would eventually drive me all over the city and beyond during my stay—and I arrived at the Schloss a ragged, jet-lagged specter of myself. It was at this point that I met Justin Hoffman, the curator of the Kunstverein, and, before I had a chance to pass unconscious, I was introduced to Axel Bosse—the tour guide.

Axel was great. Despite my exhaustion, he took me on a brief tour, full of Wolfsburg history lessons. He toured me around the entire next day as well. I was shown the origins of this 700 year old »water castle,« known as »wolf castle,« and

the mote that once encircled it. I learned about the positioning of the Bergfried that became a castle, in the Drömling, between the splitting River Aller. I was taken to Burg Neuhaus, to see another example of these old fortresses—both were spared from the many battles over the centuries. And I learned many things about the birth of the auto city of Germany—so different from the auto city where I come from, Detroit.

In America, Volkswagen is a popular vehicle—both as a new car, and as a vintage ride for connoisseurs. I have many friends who love to fix up and/or modify aging Eurovans. Other friends are part of VW racing clubs, wherein they soup up Rabbits for racing. It's generally thought of as a solid car of choice by yuppies and hipsters alike. But, I guarantee, none of these typical VW owners and connoisseurs have any clue about the origins of their favorite vehicles. And neither did I …

Axel explained that 2013 was the 75th anniversary of the »Stadt des KdF-Wagens« which was explained to mean »The City of the Strength Through Joy Car« in English. Quite a mouthful. But what really blew my mind was that Hitler and Porsche created the Volkswagen, and, moreover, created this auto-incarnation of Wolfsburg in 1938. Not only was I unaware of the VW Nazi beginnings, I was completely ignorant of the forced labor used to build the first cars. Axel took me to see a cemetery of Polish and Russian slaves, forced to build the »people's car« throughout World War 2. I wondered what all of these American yuppies and hipster would think of this hidden history—or if they would really care.
As we walked through the graveyard, a cat bounded out of nowhere, jumped onto a fence, and looked at us. It was a strange moment, and I wondered if maybe I would want to work with this newfound, sad history …

But our tour of the wolf castle city was not limited to the auto history, or the general surroundings of the Schloss. Axel took me further and further away from the civic center—trying the narrow in on what I might find most interesting. He took me to a hill that overlooked Wolfsburg—created according to the old myths, by a giant who threw a monstrous stone, upon which this hill overgrew—providing a panoramic view of the city, and the sprawling VW plant. He drove me into the woods, to show me the ruins of the »old man's cabin,« and explained the history of Mr. Willy Ackermann—who attempted to create his own utopian life, and a short-lived hippie commune with the acronym »T.A.T.« at his entrance gate. For a moment, I was certain I would want to work with this site, despite only very few remnants of Ackermann's cabin. But that was before Axel took me to the furthest location of the day: a long, private lumber road on the outskirts of Wolfsburg, in the small village of Velpke. There he took me through the trees to see a flooded sandstone quarry, and the site immediately transfixed me.

All along, Axel was trying to figure out what kind of place I might find useful. He was guessing and suggesting places and ideas, and then surveying my reaction. He was a fantastic guide, and I would have never known of the Velpke quarries without his insight and knowledge.
But it was exactly the kind of place I love to work. After centuries of work as a sandstone quarry, the last facility was closed only a handful of years ago. Not only were there hundreds of discarded blocks of stone everywhere—from large monoliths to small sliced slabs—there were a few vacant buildings as well. I had an isolated space to work, and I had an abundance of material to work with—two important requirements of my practice. Working somewhat in secret is also common to my projects, and I'm often trespassing in the process of

working this way. But this method allows for the finished site-specific works to be discovered by random explorers, and leaves a lot of the possibilities up to chance—all of which I embrace and enjoy as part of my art practice. And, an unexpected additional attraction to working in the quarry: It was beautiful there. Surrounded by forest, teaming with the sounds of nature, and dotted with gorgeous flooded pits, the quarry area was a bucolic escape from the land of automobiles. It had all the elements I look for when working onsite—working with the cycles of nature, in nature.

