

Prospect.1 New Orleans

Various venues, New Orleans

1 November – 18 January

As the US's largest international biennial of contemporary art, Prospect.1 New Orleans (P.1) is unique. Of course the Whitney has held a biennial for some time now, but its national scope, according to Dan Cameron, P.1's founding director and chief curator, would seem to disqualify its use of the term. But P.1 is notable too because it is located in and across the landscape of New Orleans, a city, as much of the world knows, which was drowned by hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. Natural catastrophes affect many places around the globe, but the scenes from New Orleans exposed the soft tissue of America's first-world pretensions. As few foreign commentators failed to note, the images broadcast from New Orleans made one wonder if the city, and the country which enshrined the concept of incompetence as an executive qualification, wouldn't be better served by the condescending label of 'developing'.

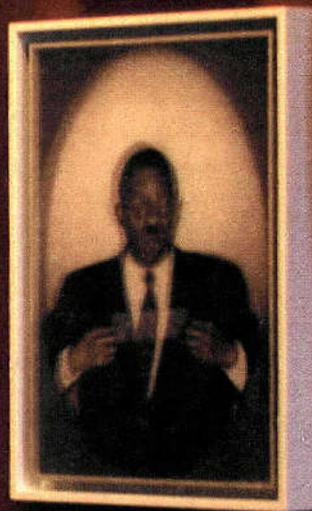
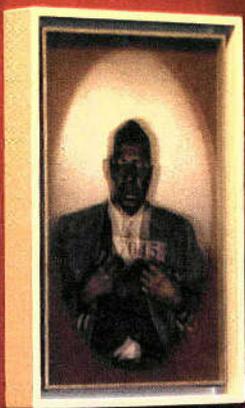
That term can give us some insight into P.1 as an exhibition, nevertheless; because 'developing' nations are those looking to grow out of regional seclusion into the international order of modern market states. Similarly, it is P.1's ambition to take its place within what Noël Carroll recently dubbed the 'transnational institution of art', 'a single, integrated, cosmopolitan, institution of art, organized transnationally in such a way that the participants, from wherever they hail, share converging or overlapping traditions and practices at the same time that they exhibit and distribute their art in internationally coordinated venues'. What Carroll's new institutionalism suggests is that there is a transnational art 'culture', but a difficulty arises when the placelessness of this new transnational culture runs up against a profoundly local culture and history, one that is already 'well-placed', we might say.

During the opening weekend of P.1, Mark Bradford's 'post-Katrina ark for New Orleans', *Mithra* (the poster-boy piece of the biennial), offered an opportunistic illustration of this difficulty. Bradford built a three-storey ark on a vacant lot in New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward, the neighbourhood that suffered near erasure when Katrina caused the city's levees to fail. The hull of Bradford's piece is constructed from reclaimed plywood sheeting that bears the traces of old posters and wheat-pastings; it's a look ubiquitous throughout New Orleans, given the number of still boarded-up and abandoned buildings. The materials, the location, the symbolic cache of the ark, the city's recent history, Bradford's own biography (his father is from New Orleans) – all of this conspires to lend the piece a relevance that, even if a bit showy, is neither kitschy nor pedantic. But on the opening weekend, Bradford's work (along with one by Robin Rhode, a simple fountain installed in a defunct public toilet just up the road) was attended by water-bottle-bearing golf carts underwritten by De Beers, the diamond mining, retail and trading company. There is a word that describes when an ethically questionable multinational gratuitously supplies water to the parched consumers of the US's first true bid to the transnational institution of art, and does so on the site of a disaster occupied by a monumental sculpture explicitly evoking the fiction of the flood and placing art in the skipper's role of world saviour, but whether that word is 'cheeky' or 'ironic' or 'tactless' I'm not sure.

The difficulty derives from the nearly impossible position in which art and artists are put by such a clash of interests. P.1 is self-consciously in the art-tourism business. As Cao Fei's piece for the New Orleans Contemporary Art Center (CAC) admits in bold black lettering, 'Since people in the art world tend to be flush, when they show up, they like to live it up.' And since 'Tourists buy souvenirs. Collectors by art' (Cao Fei again), one presumes that new institutionalists are the best kind of tourists one can imagine. They certainly are for Cameron, who on more than one occasion likened P.1 to the antidote for New Orleans's hedonistic tourism of the *Girls Gone Wild* variety.

The question remains, however, as to whether New Orleans's local history and culture are too rich, too rooted in their own idiosyncrasy, to join the 'transnational institution of art'. Certainly much of the best work in P.1 forges a unique bridge between the placelessness of new institutionalism and the place that New Orleans is, and the larger histories to which it points. The trio of projects at the New Orleans African American Museum are exemplary in this respect. Installed there are *What Will Come (Has Already Come)* (2007), a cylinder-mirror anamorphic video animation by William Kentridge; *Spirit, Ritual, Myth and Liberation* (2008), a six-channel video installation by Rico Gatson; and *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (2007–8), a multicanvas portrait and sound suite by Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry. None of the pieces addresses New Orleans as anything more than a particularly strong centre of racial gravity; the city's recent past is here enveloped within the weighty sediment of a greater history, which each of the works evokes in its own measured and beautifully poignant way. Next to these pieces, Julie Mehretu's five never-before-seen (but signature) canvases hanging in the CAC appear a little too cool and detached, too cosmopolitan, which is what makes them perfect for a biennial with ambitions to the new institutionalism.

Whether any of this qualifies Prospect.1 New Orleans as an exhibition with a multiple-personality disorder I don't know. The difficulty of weighing place against placelessness, of courting the new institutionalism in a city where history is written into the landscape like nowhere else in the US, may simply stand as necessities of the struggle, which it is now New Orleans's destiny to do. *Jonathan T.D. Neil*





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