Being There

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THESE DAYS, VOLUNTEERS IN NEW ORLEANS'S Lower Ninth Ward can be found trimming, uprooting, and generally hacking at vines, ferns, and feral shrubbery. Louisiana has a lot of "exuberant vegetation," as one Tulane biologist has put it, and when you contemplate the alacrity with which nature is reclaiming the Lower Ninth Ward, you do sense a certain creepy vegetable enthusiasm. Many buildings have been demolished, and many that remain are vacant. Particularly after nightfall, when the few illuminated homes glow like oil platforms in splendid isolation, the overall impression is of one vast sea of weed sretching as the eye castretchingn see–all the way to the downtown skyline, with its rookery of high-rise hotels. You can easily imagine that it's just a matter of time before the cypresses and the tupelo gums and the alligators and the armadillos come back, and the whole place reverts to swamp.

And the swamp does return, in a manner of speaking, in Adam Cvijanovic's Bayou, 2008, which is one of the more than 280 works in Prospect.1, New Orleans's first biennial of contemporary art. In three rooms on the second floor of a small, rickety house in the Lower Ninth Ward, Cvijanovic has painted wrap-around murals depicting a pristine wetland in all its glory: skeins of moss drooping toward placid water; birds alighting under massive, gnarled trees; dense foliage filtering sunlight into a chartreuse gloaming. The house itself seems abandoned, empty of furniture, the ceilings mottled with water stains. Signs of domestic and mercantile life are arrayed throughout the rooms: a mirror propped against a wall; a carton of blank sales receipts; a few glass Christmas lights on a mantelpiece. Most of these relics appear to be decades old. (One yellowed calendar, decorated with little nosegays, is dated 1923.) All of them are on the cusp of returning to dust, making way for the scene that seems to belly into the room like a sail, barely contained by the dark wooden moldings that frame it.

Cvijaanovic's swamp, in other words, registers not as prelapsarian but as postlapsarian, which may be the source of the dread fascination it exerts. On a smaller scale, it articulates the same vision as Alan Weisman's 2007 book, *The World without Us*, in which the author explains exactly how microbes, plants, and animals will, upon our eventual extinction, slowly break down everything we've wrought. Apparently, people are drawn to such projections: The book was on the New York Times best-seller list for six months. Perhaps when Weltschmerz reaches a certain level, the only way to soothe it is to imagine the Welt without us–to remind ourselves that someday, nature itself will soften the contours of our failures and mistakes and finally efface them. In any case, Weltschmerz is probably close at hand for most visitors to the Lower Ninth Ward, or indeed to New Orleans, where reminders of our recent collective failures remain abundant and, to those who have had no opportunity to become inured to them, shocking.

As if to articulate this free-floating reproach, someone has posted a handwritten sigh on a telephone pole near Battle Ground Baptist Church that reads THINK THAT YOU MIGHT BE WRONG. Battle Ground Baptist–also in the Lower Ninth Ward and the site of another Prospect.1 work, Nari Ward's Diamond Gym; Action Network, 2008–is a low-slung brick building whose unprepossessing appearance belies its long history: It was established in 1869 in Fazendeville, an African-American community in

Adam Cvijanovic, *The Bayou*, 2008, flashe paint and latex on Tyvek. Installation view, Tekrema Center for Art and Culture, New Orleans, 2008. Photo: John d'Addario.

nearby St. Bernard Parish. In the early 1960s, after the federal government expropriated Fazendeville's land create a park, the church moved to the Lower Ninth Ward, where it persisted until August 2005.

When I visited, the double doors stood wide open, spilling light onto the lawn and revealing Ward's sculpture: a hulking, gem-shaped metal armature filled with a jumble of derelict exercise equipment. Voices could be heard, getting louder as I approached, but once inside, I saw that no one else was there–not even as attendant or guard. The sounds were coming from speakers, and they gradually resolve themselves into a layered composition of music and speech fragments: Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey. Torqued mirrors were installed behind the piece, creating a disorienting thicket of reflections.

It's hard to convey how eerie it was to think of Ward's sculpture sitting there, keeping its own murmuring counsel in an abandoned church in a silent, empty neighborhood. In its commanding inscrutability, it was weirdly reminiscent of the monolith in 2001: A Space Odyssey, the one that is discovered on the moon and turns out to be a communications beacon. But if the work was calling former residents back, its magus-like presence offered no assurances that they would find aid or comfort when they arrived. Diamond Gym seemed simply to be insisting on an absolute imperative to return–insisting, that is, that history hasn't yet come to an end in this particular place. And yet, while there are people and organizations insisting the same thing, and making valiant efforts to restore inundated neighborhoods, the concerted federal support that was promised has never really materialized. Which is why, more that three years after Katrina, nature is still offering its melancholy dispensation to the Lower Ninth Ward.

