

# Art

MONTHLY

MARCH 2018 | No 414 | £5.50 €8 \$9

**Cécile B Evans**

Interviewed by Chris Fite-Wassilak

**No Surprises**

Jennifer Thatcher

**Red Africa**

Amna Malik

**Letter from Buffalo**

Dominic Czechowski

# LETTER FROM BUFFALO

## Boom and Bust

It's the buildings that one notices first, an eclectic mix of late 19th and early 20th-century American architecture: archetypal wooden houses perched on tree-lined avenues. Art Deco gems, glorious examples of design from luminaries such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Eero Saarinen and Louis Sullivan, stand alongside the city's distinctive, and many, grain elevators – often celebrated as prototypes of modernist architecture.

Such rich urban design aesthetics is a source of huge civic pride in Buffalo, as is the city's wider cultural and economically prosperous past. Situated close to the Canadian border in western New York state and just down the road from Niagara Falls, Buffalo mythology claims it was once the richest town in the US: a 'boom city' at the turn of the 20th century, mainly due to immigration and the grain and steel industries. Geographically, it was also an important railroad junction along the east/west trade route, a factor contributing to the glory days between the 1920s and 1950s.

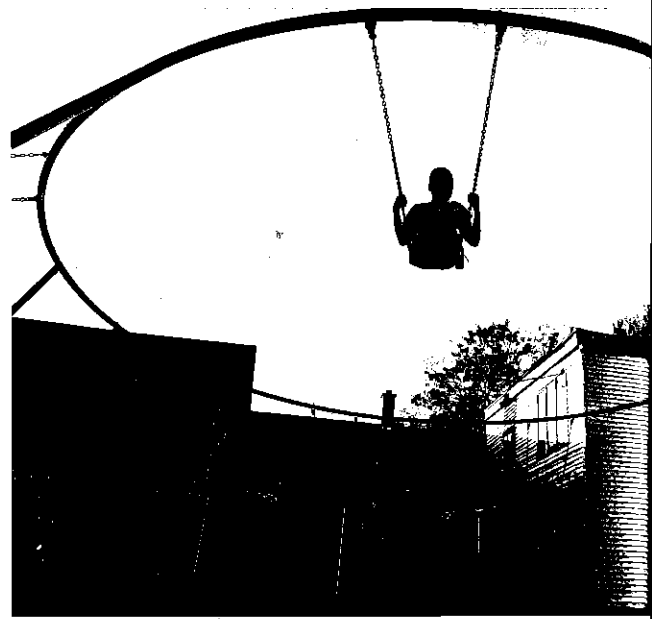
Since then Buffalo has seen a sharp decline – a reality etched firmly into the community psyche. Just a few years ago the city's poverty rate topped 30%, making it America's third-poorest city. It is also one of the most segregated ones, despite its long history of immigration with many Ukrainian, Swedish, Italian and, more recently, Ethiopian, Burmese and Pakistani communities settling here over the decades. Today, residents refer to the city's Main Street as the 'demarcation line' dissecting the (affluent) west side from the (disadvantaged) east; split not just by gaping income disparity, but further by class and race.

It is against this complex backdrop that Buffalo has seen a recent resurgence of creative energy, evoking the rich legacy of artistic innovation historically associated with the city. Alongside its multi-layered social and industrial history, cultural innovation has always played a significant role and Buffalo prides itself on its avant-garde heritage and pluralistic, socially engaged forms of artistic expression. The past is a constant point of reference but without any ostensible nostalgia or self-indulgence; instead, it seems it functions as a benchmark of excellence, a recurring pedagogical toolbox and blueprint for endeavour. Universally – and perhaps paradoxically – experimentation has always sprung from economic and social unrest. Buffalo's artistic community flourished in the 1970s, especially among the working classes, and there began a period of incredible creative energy that remains relevant today.

Always at the forefront of new media, photography and film practices, in 1973, well before any other university had a course explicitly devoted to media art, the University at Buffalo (UB) launched a now legendary media study programme. Artists and filmmakers such as Hollis Frampton, Tony Conrad, Paul Sharits, and Steina and Woody Vasulka investigated, taught and made media art in all forms, and founded the first Digital Arts Laboratory. Vibrant organisations for visual, media and sound arts, music, poetry and theatre were founded by the likes of Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo and Charles Clough – all former students at UB. Among them were CEPA (Contemporary Photography and Visual Arts Center), Hallwalls and Squeaky Wheel Film & Media Arts Center – three pioneering organisations located within walking distance from each other in downtown Buffalo.

The scene has evolved quite significantly over the past few years with a renewed focus on utilising the glut of both derelict and newly restored buildings throughout the city as viable (and affordable) sites for production and exhibition. While it was organisations such as the above (with their emphasis on progressive practice and support of regional talent) that were once the driving forces behind experimental exhibition programming in the city, there has recently been an upsurge of independent projects taking up residence in these off-centre spaces. This renewed interest in site-specificity was pertinently reflected in 'Wanderlust', a sizeable 50-year survey exhibition at the UB Art Galleries bringing together a range of international artists exemplifying conceptual, body and kinesthetic art practices operating outside the studio.

When I visited CEPA, it was halfway through a multi-part survey exhibition on contemporary Israeli art and identity, with artists such as Keren Cytter, Adi Nes and Yael Bartana addressing timely issues of diasporic regions, prejudice and racism. At Squeaky Wheel, a solo show by Angela Washko invited audiences to engage with a dating simulation game – players embodied a female character targeted by pick-up artists, upending the gender role-plays. Such examination of social behaviours around power and male privilege were further echoed by a solo performance at Torn Space Theater across town (the only cultural organisation on the poorer East Side) – an all-too-relevant look at what it means to say #MeToo. Occupying a building that was a community centre for a substantial Polish



immigrant community, this small experimental theatre has a long-term commitment to its local context and neighbourhood. Drawing from the global Avant Gardes (included stagings of work by *monstres sacrés* of European theatre such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Bernard-Marie Koltès and Ingmar Bergman), it has been bringing diverse performances to the local community since 2003, retooling people's expectations of what theatre might be, both aesthetically and politically.

