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**Chandra McCormick, Jammin’ at the Shop in Treme, 1986**, black-and-white photograph, 23 x 29". From “Gone,” L9 Center for the Arts, New Orleans, 2008.

# To Miss New Orleans

GLENN LIGON

**I ALMOST MISSED** one of the most affecting presentations of Prospect.1 New Orleans. Wandering into a small room at the back of the L9 Center for the Arts, I discovered “Gone,” an exhibition of flood-damaged photographs assembled by the center’s founders, local artists Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick. Hung salon style in their ruined mats and mud-encrusted frames, these black-and-white documentary photos of weddings, block parties, and second-line parades in the Lower Ninth Ward are a devastating reminder of what Hurricane Katrina swept away and what a courageous and determined group of artists, community organizers, and local residents are working to restore. The problem is that “Gone” is not actually part of Prospect.1. L9 Center for the Arts is the host of a wallpaper installation by biennial artist Anne Deleporte, but Calhoun and McCormick seized the opportunity to highlight the work of the center and to present their own photos by hanging their show behind the official show. “Messy,” a friend said to me after she saw “Gone,” shaking her head sadly. It was unclear whether “messy” referred to the work in the shadow exhibition; to the fact that Calhoun and McCormick, touchstones for many artists working in the Lower Ninth Ward, aren’t officially in Prospect.1; or to the biennial itself, which is indeed messy, fantastic, disorganized, and tragic.

Curator Dan Cameron set himself an enormous task: to create a biennial on a minuscule budget in a half-ruined and infrastructure-challenged city. And like “Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art in Charleston,” a show curated by Mary Jane Jacob in 1991 that could have served as a template for this exhibition, Prospect.1 will surely be judged on its engagement with the city as well as on the art exhibited within it. Now, to be truthful, I’m a hater. Before I arrived in New Orleans I thought it needed a biennial like it needed a hole in the head and a stab in the neck. In retrospect, however, I have to congratulate Cameron on curating what turned out to be a stunning intervention in the life of a troubled city. Prospect.1 offers an opportunity to ask many hard questions about what a biennial can and cannot do—and it makes us ask the same of art.

The first question that must be asked is whether biennials as platforms for the presentation of art are played out. Yes, they are. The dozens of biennials that have sprung up all over the world have made little effort to reinvent the form, despite many claiming to have done so. Too often they are examples of the art world talking to itself through exhibitions staged primarily for a small and spectacle-hungry international art audience. These biennials give artists the chance to supersize their work in unproductive ways and provide them with venues to engage in facile notions of site-specificity, in which the local population acts as a backdrop for the main action. That said, why is this biennial different from all other biennials? What could Prospect.1 deliver that was distinct from those other biennials that keep me on airplanes for a good portion of the year?

The website for Prospect.1 claims that the exhibition "seeks to base an entirely new category of tourism for the city on the growing American interest in contemporary art, as well as the worldwide love for New Orleans," and, to be sure, standing outside the L9 Center I was handed a questionnaire that sought to measure the level of tourist spending generated by the show. This may be "an entirely new category of tourism" for New Orleans, but it's nothing new in Venice or Ljubljana or, for that matter, any city undertaking spectacular public art projects. Olafur Eliasson's *New York City Waterfalls*, 2008, had an estimated economic impact of $69 million on New York, including the $15.5 million spent on construction and promotion—a sum more than four times the entire budget of Prospect.1.

What may actually be new in New Orleans, however, is the extent to which the strongest presentations there are essentially intangible and operate outside the logic of "spectacle equals spending." For example, Dave McKenzie's *I'll Be Back, 2008–2018* takes the form of a promise: The artist will return to New Orleans every year for a decade. Unclassifiable as performance or conceptual art project, McKenzie's piece is a personal commitment to New Orleans that extends beyond the temporal boundaries of the biennial. Similarly, *Invocation of the Queer Spirits*, 2008, an undocumented séance performed by A. A. Bronson in collaboration with Peter Hobbs (which was underwritten by Creative Time and not technically part of Prospect.1), was also about commitment, in this case to the Lower Ninth Ward, which Bronson described as a place "dense with spirit life." If on its website Prospect.1 acknowledges the necessity of satisfying the agendas of government agencies and corporate donors, such intangible projects signal a curatorial adventurousness that runs counter to the stated mission of the biennial and should be expanded upon in future exhibitions.

