

Land Mass, silver gelatin print, 20" x 24", 2006.

Arrested Development

By Eva Díaz

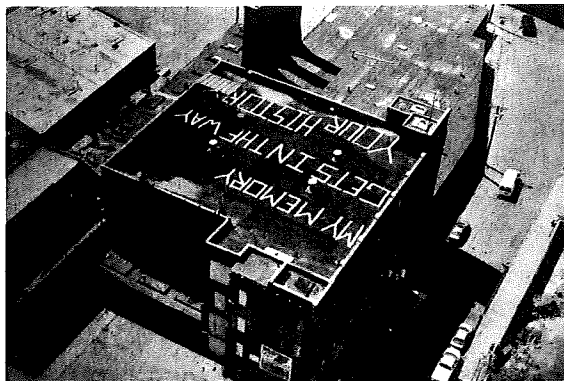
It doesn't take a detective to reveal that real estate has gone wonky in the New York City area. Stalled construction on out-of-scale luxury condos is evident everywhere: it can be found on nearly every block in my neighborhood near downtown Brooklyn, for example. Go to Prospect Heights, Greenpoint, Williamsburg, and Bushwick, Brooklyn; Long Island City and Astoria in Queens; or Jersey City, Hoboken, and Newark across the Hudson in New Jersey and you'll see similar half-baked high-rise shells standing vacant, if they were finished at all. Some have sat in various stages of incompleteness for years; a big sign on a lot at the end of my block announces "Luxury Occupancy for Summer 2006." The lot is boarded-up; when I pass I can see piles of moldering building supplies through the cracks in the warped plywood planks. What happened to the people who used to live there before, in apartment buildings that were razed for fantastical promises proclaimed in obsolete placards?

As common as halted condo construction sites have become, more pernicious are the large-scale developments that trafficked in the legal mumbo-jumbo of misapplied eminent domain claims in order to annex privately owned buildings, merely to leave them unoccupied when money ran out. This unusual application of eminent domain is now permitted after the so-called New London

Emma Wilcox is a photographer concerned with environmental justice, land usage, eminent domain, and the role of individual memory in the creation of local history. She is the recipient of a NJ State Arts Council Fellowship for photography, the Camera Club Of NY residency, the Newark Museum Residency and was a core participant in *Night School* at the New Museum in 2008. In addition, she participated in *Emerge 7*, Aljira, Newark, NJ and *AIM 29*, Bronx Museum, Bronx, NY. She is also co-founder of Gallery Aferro, a Newark, NJ alternative space.

case in Connecticut was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2005 [*Kelo v. City of New London*, 545 U.S. 469 (2005)]. A landmark ruling, New London allowed for the use of eminent domain to force the transfer of privately-owned land from one owner to another in the name of economic redevelopment. The decision was criticized by dissenting Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor as taking from the poor to give to the rich. As she wrote, "Any property may now be taken for the benefit of another private party, but the fallout from this decision will not be random. The beneficiaries are likely to be those citizens with disproportionate influence and power in the political process, including large corporations and development firms."¹ Atlantic Yards in downtown Brooklyn is a prime example of an abuse of eminent domain. As development company Forest City Ratner's overweening scheme for a sports and apartment complex is inevitably scaled back, the homes of those in the project's footprint who were forced to sell out will likely remain vacant for years to come until the now-postponed plan is revisited. In either case—the aborted luxury condos sitting dormant on many city blocks, or the megaprojects that entirely failed to launch—the results are the same. Residents of one economic class were displaced in a greedy hunt for those of another: those who could afford to purchase "1 Bedrooms starting at \$850,000."

Emma Wilcox's recent exhibition *Salvage Rights* at Real Art Ways provides powerful documentation of the visible manifestations, and makes links to the frequently invisible forces, that drive these unjust and irrational forms of real estate speculation. As Wilcox found, if you can't beat them, join 'em. Now I don't mean she became a flunky landlord or a developer of fictive properties. Instead, she took to the skies, using aerial photography to investigate the area around her apartment in Newark. Helicopter-assisted surveying has been a common way to evaluate land for development.² As she made passes over the neighborhood, she photographed textual slogans she had previously marked out in huge 12-foot letters on the roofs of buildings and in vacant lots. In one picture, the following text is inscribed on a roof: "My memory gets in the way [of] your history." The black and white photograph captures the text upside down and at oblique angle, the missing word a casualty of the paradoxically too-small canvas of the square rooftop. In another work, the word "thief" is evident, also upside-down, on a vacant lot. An arrow following the word



Eminent Domain No. 3, silver gelatin print, 20" x 24", 2006.

indicates that it refers to the owner of the property it is written upon, or perhaps to a nearby building to which the arrow points.

The effect of these phrases, visible only from the God's-eye perspective of Wilcox's camera or the rare low-flying passerby, is disconcerting. Her scream against the sky is both a personal testament to changes in her own living situation, and summarizes an all-too familiar frustration of victims of real estate speculation. Like many seeking space and affordable housing, Wilcox signed a long-term lease in a run-down former industrial building located in a disinvested area on the outskirts of the metropolitan center; in her case, in Newark. After she refurbished the live-work space and subleased it to fellow artists, a city agency used eminent domain to evict all the building's tenants in order to build a school, while nearby buildings and lots were deemed blighted and rezoned for condo development in the hopes of capitalizing on city redevelopment funds.³ Meanwhile, politically-connected developers had acquired the surrounding properties at cut-rate prices before the rezoning and planned neighborhood transformation. After much legal wrangling, the area was cleared of residents. Yet in the current economy her still-vacant building will likely sit unoccupied for years now that the school project languished and the cutthroat financial motivations behind blanket "improvements" to neighborhoods are revealed.⁴ Once masked in a language of "upmarketing," this scorched-earth clearance policy of speculative overreaching is now exposed as a new kind of urban blight that undoubtedly will have severe consequences as blocks emptied of inhabitants experience continued neglect.