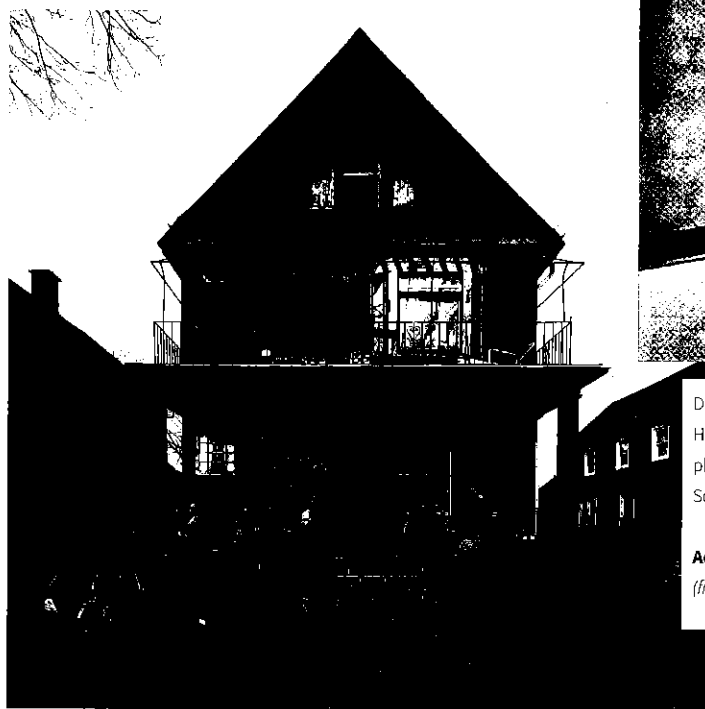
The vanguard artistic legacy is continued in Buffalo's post-rust-belt cityscape through independent initiatives with particular focus on community work and non-traditional, site-specific grassroots projects that foster relationships in order to develop a more socially and culturally connected city. At 500 Seneca (a former paper pulp factory), artist-educator Tina Dillman has started a community-driven arts residency and a multimedia/performance art space (acting, in her own words, as a 'civil servant'). Similarly, CS1 Curatorial Projects run by Claire Schneider strives to engage diverse communities in conversation through access, integration and experiential knowledge – 2020 will see artist Nick Cave's largest cross-cultural public commission to date in Buffalo's Silo City. This striking area south of the city centre with its gigantic grain elevators, which were admired and studied by the likes of Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, is now widely used for a variety of programming, including dance and sound performances and theatre productions.

More generally, Buffalo feels like an ideal testing ground for rethinking what the audience engagement and educational model might be. While this could be seen as an opportunistic driver for government funding at a time when art education is removed from school curricula, the education programmes here are linked to a wider continual process of community building and do not feel contrived or tokenistic because

**Julia Jamrozik and Coryn Kempster**

*Full Circle* 2016 commissioned by CEPA Gallery and CS1 Curatorial Projects

Tony Conrad in front of his *Yellow Movie* 1973



Dennis Maher's Fargo House, Buffalo, 2015  
photograph by David Schalliol

**Adi Nes** *Untitled*  
(from boys) 2000



the inside of a Joseph Cornell sculpture, or Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau, and engages processes of disassembly and reconstitution through multiform artworks and a cross-pollination of perspectives. This lived-in space serves as 'a centre for the urban imagination', and its myriad artefacts and communal functions evoke the notion of 'a society of friends' (as coined by Miguel Tamen in his 2001 book *Friends of Interpretable Objects*, 2001) that extends beyond the walls. It has a palpable relevance to how Buffalo's artistic scene seems to operate: a culture of friends and collaborators who rely on heterodox approaches to economics based on friendship, solidarity and exchange. Generosity and cross-fertilisation of ideas and knowledge are evident across the board.

'Introducing Tony Conrad, the upcoming retrospective at the UB Art Gallery and the Albright-Knox in spring 2018, will invite collaborations (smaller-scale documentary and archive exhibitions) from colleagues such as Hallwalls and Squeaky Wheel as a way of sharing resources and audiences.

Buffalo is by no means some utopian ideal, nor is it just another exercise in neoliberal urbanism harnessing a polarising 'hipster renaissance'. The rapidly changing economy offers clear benefits for entrepreneurial artistic spirits but, of course, also presents the usual risks; and there is a real sense of anxiety about real-estate fluctuations. It is a pivotal moment for the city – a threshold between what has been and what might be. From my position on Main Street, the breadth of resources, social awareness and genuine intention from the robust artistic community offers a critical resilience that bodes well for the future and transcends the economic divide. It may be (as Van Morrison declares) a long way to Buffalo, but it's a trip worth taking. See you round the outside. ■

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they are embedded in a longer historical and ethical tradition. Visiting one of the 'First Friday' evenings at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, the city's 'official' and much revered museum, the spaces were heaving with cross-generational audiences lining up to see not only the world-class collection but also a temporary exhibition offering an interesting and user-friendly investigation into the multisensory and

participatory nature of performance, sound and installation art.

The Albright-Knox is also an institutional partner for architect Dennis Maher's SACRA project: essentially a job-training programme in a former Catholic church which has been transformed into a community construction workshop and art space, using the guts of the building itself as raw material. Nearby, Maher's *Fargo House* feels like