But what kind of dispensation can a contemporary art biennial offer? What kind should it be in the business of offering? These are the questions raised by Prospect.1. The exhibition, curated by Dan Cameron, is the largest international contemporary art biennial ever organized in the United States. It contains works of every conceivable description by eighty-one artists from six-

This page, above: **Monica Bonvicini, *Desire*, 2006**, stainless steel, 9' 5" x 21' 1" x 2' 7". Installation view, New Orleans Museum of Art, 2008. Photo: John d'Addario.

teen countries, installed at more than two dozen venues, from the vast Palladian pile that is the New Orleans Museum of Art to the disused Ideal Auto Repairs garage (where there is a grungily beautiful installation of silver-black abstractions and ghostly monochrome wall paintings by Jacqueline Humphries). It is an enormous show, and Cameron has not made any attempt to unify it via a particular thematic or theoretical scheme. What unifies it, rather, is its map–not the typical no-frills biennial site guide, but a colorful, Acme Novelty Library–ish document replete with sidebars and small blocks of text explaining the histories of the various venues. The sites themselves are marked on the map by lettered disks that look like the keys on an old-fashioned typewriter, and in a curious way the constellation they form seems like Prospect.1's real curatorial statement.

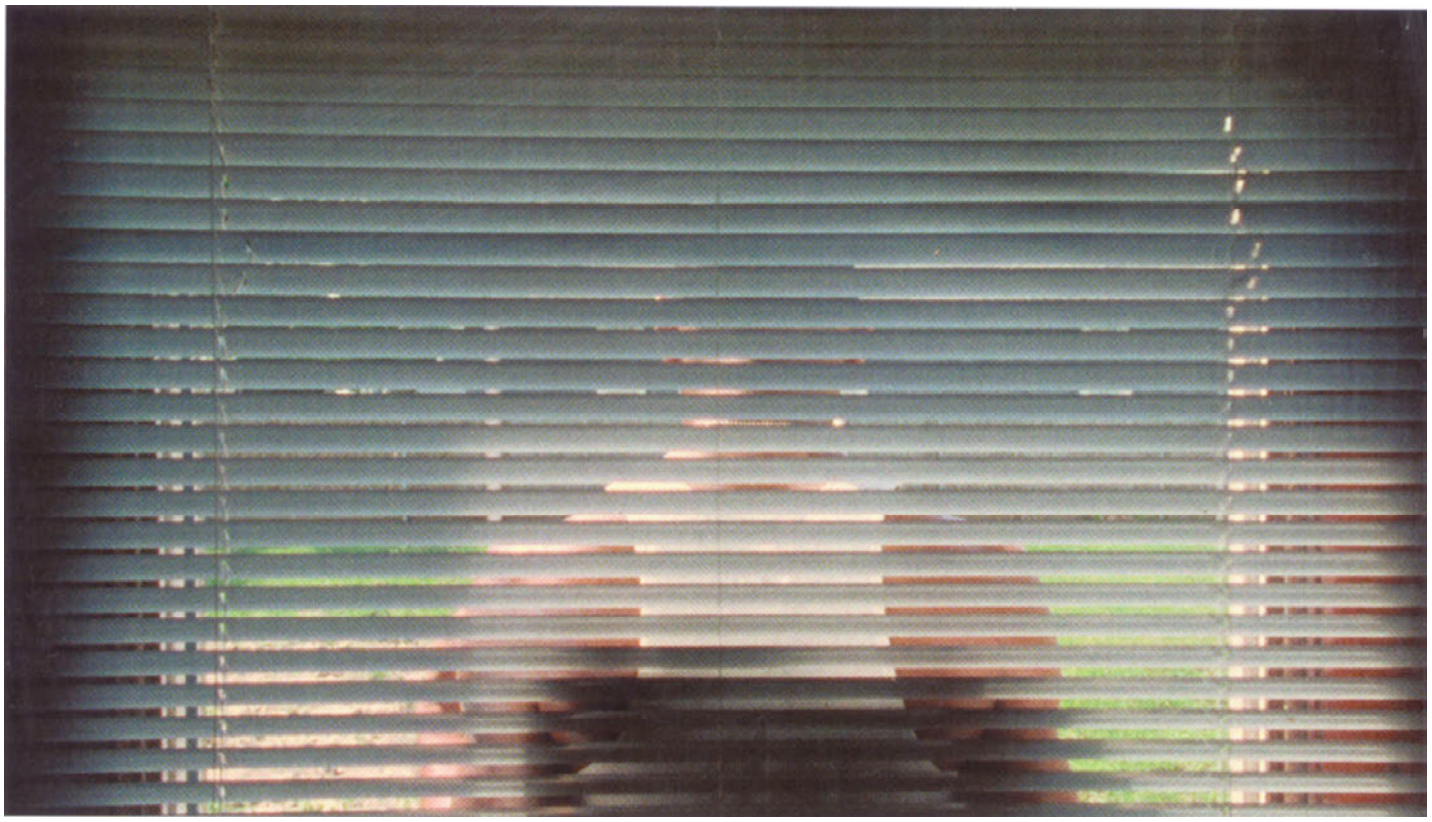
The alpha and omega of this exhibition is New Orleans itself, and, not surprisingly, many of the works address the events that recently transpired there, putting forward a kind of material rhetoric stripped down to the most basic propositions.

