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Prospect.1 New Orleans

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LOOKING BACK
The largest biennial of international art ever held in the USA opened last November, and helped to revitalize a city still suffering in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

After attending the opening of Prospect.1 New Orleans, I returned home impressed as hell, slightly hung-over and filled with stories. One of the things I've always loved about New Orleans is the way visits tend to generate stories-both first-person adventures and anecdotes related by random strangers. And one of the things that impressed me most about this new biennial was how it seemed to encourage and concentrate that distinctive quality of its host city; to quietly and mysteriously stage-manage occasions for narrative. Prospect.1 was, in every sense, an anecdotal biennial.

Here's a story I heard. It was related by Nari Ward, one of the 81 participating artists. He told it to the group of journalists I was shuttling around with, while standing outside the Battle Ground Baptist Church in the Lower Ninth Ward. It was the day before the official opening, and his sound and sculpture installation Diamond Gym: Action Network (2008), was already up and running inside. The squat, red-brick church building, unlike most of the homes once surrounding it, had made it through Hurricane Katrina intact. The congregation had not. The church has been empty since August 2005, when the levees holding back the Industrial Canal were breached. Some parishioners who had survived the storm and returned to the devastated neighborhood have cleaned up the church building and maintained it, but there are still not enough of them around to get Sunday services going again.

Ward described an encounter with one of the former Battle Ground Baptists. A month or so earlier, while he was in the midst of installing the work, an elderly neighborhood resident strolled over during a break in the activity, trying to figure out what was going on. 'The church is coming back?' he asked the artist, hopefully. Ward had to admit: no, the church was not coming back. Not yet. Maybe some day. He explained the art event that was about to descend on the city and described his own project. The old man didn't seem interested in details, though. Unwilling to surrender that initial optimism, he continued to press: 'But people are coming?'

Of the stories I heard that weekend, Ward's anecdote was the one that hit hardest and struck deepest. For one thing, it personalizes the talk of civic uplift and community revitalization that has surrounded the biennial - talk that can all too easily slip into feel-good abstractions. But more pointedly, this story, as I see it, is a parable of priorities - one I'm taking to heart here. For the displaced

Baptist human presence took precedence over content. Wishing for the return of people to the empty church, the nature of the sermon mattered less than the simple fact of bodies filling the space.

In a similar way, I think the first, and most essential, thing to say about the New Orleans biennial is: there was a biennial in New Orleans. People came. The almost miraculous nature of this fact should not be underestimated. A major international art event - billed as the largest ever held in the USA - took place in a city that three years ago was almost obliterated, a place that has not fully recovered and whose future is still uncertain. The idea that the city - in terrible shape long before the storm - hosted a biennial is almost as absurd as the city itself. There are few places that match it in terms of beauty and dysfunction; despite the highest murder rate in the nation, I believe it paradoxically retains, as Walker Percy claimed, 'a certain persistent non-malevolence'.

To stress all this is not a way to abdicate critical response. But it's clear that I'm not impartial here. In an interview posted on the Prospect.1 website, the Chicago-based artist Tony Fitzpatrick said he thinks of New Orleans as his 'other city'. I do as well. And it was crucial to the success of Prospect.1 that Dan Cameron, who conceived, organized and curated it, happens to be another member of this tribe of love-struck semi-outsiders. It's pretty much impossible to imagine that anyone else could have pulled it off - or wanted to. Cameron has been visiting New Orleans regularly for the last three decades. He talks about the city in unabashedly romantic terms, and he knows what he's talking about. He can tell you where to get the best cochon au lait po'boy and can knowingly debate the merits of local trumpet players. In a city where food and music are vital topics of discussion, this knowledge is more politically important than it may seem.

At the same time Cameron - a veteran of Istanbul Biennial in 2003 and Taipei Biennial in 2006 - is starkly unsentimental about the nature of art biennials. He can speak the language of civic boosterism and uses the phrase 'cultural tourism' without flinching. Prospect.1 accepted as a given that these sorts of events essentially exist to fill out the itineraries of an international jet set of curators and collectors. That's not a problem: that's the point. The New Orleans biennial was explicitly conceived as a post-Katrina revitalization effort. The city's economy is already almost completely dependent on tourism; the goal was to bring a 'better class' of tourist to town - a class more culturally sensitive, yes, but also one with access to power and money to spend. Somehow I see none of this as cynical, only pragmatic. It's easy enough to sneer at attempts to put yet another city 'on the map'; more difficult when you're talking about a place that was very nearly wiped off the map.

