

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Conjuring a Piece of the Earth by Its Outline

Susan Silas August 15, 2016



Installation view, 'Kurt Steger: Scribing the Void' at Odetta (2016) (photo by Paul Takeuchi, courtesy Odetta)

Upon entering [Odetta gallery](#) in Bushwick, one is confronted with an irregular but geometric plywood sculpture that nearly fills the space, hovering within an inch of the floor. It is suspended, hanging from wires attached to the crossbeams in the ceiling. The shapes forming the top of the structure are regular, inasmuch as their edges are made up of straight lines, but the edges closer to the floor seem ragged, as if they describe something that is not there.

As I settled into looking, I sensed that the key to understanding the work was both before me and elsewhere. That elsewhere turned out to be an enormous outcropping of schist that sits on Manhattan's west side in Central Park, roughly at 70th Street; the artist, [Kurt Steger](#), traced the rock formation to make the piece. Previously, he had worked in Harlem's Marcus Garvey Park, creating a wooden structure that adhered to a large rock. There, the protective piece sat snugly on top of the boulder, its

geometric casing above and its jagged lines married to the shape of the rock underneath it. By contrast, the sculpture at Odetta has been separated from the rock that proscribed its shape, leaving us uncertain as to its origin and meaning.



Kurt Steger, "Urban Structure #5" (2016)
(photo by Guenter Knop, courtesy
Odetta) (click to enlarge)

In the passageway between the larger gallery room containing this piece and the office, there are several pedestals with small, discreet sculptures displayed on them. In each of these earlier works, an abstracted, geometric form sits on top of a rough concrete remnant. In a talk given at the gallery, Steger said that the inspiration for these pieces came from a visit to the US Southwest, where he became preoccupied with the adobe houses built directly onto rock formations. His sculptures can be seen reformulations of such dwellings. They rest on rubble found in Bushwick, what's left in the street and in vacant lots, where older edifices are being replaced by more upscale housing and development. In Steger's sculptures, the new construction is built literally on top of the old, which becomes its foundation. The structure conforms to the shape of the remnant, the old

determining the form and contour of the new.

About a year after his trip to the Southwest, Steger visited Tibet and made a pilgrimage to Mt. Kailash. There he came across numerous monasteries built into the mountains. His hanging piece at Odetta, "Scribing the Void," is both an expansion of his smaller-scaled sculptures and a continued meditation on those architectural encounters.

"Scribing the Void" defines a negative space beneath it, but that space is only partial. As we can see from photographs in the back, the rock is substantially larger than the sculptural form. The latter would not cover the former entirely if it were to be dragged to Central Park and set in place. It is just a partial covering, like a snow cap on a mountain. It was made by scribing the rock formation, not by computer or laser but



Photograph of a fortress by Kurt Steger
(© 2015 Kurt Steger)

rather by hand, with an old-fashioned scribing compass, over the course of nine trips to the park. On one of those occasions, the artist encountered a man sitting on the rock, reading what he described as “an esoteric book on Eastern philosophy.” After a short conversation in which he explained his project, the man with the book remarked, “We may as well be on Mt. Kailash as sitting on this boulder” — a rather startling coincidence for Steger.

We can think of mountains and even the rock formations of Central Park as evidence of the earth’s crust: the consequences of force and motion, a metaphor for the core bubbling to the surface, evidence of the materiality and geology of the planet, of whose history we are but a tiny portion. And it is on this hard surface that we construct shelters where we dwell. It is perhaps not surprising that one of the most influential (and controversial) philosophers of the 20th century, Martin Heidegger, spent so much time defining the word “dwelling.” We use it to describe the structures we make for ourselves to live in, but we also use it when trying to talk about the ontology of being.

The structure of the home built into the rock — as the adobe houses in the Southwest and the monasteries of Asia are — is a great metaphor for the conflation of dwelling as home and dwelling as being, because it seems to blur the distinction between what is man-made and what is of the earth. In “Scribing the Void,” the metaphor has become unmoored, the dwelling or habitation torn away from the rock it is meant to rest upon. This suggests the ways in which we are ungrounded in modern life, living as much in cyberspace as in what we refer to as “the real world.” Because the sculpture also evokes a polar ice cap or snowy mountaintop (like Mt. Kailash), it also brings to mind the catastrophe of global warming and our need to care not only for our individual dwellings but for the larger, planetary whole.



Scribe score and rock (courtesy Kurt Steger and RSM) (click to enlarge)

The scribe line that traces the rock is not just visible, it can literally be heard as the viewer walks around the gallery. Steger collaborated with the composer RSM (Rodrigo Rhema Guzmán), who used the line to create a composition; thus the structure of the score, titled “Void,” echoes the intersection where sculpture would meet rock in the park and the void would disappear.

In the gallery, we can occupy the negative space — the ghost of the rock, which would of course be impenetrable in Central Park — physically. Here Steger is conjuring a bit of magic, allowing us to exist somehow in the materiality of the earth, to walk through schist, so to speak. Standing amid those molecules of air where the hard rock would be, I thought about the end of most yoga classes, when students are instructed to lay on their backs on the ground in *savasana*. Meant to be the ultimate pose of relaxation, it asks us to feel the ground that supports us along the entire length of our bodies, and to feel at one with it. Steger similarly beckons us to consider our deep connection with the earth, one we so often take for granted.

Kurt Steger: Scribing the Void *continues at Odetta (229 Cook Street, Bushwick, Brooklyn) through August 21.*



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