

## SPOTLIGHT



◀ Dan Cameron, the curator of Prospect.1 New Orleans.

OPPOSITE Tony ▶ Fitzpatrick's *Boeuf Gras*, 2007 (top). Alexandre Arrechea's *Mississippi Bucket*, 2008 (bottom), which will be installed on the plaza outside the Poydras Street entrance to Harrah's Casino.

# Encouraging Wards

A biennial brings art to communities across New Orleans

BY CARLY BERWICK

It started, like so many things in New Orleans after August 28, 2005, with a sense of outrage. The following January, after the floodwaters unloosed by Hurricane Katrina drowned much of the city, gallerist Arthur Roger hosted a panel discussion about the future of New Orleans, as part of a group exhibition he had put together called "The Comeback Show." (It was organized, Roger points out, even before the postal service was back and running.) Dan Cameron, 51, a New York curator and frequent New Orleans visitor for the

past 20 years, was a panelist, along with Duke University art history professor Richard Powell and historian and author Douglas Brinkley. "Doug Brinkley said something that I found annoying," says Cameron, at the time a senior-curator-at large at the New Museum in New York. "He said that once New Orleans tourism came back, that would be fine for the art world. I said, 'Tourists don't buy art. If you want to help the New Orleans art world, you have to get the serious art-world players to come to town—that's what's going to make a

difference." (Brinkley did not respond to a request for comment, but others who attended the discussion confirmed the gist of the debate.)

The exchange led to more talk that night over dinner between Cameron and longtime New Orleans friends such as William Fagaly, curator of African art at the New Orleans Museum of Art. The next morning, Cameron realized what a major contribution it would be to stage a biennial in the city. "The art world seemed to be the only part of the cultural community in America that didn't seem to understand why New Orleans was important," he says.

An art fair was out of the question. Even though fairs are "all the rage," as Cameron notes, they are not his area of expertise. But a biennial featuring dozens of international artists was something he had done before, having curated the 2003 biennial in Istanbul and the 2006 biennial in Taipei. From the first of next month through January 18, people will be able to judge for themselves the success of Prospect.1 New Orleans, when it will launch at indoor and outdoor sites across the city.

Even September's Hurricane Gustav didn't put a damper on it. Eighty-one artists—many familiar to the international biennial circuit (such as Xu Bing, Leandro Erlich, William Kentridge and Julie Mehretu), others purely local—are presenting works that respond to the city.

Tony Fitzpatrick's *Boeuf Gras*, 2007, will be installed on the plaza outside the Poydras Street entrance to Harrah's Casino. Among the artists is Los Angeles-based Mark Bradford, known for his gridded, detritus-based collage paintings. "Dan sent me an e-mail about a year ago at 5:01 P.M. and I e-mailed him back saying yes at about 5:05," Bradford recalls. "I knew I wanted to do a project in New Orleans, but I didn't have the venue. I was very attracted to all that detritus and the shipping containers.

The ark, I'm going to build an ark, that was in my head." So Bradford traveled to New Orleans for the first time, walked around, and came across L9 Center for the Arts in the Lower Ninth Ward. Chandra McCormick and Keith Calhoun, the photographers who founded L9, introduced Bradford to locals who are collaborating with him to build a huge ark in situ. Bradford also introduced Cameron to L9, and now the center is an official venue of the biennial. "It's like this whole city has been turned into circuits and tentacles—in every little community there's something to do with the biennial," Bradford notes. Although Cameron has been a curator for most of his career, running a nonprofit was completely new to him. Originally from upstate New York, he moved to New York City after graduating from Bennington College. "I was sort of instinctively organizing shows in high school and college without knowing what it was called," says Cameron, who became a freelance curator in the early 1980s in New York.

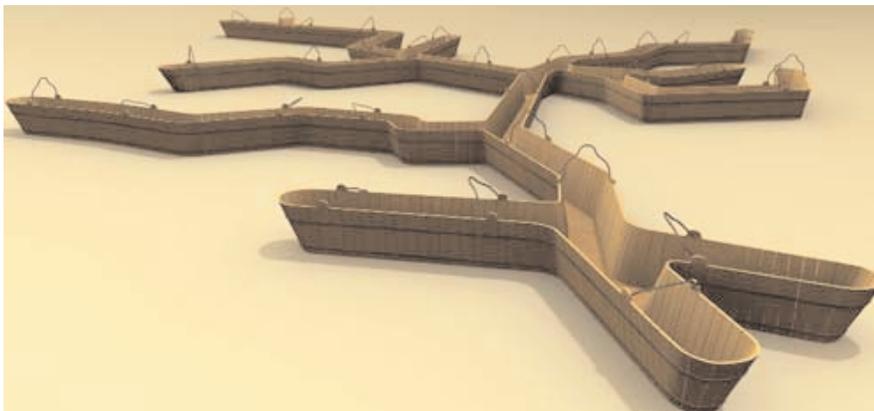
His experiences in the art scene of the time were channeled into one of the first '80s-nostalgia exhibitions, titled "East Village USA."