What resulted from this position is a biennial that looked remarkably conventional - on paper. Cameron is a pro; he knows all the steps of the dance. While the artist line-up lacked superstars, there were enough familiar A-list names to attract attention, enough locals to assuage fears of carpetbagging, sufficient Africans and Latin Americans legitimately to claim international scope. Again, I don't see any of this as bad faith. To be taken seriously, Prospect.1

needed to be a 'real' biennial, not just some do-good charity operation. It's easy to believe this apparent by-the-book approach eased the way in fundraising: by the opening day Cameron had managed to secure the necessary $3.5 million - mostly from private donors and foundations. (Admission to the biennial was free for the entire run.) Considering the scope of the final project, this is a remarkably modest sum. It is, coincidentally, the same amount as was reportedly spent on the concurrent 28th Biennial of Sao Paulo - an event that infamously made the 'radical gesture' of foregoing an emphasis on art objects in favour of performances and panels, a conceptual choice ostensibly designed to foster self-examination and reflection on the 'crisis' in international biennials.

Whatever the case in Brazil, Cameron obviously decided that there were more pressing crises to attend to. The New Orleans event was blessedly free of any sort of ideological hand-wringing. No cultural problematics were hashed out, or even broached. The institution was a springboard, not a symptom: there was no explicit 'take' on globalism or the status of relational aesthetics to be gleaned. By design, Prospect.1 lacked a thesis or a theme. There were the works - extraordinarily strong, for the most part - there were the various sites and, above all else, there was the fascinating friction between them.

The power of this approach was felt even where the works themselves were lacking. Did I, for example, really need to see another blithely decorative mini-spectacle by Cai Guo-Qiang? I thought I didn't, and the work itself - Fireworks from Heaven (2001-8), a modest neon piece installed in the auditorium of the Charles J. Colton School - did not seem ready to change my mind. But it was Cai's piece that brought me to the former middle school on St Claude Avenue. Colton, I learnt, reopened for a time after Katrina, but there were not enough students to keep it going. The building has just been revamped as a studio complex for local artists - in return for free space, they mentor high school kids. A brief tour took me through faded classrooms where printmakers and puppeteers were working. At the bottom of one stairway were dozens of derelict pianos: Peter Spring, the building manager, is a piano tuner from Oregon who moved to town after the storm and set up a project that repairs damaged instruments and donates them to musicians. At the front desk, among the piles of gallery announcements, were copies of Hip Hop Teen magazine, produced by local high school students. This issue proclaimed itself the 'Prospect.! Edition' and included an interview with John Barnes Jr., a local biennial artist. Is it mawkish to say that, after all that, Cai's flashing lights, hanging above the rows of battered seats, felt a lot more interesting?

Even the most ostensibly conventional venues were inhabited by ghosts. New Orleans, in other words, is a place where context is so thick and so close to the surface that the dreaded 'white cube' is an impossibility. There was certainly nothing remotely sterile about the raw, unfinished spaces at the city's Contemporary Arts Center (where Cameron now serves as Director of Visual Arts): the previously unused upper floors were opened as exhibition spaces for the first time. Light filtering in from huge windows made Julie Mehretu's massive new canvases seem to glow. (To residents the institution is still the K&B Building, former home of a defunct regional pharmacy shop chain. Given half a chance,

anyone you ask will wax nostalgic about the house brand ice cream.) If it was moving to see the work of the local artist Willie Birch - delicate charcoals of neighborhood scenes - installed in the august halls of the Neo-Classical New Orleans Museum of Art, it was more so to hear about Birch's childhood visits to the museum: to get there, his school group had to be escorted along a specially cordoned-off path through the segregated City Park.

While the major cultural institutions hosted the greatest concentration of work, more than two dozen other sites throughout the city were involved: the intention was clearly to get the art crowd out to neighborhoods that the conventional tourist routes usually ignore. The official Prospect.1 map - produced by the local design firm Atelier Fleufhaus - was rich with 'unofficial' information. A complex but brilliantly organized colourcoded system of alphanumeric markers identified almost 100 satellite exhibitions at commercial galleries, ad hoc project spaces and shoestring artists' collectives. Admirably open about the boundaries of the 'proper' event and unworried about policing the biennial brand, the Prospect.1 organizers were keen on encouraging detours.

The section of the map devoted to the Lower Ninth Ward had plenty of stories of its own to tell. It marked the site of Paul Chan's 2007 production of Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot (!953), as well as Fats Domino's house (the long-time neighborhood resident was initially thought lost in the storm; he was evacuated from his home by a US Coast Guard helicopter). Also on the map were the various grassroots relief organizations, such as Global Green and Common Ground, still operating in the neighborhood. There are many places in New Orleans where you can forget entirely about Katrina, but not here. Much of the area is still filled with weedgrown lots where houses used to stand and new ones have yet to be built. Yet people have returned. A ruined home barely standing, with its spray-painted Federal Emergency Management Agency code markings on the outside, might be next door to one that is fully restored and occupied. While no longer some totally barren post-apocalyptic landscape, the neighborhood remains a deeply hesitant, in-between sort of place: not so much tragic as fragile. Uncertainty about the future can be felt on every block.