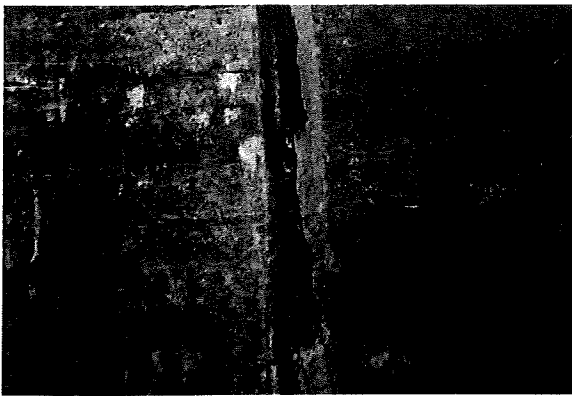
Coupled with her airborne photos are a series of street scenes of Newark's surroundings. Wilcox uses the phrase "forensic landscape" to describe these works, and indeed she discerns in the overlooked details of urban sites residues of the quotidian use of space that perseveres in spite of nearly criminal institutional abandonment. In one photo, seven identical bottles have been wedged into a large vertical crack in a concrete wall. The symmetry and order of the neatly placed bottles contrasts with the jagged edge of the crack that bespeaks the vulnerability of the city's crumbling infrastructure. In another work, shot from a claustrophobic courtyard formed by the corner of a tall, industrial building, several official-looking white vans are seen through a bent chain-link fence. Do these vans represent a new drive of real estate exploration sniffing out future luxury lofts, or are they simply governmental forces seeking to remediate the harm of the last speculative wave?

Wilcox's work asks why housing resources are allocated in such a haphazard manner; why buildings such as her former apartment in Newark will remain empty when so many are in need of shelter, when so many struggle to keep a roof over their heads. What remains is the intractable reality of unaffordable housing, of long commutes from marginal neighborhoods, and of homelessness, realities that are difficult to reconcile with the razed lots and empty apartments that sit waiting for an uptick in the market to instigate the next speculative drive. Where is the agency that can step in and equitably allocate these mismanaged housing resources? Will it take another squatters' movement like the one that secured rights to aban-

doned buildings and lots in the East Village in Manhattan? I fear slumlords letting their buildings go to pot to avoid the expense of maintaining them are a different breed than today's luxury condo developers. These are multi-million-dollar soup-to-nuts constructions, and I don't think these developers will be giving out salvage rights to their failed projects anytime soon. Unless, like Wilcox does, we train our eyes to the new zones of conflict and join the fight to keep urban space economically viable for all residents, not just the chimera of an entirely "luxury" clientele in a privatized city. The fantasy of a universally wealthy population was always the flip-side of real estate developers' fractured imaginary; as if somehow the top one percent of the class system could own one hundred percent of the property. Wilcox's photographs suggest that the failure of the other ninety-nine percent to disappear won't be a subject of speculation much longer.

Eva Díaz is an art historian and critic. She recently received her Ph.D. at Princeton University for her dissertation titled "Chance and Design: Experimentation in Art at Black Mountain College." Díaz's writing has appeared in magazines such as Time Out New York, Art in America, Modern Painters, and The Art Bulletin; in exhibition catalogs for the New Museum of Contemporary Art and other institutions; as well as in numerous art monographs and books on curatorial practice. In fall 2009 she joins the faculty of Pratt Institute in New York as Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art.

Railroad Avenue, silver gelatin print, 20" x 24", 2006.



¹ The full text of the decision is available at the Cornell University's Law School Legal Institute Website. O'Connor's dissent can be found on <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/04-108.ZD.html>.

² The prevalence of aerial surveying has markedly diminished in recent years, Wilcox learned, due to the popularity of satellite-based mapping programs such as Google Earth. Yet many satellite surveying programs, though they appear to be providing "live-feeds," are frequently saved information that is years out-of-date. For example, Wilcox could not obtain accurate photos of her neighborhood from widely-available satellite technologies.

³ There remains a reality of first-wave gentrifiers building out raw spaces and smoothing out the contours of undesirable neighborhoods by attracting the cafes and boutiques that later bring the wealthy buyers developers wish to entice with expensive and exclusive.

⁴ The July 23, 2009 arrests by the FBI of forty-four New Jersey and New York politicians, rabbis, and real estate developers on corruption charges included accusations of shady real estate deals and money laundering. Mayors, deputy mayors, city council members, and state assembly members from Hoboken, Secaucus, Jersey City, and Ridgefield were accused of taking bribes from developers in exchange for government approvals of development projects.

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This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' *Step Up '08* open call, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New England and New York. *Step Up '08* was juried by Chris Doyle (Multi-Media Artist, New York); Andrea Miller Keller (Independent Curator, Connecticut); and Herb Tam (Associate Curator, Exit Art, New York).

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Emma Wilcox



**REA
ART WAYS**

On the cover: *Local*, silver gelatin print, 20" x 24", 2002.

All images courtesy of Real Art Ways. Staff photographer John Groo.