So, over the course of one weekend, I built an approximately 8-foot tall sandstone cairn inside the cavernous former stone-cutting building. I used various sizes and colored fragments from all over the site, often breaking larger pieces into manageable weights by simply knocking them onto the floor, and letting them shatter. The sound of breaking stones echoed throughout the now empty structure, but soon gave way to the quiet solitude of working alone. It was a great meditative place, and I loved it there.

Other than a visit from Steffen Grau, I had very few human interactions during my time at the quarry. On one particular day, I heard sounds from the yard outside of the building, and found it to be the squeaking breaks of a fairly amazing bicyclist, practicing his tricks on piles of stacked stones. Another day, I heard the sound of a car pulling into the lot—meaning that whoever was driving had a key to the gated entrance—and my Detroit instincts told me that I needed to stay hidden for fear of being caught trespassing. Alas, I later learned from Steffen that these were just local masons, trying to make use of so much wasted stone. On another day, three young boys visited me, and were intrigued by my presence there, as well as the sculpture I was building. After an hour or so of exploring the quarry and breaking random stones, they revisited me as they were leaving, just to say goodbye. And on my final day, while photographing the finished cairn, two graffiti artists came to work on some of the large interior walls of the warehouse. They were extremely polite—asking me »do you mind if we paint?« before starting their work. They also offering to smoke a joint with me; I declined, but I did have a cigarette, and chatted about art with them for a bit.

But, unbeknownst to me, the quarry was completely connected to the castle. As I worked onsite, building the stone sculpture during the day, I spent my nights researching and reading—trying to assimilate what I was learning with inner ideas and concepts. On a recommendation, I had brought a sci-fi paperback with me titled »Iron Cage«. A dystopian futuristic book—it described a planet where the ancient human cities were ruins of stone, and a race of bear-like intelligent animals known as »the People« lived free in their wake. It was an easy read—I flew through it—but what most intrigued me was this now reoccurring theme of stone. »The People« described the mysterious metropolis remains as the» Stone City«, and the descriptions reminded me of the overgrown quarry, strewn with sandstone megaliths, azure flooded pools, and rubble piles. Yet there I was, reading this book while living in an old stone fortress myself.

The castle was built with this same sandstone mined from Velpke. According to Axel, stones from those quarries were used all over Germany, for hundreds of years—many castles and fortresses still stand with the light reddish brown toned rocks as their building blocks. One day, as I explored the grounds, I found a rough, unfinished quarry stone

at the far corner of the castle gardens—a massive oblong block identical to those found all throughout the Velpke. This lone stone was not placed by accident: it was at the center of a perfect circle of ground cover, beyond which the bushes and trees arose. A mystic circle, surrounding the stone …

On another day, I asked the schloss caretaker Georg if he could show me the »secret areas of the castle.« Everything he showed me had an interesting significance. We walked to the top of my tower—to the floors above my bedroom—and up to the clock tower, which Georg still had to wind with a hand crank every evening. The floor between the clock and my room had a strange stone fireplace, and the remnants of the original weights that once hung from ropes and sounded the bells. We crossed over to the oldest part of the castle, the Bergfried, where the exposed sandstone walls created a pit, with only small, fortified gun windows peeking behind boards. Currently unused and kept mostly unseen, I later learned that this original tower had at one time been used to hold prisoners, as a dungeon of sort. We passed through the locked doors beyond my bedroom and into the studio rooms of the past castle resident (who's name I cannot remember): an artist and his wife, who lived and worked in the castle by themselves for many years. And beyond that, a room of beautiful yet anonymous figure carvings. He showed me the dead-end tunnel, and the still mysterious concrete slab covering what may or may not be a long-sealed continuation of that tunnel, approximately 50 feet from the castle entrance. Is it possible that there was once a tunnel between Schloss Wolfsburg and Burg Neuhaus, six kilometers away? It was here I would often find the »castle cat,« lounging on the concrete square, acting as gatekeeper to what might be beneath. Georg also took me into the archives, and through the clad peaks—as high as I could go without climbing out onto a copper gargoyle. It was a great tour, and I found myself weaving together a sort of mythology between the castle and the quarry. Like all aged places, the walls hold memories and history, and they eventually emit a quality, an intangible energy. This energy can take many forms—any feeling you can imagine—radiating from these stones. I felt there was a connection between these places—two sites where I spent so much time alone, absorbing the energy, the sounds, the imagery, the feel—and like all of my favorite projects, everything seemed to fit together naturally.