First and foremost are the houses. It's basic thing, a house–a fundament of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, its foursquare representation known to every kindergartner. Yet in Prospect.1, it's as if houses are more like giant squid–entities whose very existence strains credulity, and so must be affirmed again and again. They're all over the exhibition: houses as medium, dream houses, nightmare houses. At the Contemporary Arts Center, one of the biennial's main venues, Monica Bonvicini's big black-and-white drawings bring the grainy cast of old crime-scene photography to images of flooded homes, while on the roof of the New Orleans Museum of Art she has mounted an enormous illuminated sign that reads DESIRE–conjuring thoughts of Tennessee William's play, though one wonders if even Blanche DuBois's powder, perfume, and paper lanterns would have been enough to diffuse the realities of a FEMA trailer. (There's one of those, too–repurposed by Paul Villinski as a mobile art studio.) The House That Herman Built, 2003–, also on view at the CAC, illustrates one way of coping with the realities of a six-by-nine-foot prison cell: It's an installation documenting the long-term collaboration–part architectural project, part fundraiser, and part artful correspondence–between New Orleans-based artist Jackie Sumell and Louisiana State Penitentiary inmate Herman Wallace, who has been held in solitary confinement for decades for a murder it seems likely he did not commit. If

Wallace is ever released, he may find himself living in a traditional Louisiana-style A-frame house and lounging by a swimming pool with black panther design on the bottom of it. For every such redemptive vision, however, there are others that do the work of mourning–the dim, empty bungalow in Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's mesmerizing video A Man Screaming Is Not a Dancing Bear, 2008, for instance, or the moth-colored latex cast of somebody's decimated cottage that Takashi Horisaki has hung from the ceiling of the Hefler Warehouse, another central venue. Sewn together with big wire stitches, it's more garment than building–a shroud, registering the multicolored stigmata of mold.

And then there are the boats. There is an ark–Mark Bradford's Mithera, 2008–constructed out of locally salvaged materials and beached on a lawn in the Ninth Ward. There is a giant orange boat, Miguel Palma's Rescue Games, 2008, filled with water and motorized, so that it rocks ponderously; you can climb up on a scaffolding and peer down and watch the water rolling fore and aft in an endless, hypnotizing wave. There is a peculiar vessel, made of wooden staves and not particularly watertight in appearance. Its eccentric, branching shape is based on a map of New Orleans's waterways: Various pseudopods represent the Seventeenth Street Canal, the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, and so on. This work Alexandre Arrechea's Mississippi Bucket, 2008–is to be found in front of Harrah's on the downtown waterfront, a short walk from the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. Another giant illuminated sign–CASINO–looms above it, a reminder that you take your chances when you go to sea in sieve, as when you build a city on a flood-plain and let its barrier islands wash away.