What Prospect.1 also delivers that other biennials cannot is the city of New Orleans itself, the destruction of which riveted the nation and captured artists' imaginations. But New Orleans is not Pompeii, a picturesque and unpopulated ruin where one can run buck wild. It is a vibrant, troubled city with real live inhabitants and real live problems that were not being addressed before Katrina, much less in the years since. Prior to Katrina, New Orleans had the highest homicide rate of any major American city (a title it retains). Its public schools were considered some of the worst in the nation. Although African-American residents made up 67 percent of the city's total population, they made up 84 percent of its population below the poverty line. Before the hurricane, New Orleans was, to use Mayor Ray Nagin's phrase, a "Chocolate City," but it was a Chocolate City in crisis. Would there have been a biennial had Katrina not (further) devastated the city in 2005? Likely not. To be sure, the hurricane and subsequent flooding made New Orleans a place where trauma was evident; but if trauma were the criterion for the creation of a biennial, why not Detroit? Or Newark? Or Los Angeles? Or Washington, DC? It is troubling to think that the dramatic pictures of folks waving to passing helicopters from the roofs of flooded houses were what spurred the nation (and the art world) into action in ways that ordinary misery has not.

In saying this I do not mean to take anything away from the artists and arts professionals who were working in the city before the levees broke and for whom art as a healing force is not just a cliché. Calhoun and McCormick's photographs of daily life in the Lower Ninth Ward function as images of a community representing itself to itself, curative visions of lives too often seen through the lenses of poverty and crime. As photographs engaged with what many in the art world consider old-school debates around the politics of representation, they are not likely to be seen on the walls of museums and galleries outside New Orleans. And, to be frank, while I found the photos interesting, they were often indistinguishable from the work of any number of documentary photographers. It was their destruction in the posthurricane floods that made them particularly affecting, rendering them concrete witnesses to the horrors of the days after Katrina and aestheticizing them in ways that made them digestible for the art lovers (including me) that descended on the city for the opening of Prospect.1.

Although Calhoun and McCormick are not in the biennial, Cameron made sure that a number of New Orleans–based artists are, and many of them take the city as their subject. *Remember the Upstairs Lounge*, 2008, an amazing installation by Skylar Fein, re-creates artifacts from a French Quarter gay bar that was destroyed in 1973 by an arson fire that killed thirty-two patrons. Densely hung with handcrafted gay kitsch, Fein's installation is at once fabulously campy and a poignant reminder of the cost of gay visibility. Another artist who uses trauma as her subject is Deborah Luster, whose photographic project *A Tooth for an Eye: A Chorography of Violence in Orleans Parish*, 2008, documents sites in the city where homicides have occurred. Luster's black-and-white photos of empty lots, cheap motels, and railway sidings present a sobering view of the city beyond the 24-7 party that is the French Quarter. Willie Birch, whose large-scale multipanel acrylic and charcoal drawings grace the lobby and an adjacent gallery of the New Orleans Museum of Art, furthers his focus on black life in the Big Easy. While the drawings are certainly accomplished, I was struck by their prominent placement in comparison with the gallery reserved for the work of African-American artists in the museum's collection. Hung without regard to medium or chronology, this mini "Chocolate City" is presumably designed to show the museum's commitment to collecting the work of black artists and, perhaps, to make sure black visitors don't waste time searching the museum for the only art in which we are assumed to have an interest. In obvious contrast with Prospect.1, where there are no presuppositions about the kind of art or artists that are relevant for a particular community, the installation at the New Orleans Museum of Art points to the myriad ways in which museums have not dealt with the legacy of race and racism in relation to their curatorial practices.

My uncle Tossy used to say, "You have to be middle class to be poor," by which he meant that the skills and resources needed to get a mortgage without usurious rates, or to secure affordable health insurance, or to open a checking account or navigate a government bureaucracy were skills that middle-class people took for granted and that poor people desperately needed. At the biennial's opening, the presence of police cruisers parked in front of various art installations in the Lower Ninth and of city electrical workers wiring lights for an outdoor sculpture in an empty lot, to say nothing of the Prospect.1 shuttle bus (which some

local residents realized could be used to run errands as well as to visit exhibition venues), were examples of ordinary middle-class services at work in chronically neglected neighborhoods. The disconnect between the resources marshaled to serve and protect art and the needs of the communities in which those pieces are located is a dilemma that artists in Prospect.1 respond to in various and enterprising ways. A friend said that New Orleans is a place where artists “committed their empathy,” and many projects in the Lower Ninth involve acts of empathy and generosity that address very pragmatic needs. As one artist told me, “People here said that there was a time for storytelling—for ‘where were you when the water came?’—but now it’s time for folks to leave checks.”