The chaotic, esthetically jangling show of spray paint and neon was held at the New Museum, where he worked from 1995 to 2006. There he also organized mid-career retrospectives of Kentridge and Carroll Dunham.

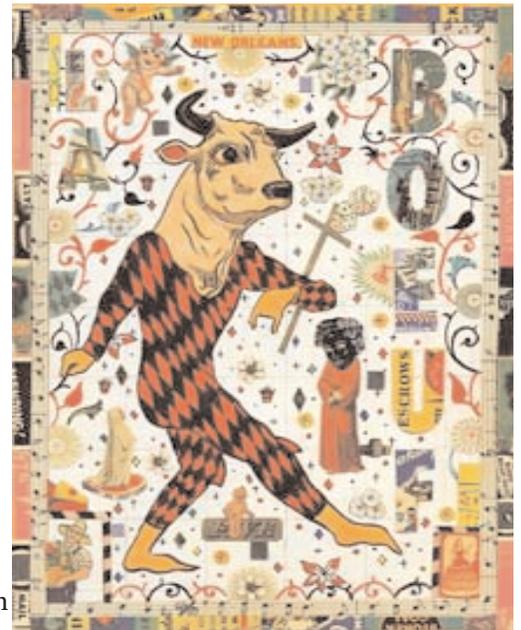
In 2006, inspired by the conversation started at Roger's gallery, Cameron set to work in the decimated city, trying to raise seed money for his New Orleans biennial idea, even though phone lines were not yet up (the New Orleans Museum of Art still uses satellite phones). "The city was crippled, there

was no tourism, no economy," says Cameron. "There was no good news coming out of New Orleans in all of 2006, except for individual acts of compassion or bravery."

Eventually he received a grant from the Toby Devan Lewis Foundation and established an office in New York, with about a half-dozen employees. He left the New Museum and decided to devote himself to his startup. By midsummer of this year, Cameron's year old nonprofit, U.S. Biennial, Inc., had raised more than half of the \$3.5 million cost of the biennial, with powerful art-world supporters such as Agnes Gund and Beth Rudin DeWoody behind him. In early July alone, Prospect.1 New Orleans received grants totaling \$225,000 from the Getty Fund for New Orleans, the Starry Night Fund of the Tides Foundation, and the Ruth U. Fertel Foundation. (Cameron has since been hired as a curator at the Center for Contemporary Arts in New Orleans.)



Alexandre Arrechea's Mississippi Bucket, 2008, will be installed on the plaza outside the Poydras Street entrance to Harrah's Casino. According to Cameron, 100,000 people are expected to visit Prospect.1 New Orleans. These visitors will also be engaging in a grand civic improvement project. The explicit goal of the biennial is to bring another tourism segment and its money into the city. Although other biennials have come to strife-torn cities, such as Johannesburg in 1997, "the notion of having a biennial shortly after man-



made and natural disaster," Cameron points out, "that's never happened before."

For this first, untested biennial, he invited friends such as New York painters Fred Tomaselli and Amy Sillman, as well as artists who, Cameron says, he was sure would not be "divas." Among them are the New York-based Nari Ward, who is making a diamond-shaped jungle gym on site at the Battle Ground Baptist Church, while fellow New Yorker Paul Villinski is contributing one of his solar-and-wind-powered repurposed FEMA trailers.

Only 10 percent of the artists in the show are from the New Orleans area, including photographer Deborah Luster and multimedia tapestry artist Shawne Major. L9's McCormick and Calhoun are extremely impressed by what Prospect.1 New Orleans is bringing to the Lower Ninth Ward. "By having the biennial in the community, people who never had a chance to come to the nontourist part will get out of the norm," says Calhoun, who also notes artist Wangechi Mutu's restoration of a woman's house as part of her biennial contribution. "Just with what she's doing for that one lady, the biennial already means a lot."