And yet in one's peregrinations from point to point– in the process of navigating the exhibition–these ostensibly stable constructions, these houses and boats, come to seem unsettled, contingent, and adrift. The map's lettered disks are big enough to read easily, but too big to indicate precisely the location of the works. not all of which are easy to find. Mississippi Bucket, for example, was supposed to be in a place called the Plaza of Good Fortune, but no on I spoke with–not the parking valets at Harrah's, not the security guard who got on his radio and asked if anyone listening had ever heard of such a plaza, not the concierge at the hotel across the street–had any idea where that might be. Uptown at Tulane, I went looking for a work that, it turned out, had never actually been completed; mystified administrators kept directing me to the campus sculpture garden, full of steely '70s geometries. Robin Rhode's fountain like Contemplation Piece, 2008, at the watery edge of the Ninth Ward, proved as elusive as Ponce de Leon's Fountain of Youth. Though fixed on the map, the works in reality were unmoored in the general flux of the city which–judging from the profusion of "For Sale" and "Going Out of Business" signs, on the one hand, and the constant sound of construction and smell o sawdust on the other–seems to be rebuilding and disbanding at the same time.



But this unrest also imparts a certain frontier ambience, and the contemporary art scene in general is thriving, as art scenes will in such atmospheres. Artist-run galleries, such as Good Children and the Front, are opening up in vacant buildings. The city has turned the Charles J. Colton School, a mold-encrusted white elephant, over to artists, who have transformed it into a warren of studios and impromptu exhibition spaces. (Cai Guo-Qiang's Prospect.1 project, Black Fireworks, 2008, a light show whose silent pyrotechnics can be watched from massage chairs, has been installed in the musty auditorium.) The young director of the George and Leah McKenna Museum of African American Art, Shantrelle P. Lewis, has started a contemporary program showcasing, when I visited, the work of New Orleans painters; group shows of local artists at the nonprofit venue and residency center Louisiana ArtWorks and in a disused furniture store–the former curated by Mia Kaplan, the latter a salon-style expo spearheaded by gallerist Andy Antippas–were full of impressive work. The improvisational spirit makes for some bizarre juxtapositions: The furniture store, for instance, shares a building with a police station, and there's no wall separating the two spaces. Cops can be seen standing around the sergeant's desk drinking coffee, just steps away from the art. Later, a friend to whom I described all this said that it sounded "like Berlin after the wall came down." It's an open city, in other words, with all the prospect of adventure that that implies (for some). But it is still roiled by violence, poverty, and corruption scandals. When you walk around experiencing the dazedness that seems to persist everywhere–not just in the Lower Ninth Ward, however much it is fetishized as the locus of catastrophe–you sense that the city is open also in the sense of agape, like a mouth.

Some Prospect.1 artists have chosen to put words in that mouth, as it were, using fabulation or narrative to rearticulate histories both recent and not-so-recent. At the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, Nedko Solakov presents an antic, poignant installation that combines videos, loopily scrawled wall texts, his trademark little drawings, and an amalgam of medieval Bulgarian and contemporary Creole kitsch. To make a long and convoluted story short, Solakov's conceit is that Katrina was actually caused by Baldwin, Emperor of Flanders whoa died in 1205 but who lives on as a vengeful ghost, wreaking hydrogeologic havoc around the world. Sanford Biggers's sculpture Blossom, 2007, at the Old US Mint, alludes to Jim Crow atrocities: A player piano, slowly plinking

out a rendition of "Strange Fruit," is smashed into the trunk of what the artist refers to as "The Hanging Tree." And Skylar Fein's harrowing installation at the CAC, Remember the Upstairs Lounge, 2008, uses signage and red flocked wallpaper to re-create the interior of a New Orleans gay bar where, in 1973, thirty-two men died in a fire that probably caused by arson. On the walls are snapshots of the dead and a graphic newspaper photos of the fire's aftermath. (In one, a man who is evidently in shock stares calmly at his hands, which appear to have melted.) In a more oblique way, too, the many Prospect.1 works that trade in ornament and in a carnival logic of misrule and masquerade (e.g., amazing, enormous tapestries by Shawne Major at the CAC, which chime with the lately ubiquitous El Anatsui's, at the Old US Mint; the campy comedy of Kalup Linzy; a demented Hall of Presidents created by Stephen G Rhodes) resonate with the strategies by which the city has traditionally formulated polyphonic refusals of speechlessness–whether the kind that is symptomatic of shock, or he kind imposed via political and geographic marginalization. And then, finally, there are works that have nothing whatsoever to do with New Orleans but just seem to be there because, presumably, Cameron likes them and thinks viewers will as well. Which is fine, but the show is undoubtedly strongest where the work speaks directly to what an NGO worker would call "conditions on the ground."