The Danish group Superflex is prepared to do just that. Their photo and text piece *When the Levees Broke We Bought Our House*, 2008, documents how falling interest rates in Denmark in the aftermath of Katrina allowed a Danish family to purchase a home. The $20,000 price of the piece represents the amount that the family saved on its house, and when the work is sold the proceeds will be used to buy building materials for residents of the Lower Ninth. Another notable project serves as a platform for a variety of community activities. In a departure from her figurative paintings and collages, Wangechi Mutu created a post-and-beam architectural folly on the footprint of a demolished house. Strung with lights that outline the structure, *Mrs. Sarah’s House*, 2008, acts as a reminder of the building that was once there and as a stage for musical and spoken-word performances. The proceeds from a print edition Mutu produced will help Sarah Lastie, the owner of the land on which the piece sits, to rebuild her home. Mark Bradford’s *Mithra*, 2008, a three-story ark made of found wood and tattered posters located on the site of a demolished funeral parlor, is an impressive translation of his densely layered painting practice into a three-dimensional form. Over the course of the year Bradford spent working on the piece, he formed an attachment to the neighborhood, organizing a benefit auction for the L9 Center and sponsoring a massive crawfish boil for local residents, allowing people to meet (and critique) the artists working in the area. The chance to speak is an integral part of Nari Ward’s *Diamond Gym: Action Network*, 2008, a structure of welded steel and scavenged gym equipment located in the shell of the Battle Ground Baptist Church. The installation’s walls function as a bulletin board for community groups and individuals offering their services, making a connection between the social and activist functions of the destroyed black church and the installation that now occupies the space.

While not all the artists working in the Lower Ninth Ward intervene directly in the local community, several projects resonate with it in more oblique and interesting ways. Janine Antoni’s *T-E-A-R*, 2008, is a video of the artist’s blinking eye projected in a room containing a lead-wrapped wrecking ball used to demolish an abandoned building. The blinking of the eye in the video is paired with the crashing sound of the wrecking ball, linking the destructive act with temporary blindness, but also suggesting renewal, as if each blink brings the possibility of something new. For his contribution to the show, Sebastián Preece transplanted the foundation of a ruined house to the Tekrema Center for Art and Culture. His piece is an act of displacement in the tradition of artists such as Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark, but like Antoni’s *T-E-A-R*, it evokes rebirth in its tension between what was destroyed and what the displacement creates.

A number of artists in Prospect.1 said that their response to the invitation was simply to “bring their best.” This is evident at the Contemporary Arts Center, where Julie Mehretu exhibits a suite of new, large-scale paintings in which architectural renderings, landscapes, and memories of place are mapped on top of one another; Isaac Julien shows *Baltimore*, 2003, a three-channel video installation that explores the city as a haunted and divided place; and Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla contribute *A Man Screaming Is Not a Dancing Bear*, 2008, a video featuring a man ominously drumming on the window blinds of an abandoned house juxtaposed with footage of the bayou. Jackie Sumell’s research project and multimedia installation *The House That Herman Built*, 2003–, centers on Herman Wallace, a Black Panther who has served more than three decades of a disputed murder sentence in solitary confinement in Louisiana’s most notorious prison. The work began in 2003 when she wrote to ask him: “What kind of a house does a man who has lived in a six-foot-by-nine-foot cell for over thirty years dream of?” Over the course of many visits, phone calls, and letters, Wallace and Sumell have conjured a heartbreaking dream house liberally appointed with pecan wood, shag carpet, and plenty of booze.

“You ordered wrong,” barked Mrs. Leah Chase, the octogenarian chef and owner of the beloved soul food restaurant Dooky Chase. “You ate my buffet and now you want fried chicken, and you know I’m going to have to charge you twice.” True, I should have known, but getting it wrong was the leitmotif of my days in New Orleans, where on the way to see Rico Gatson’s riveting video installation *Spirit, Myth, Ritual and Liberation*, 2008, I mistook a wedding on the grounds of the New Orleans African American Museum for a performance piece, or where when searching for *Tabula Rasa Calculator*, 2008, a chalk-stick installation by José Damasceno at the Charles J. Colton School, I thought a classroom full of battered upright pianos was a sculpture. Perhaps it’s not surprising in a place so full of contradictions, so creolized, so invested in masquerade, that I mistook life for art. Kafka said that art was a mirror that sometimes “goes ‘fast,’ like a watch,” by which he meant that art not only reflects the society it is part of but predicts where that society is going. In New Orleans, however, the opposite seemed true: The art in Prospect.1 gave the city a run for its money, but in the end it was the art that was outrun at every turn. Yet the feeling of art struggling to keep up with life was what gave the exhibition its vitality. If the city needs a biennial, it needs a biennial like Prospect.1, where artists tried to, and frequently did, get it right. Here’s my promise: When the next biennial in New Orleans comes around—and even if it doesn’t—like Dave McKenzie, I’ll be there.

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