When I first arrived at Schloss Wolfsburg, I remember curator Justin Hoffman explaining to me that I would be staying in the castle alone, in a room which hadn't been used for artist-in-residence in quite sometime. It might be »a bit spooky« to have the castle to myself each night, he said. But, to be honest, I'd prefer to have the castle to myself. I love working alone—especially when creating a project with such a short deadline. It's no accident that I wanted to work in the hidden, empty quarry, hidden in the forest during the day, only to arrive back at an empty castle, with only the castle cat and an occasional mouse as company. It's nice to be somewhat isolated to have time to think, meditate, and relax. Born on the »Day of Creative Isolation,« I remember some astrology book saying once. Ridiculous, perhaps; but true. And as far as spookiness goes, I don't scare easily. My artistic career is almost entirely built upon my knowledge of working in and around abandoned buildings and forlorn locations. I've explored every kind of spooky site—only rarely having any experiences that surprised me or »spooked« me.

So, I was definitely surprised to hear the unmistakable creaking of footsteps from the floor above my ceiling, around 9:30 pm one night. It is amazing

how one's mind will attempt every possible explanation when something like that happens. Alas, I could not explain it—the slow creep of gentle footsteps that moved across my ceiling, and lasted for maybe a half hour total. In the end, I convinced myself that I was hearing the randomly triggered refrigerator motor, which made the fridge vibrate and squeak rhythmically. But, days later, I heard the steps again, coming from another part of the apartment ceiling. And then, to solidify the strangeness, I gained a corroborator: for a few days during my stay, I had a roommate—an artist from Zurich named Nick Hess. One night, I returned to my castle room after dark, to find Nick somewhat shaken up. He explained that he had accidentally climbed our staircase a flight too high, and attempted to enter the door above ours. Before realizing he was on the wrong floor, he called to me through the door, because he heard what sounded like tables or chairs being moved around across the floor. But I wasn't there. And that wasn't our room. Needless to say, he was not thrilled to learn he was alone, in this strange castle. Spooky indeed.

Was it a ghost? The lost spirit of an original monk-like clock winder? The lingering energy of the artist who once had the run of the castle to himself? A trapped remnant of the past prisoners and dungeon inmates? Who knows? I certainly do not …

But, after my short time there, it did become clear to me that Schloss Wolfsburg had its mysteries, its energy, obtained through its long history—emanating from the stones walls—resonating in the wooden floors and log pilings that the water castle rests upon. The castle and the quarry were enchanting to me—the way nature is enchanting—the way anything ancient is enchanting. And I didn't care to understand it, really. I'm drawn to the mystical things in the world, and I was happy to find these qualities in Wolfsburg, in Velpke, and in many places in between. I'm always in search of the unknown—trying to revive some version of the Age of Discovery, or at least a glimpse of that feeling. I found my explorations during this project to be rich and complicated—and there were truly too many interesting moments to list here. This, I admit, was a bit surprising, knowing that I was being brought into the Auto City. It was so much more than that. It was these unusual pieces to the puzzle that combined to create my project—not the well-known surface of Volkswagen and the automobile. From the Stone City quarry, to the lonely stone garden-circle, to the walls of Burg Neuhaus. From the anonymous plaster figures, to the funny life sized gnome, to the crows and gargoyles and hourly clock tower bells. From the moss covered Old Man's well, to the unknown symbolism of a decaying sandstone sculpture. From the nautilus-like golden staircase of one tower, to the inverted pyramidal dungeon of another. And from the stone-aura of a man-sized cairn, to the stone walls of the Kunstverein gallery—all these things created a story, which unfolded as I worked. It can be a mythology to anyone who encounters it, but it is the story of my time in Wolfsburg. My adventures, what I learned, whom I met, and how it all manifested. It's a chronicle. It bridges time. And hopefully, it captures the feeling I had while there. Wolfsburg is a strange place, and I like strange places. VW may have been around for 75 years, but people have been passing through that valley for thousands of years. Perhaps I'll have to come back one day, say hello again to the castle cat, and finally pry open that concrete sarcophagi to see if there really is a tunnel under there. Thankfully, there are still some mysteries to discover, and that's the last thing I can tell you …