The reference to an NGO worker is in fact germane. For if Prospect.1 lacks an overarching theme or unifying frame, if does have a single raison d'être, by which it interpolates itself not only spatially but politically and economically into the territory it maps. The biennial's altruistic purpose is to provide New Orleans with what it so clearly needs: money. The Prospect.1 website is very direct. Under the heading "Why a biennial for New Orleans?" it asserts that the exhibition "seeks to base an entirely new category of tourism for the city on the growing American interest in some people detect in Prospect.1. And yes, indeed, there's something off-putting in the image of well-

heeled art lovers trundling through the Lower Ninth Ward in shuttle buses. Yet all biennials abet the symbiosis of art and hospitality industry–even those that take place in cities that are already art-world centers. To criticize Prospect.1 for its emphasis on tourist-driven revenue streams therefore seems faintly absurd, because such criticism would imply either that all biennials are inherently objectionable (a defensible position perhaps, but not one that warrants singling out this particular show) or that it is in the emphasis itself that Prospect.1 has gone astray–that its real failure was a failure to dissimulate.

Perhaps more problematic than Prospect.1's relation to the tourism economy, though, is its relation to the tourist optic–a detached, indulgent mode of viewing that can and does aestheticize all that comes before it, the more picturesquely decrepit the better. All biennials that go beyond institutional walls, as most of them do, court this spectatorial mode, even as they may try to counteract it by laying claim to the simple moral authority of being there. Sometimes the claims are explicit–the curatorial methodology

makes some overt attempt to establish a reflexive criticality vis-a-vis the exhibition's relationship to its setting–but in the case of Prospect.1, it's implicit. The unstated assertion is that context-specificity or -responsiveness itself will neutralize the wholesale aestheticizing of the entire city, emblematized by that beguiling map: The works will engender an ethical interaction between viewer and site that precludes imperious detachment and dissolves spectatorial guilt. This position is complicated, though, by the fact that "being there" is more difficult in some places than others. How does looking at site-specific work change in a place as thoroughly mediated as post-Katrina New Orleans? There may in fact be sites that have been so extensively disseminated as image that it is difficult to feel one can inhabit them in real space at all –at least, if on is a tourist, someone unfamiliar with the place as it existed before all the cameras arrived. The virtual screen becomes a permanent meniscus between perception and reality, and we experience a kind of false proximity.

It may be impossible to reconcile mediated viewing with any immediate, lived experience within New Orleans, and we could not reasonably ask any curator or artist to perform that fear for us. Indeed, no matter what curatorial interventions Cameron had undertaken, responsibility for negotiating this irreconcilable differential would ultimately devolve to the viewer–who, after all, is the one doing the aestheticizing. As for

myself, I liked Prospect.1 very much, found it compelling and frequently riveting–but could never quite shake the feeling that something MIGHT BE WRONG in my address of the work and the city that contained it. Cvijanovic's Bayou and Ward's Diamond Gym, for example, are among the most powerful context-specific works I've ever encountered, and I fully partook of the affective charge they derived from their surroundings. The works were haunting, uncanny–and yet those very qualities bespoke a certain detachment. The uncanny itself is, after all, a by-product of image-production technology, if we are to take theorists dating back to Walter Benjamin at their word.

Certainly in the wake of Katrina, there were constant invocations of the surreality of the scenes unfolding before our eyes on television and on our computer screens–expressions of astonishment that were in some sense simply amplifications of the unheimlich exoticism that has always been associated with the city. And when push comes to shove, as it did with Katrina, the Janus-faced nature of exoticism is always revealed; what is titillatingly strange becomes disturbingly so. " It looks like a third-world country," was the refrain. What is perhaps most toxic in that statement is the underlying assumption that there is some ontological distinction between America and a "third-world country"; and the notion that certain kinks of suffering, and sufferers, are ipso facto un-American ("refugees"). And that is essentially the same geopolitical metaphysics that has long served to reduce people to what has recently been termed bare life. What else did Barbara Bush mean when she said that the Houston Astrodome was "working very well" for the New Orleans residents who wound up there? She meant: For these people whose humanity is so etiolaed that they don't even desire privacy, palatable food, or a modicum of order in their lives, an MRE as good as a feast. The worst-case scenario would be that in viewing Prospect.1, in offering New Orleans the ministrations of your dollars an your astonished regard, you are recuperating this logic. Then again, perhaps this is one thing that we actually have the power to expiate. As Diane Arbus said when asked how she composed her photographs,"If I stand in front of something, instead of arranging it, I arrange myself." This aphorism on the way to approach artmaking may apply to the viewing of art, too. And that's the inversion that Prospect.1 may ultimately perform, a turning of the camera from subject to spectator. Viewer, heal thyself.