Unsurprisingly, most of the site-specific work in the Lower Ninth Ward engaged with the inescapable surroundings, spontaneously adopting a vernacular of the home and its treacherous permeability. In such a strange, blasted environment the lines between the literal and the poetic were blurred. Leandro Erlich's Window and Ladder - Too Late for Help (2008) - a ladder descending from an impossibly supported window - might almost have been an actual artefact. Wangechi Mutu's Miss Sarah's House (2008) - a light-bedecked bare frame - sits on Miss Sarah's empty lot: after losing her home, she was swindled out of her settlement money by an unskilled contractor. More subtly, Adam Cvijanovic's gorgeous murals filling the second-floor walls of the Tekrema Center for Art and Culture, of the bayous that once existed here, presented a insidiously menacing intensification of trompe-l'oeil wallpaper: landscape invading the home.

While Mark Bradford's three-storey ark Mithra (2008) was the most iconic of the Ninth Ward works, it was Ward's installation in the Battle Ground Church that

felt the most layered and resonant. More than any other artist, he brought his own neighborhood along with him. Punning on Reverend Al Sharpton's Harlem headquarters (located in a former gymnasium), Diamond Gym ... placed a jewel-shaped metal cage filled with discarded exercise equipment at the centre of the darkened church. This centrepiece was encircled by a freestanding wall; mirrored on the inside, the periphery covered with tacked-up community notices - both photographic reproductions and the real, local, thing. An accompanying soundtrack layered snatches of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X with echoing piano chords and a recording of Tina Turner intoning a Buddhist chant. The whole read as partly absurdist, partly ad hoc sacred space - one that embodied the complex nexus of spirituality and social activism that historically defines the African-American church.

Other works in the biennial dealt head-on with black history, notably The Evidence of Things Not Seen (2008), the glorious installation by McCallum & Tarry in the New Orleans African American Museum. They filled the space - a beautifully restored Creole villa in the Treme, one of the oldest black neighborhoods in the country - with framed portraits adapted from the mug shots of the 106 protesters arrested in the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, their prisoner numbers hovering above the canvas on translucent silk sheeting. A stunning and nuanced memorial, it was also a tribute to the vital but under-funded institution that housed it. Just as notable, though, was the effect of works that did not necessarily 'deal with' race but casually and quietly portrayed black people: the joyous Jamaicans singing Bob Marley songs in Candice Breitz' 30-channel video Legend (A Portrait of Bob Marley) (2005), the Malians posed for Malick Sidibe's portraits, performers in videos by Kalup Linzy and Isaac Julien. These works have almost nothing in common other than black faces, yet cumulatively, that fact made itself felt in the biennial as a whole. That this was even notable, of course, only points to a lack in other large-scale art events. Here it seemed incidental. Without ascribing any political weight to it, it made Prospect. 1 feel more like New Orleans.

And this was a pervasive and delightful effect of the biennial: the way work originally made in and for other contexts became somehow New Orleans-ized. Monica Bonvicini's gleaming stainless-steel Desire (2006), installed on the roof of the New Orleans Museum of Art, benefited from the added resonances in the city where that was once the name of a streetcar (as well as a crime-ridden housing project). Various pieces seemed somehow to rhyme with the city's vernacular visual culture: Lee Bul's rococo chandelier-like construction, hanging in the window of the CAC, seemed to accidentally embody carnival traditions, as did Fred Tomaselli's familiar psychedelic abstractions and El Anatsui's ornate foil curtain.

Perhaps the most unlikely and serendipitous meeting of local culture and outside intervention came from Navin Rawanchaikul. The Thailand-born, Japan-based artist - working with the Canadian Tyler Russell- has developed an ongoing project, 'Navin Party' (2006-ongoing): in a skewed spirit of globalism they seek out and celebrate fellow Navins the world over. This eminently biennial-friendly enterprise hit pay dirt in the Crescent City: after a quick web search

Rawanchaikul and Russell found a misspelt obituary for the musician Narvin Kimball. Born in 1909, Kimball played banjo and bass on steamboats and hotel lounges, and for years played in the city's jazz revivalist headquarters, Preservation Hall. He died in 2006, still in exile from the storm. On the opening day of Prospect.l, Navin Party gave Kimball the traditional jazz funeral he never had. Equipped with banners painted after the style of Thai film posters and led by the Preservation Hall Band, a group of visitors paraded through the French quarter, walking and dancing, picking up more people on every block. By the time the procession reached its end I could not have told you whether I had been involved in participatory performance art, a shallow tourist spectacle or an authentic expression of local traditions. I also couldn't tell you what Kimball's daughter said when she gave a speech - the crowd was too big and noisy to hear over. She was smiling, though.

Cameron has signed up to direct the biennial for the next ten years; Prospect.2 is scheduled for 2010. Like other questions about New Orleans' future, how the event will evolve is hard to say. Future versions will probably not seem so urgent or emotional, and they are likely to be less 'about' the city itself. Perhaps the idea of a New Orleans biennial will normalize to the point where more familiar art-world discussion can take place around it, and it will be debated as people debate the Venice Biennale. This is as it should be. Whatever happens, though, I sincerely hope every edition includes a parade.