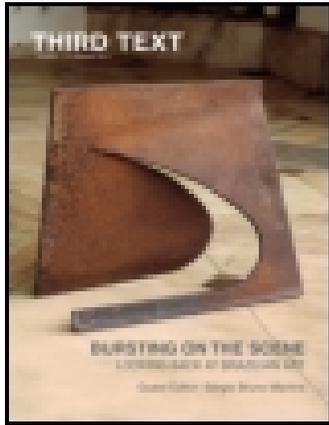


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Third Text

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ctte20>

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Published online: 09 Jun 2015.



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To cite this article: Rachel Nelson (2015): Visions at the Scene of Trauma, Third Text, DOI:
[10.1080/09528822.2015.1042220](https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2015.1042220)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2015.1042220>

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Visions at the Scene of Trauma

New Orleans' Prospect(s)

Rachel Nelson

In the only photographic series Zwelethu Mthethwa has ever undertaken outside of South Africa, the controversial artist best known for his portraits of migrant workers photographed houses in New Orleans.¹ These houses, water-ravaged and left in ruins by the catastrophic hurricane that decimated large swathes of New Orleans in 2005, were from the lower Ninth Ward, a historically economically depressed African-American neighbourhood. In the 'Common Ground Series' Mthethwa paired the interiors of flooded houses in post-Katrina New Orleans with photographs of migrant workers' quarters destroyed by wildfire in Cape Town, without indicating by wall labels which was which. When the series was exhibited at Prospect New Orleans, the art biennial launched in 2008, the results were striking. The large photographs of a fire-devastated black township were, at least at first glance, indistinguishable from those of a deluged poor, black neighbourhood in New Orleans. Homes suffering the devastation of one of the strongest storms to impact the coast of the United States in a hundred years merged into the burned homes outside Cape Town made from left-over plywood, cardboard and corrugated metal.

The images, marked by flood and fire damage, coalesce two stories of disaster into a single aesthetic vision. In Mthethwa's jarring photos, walls and window frames, the outlines and borders of formerly inhabited spaces, are formalised in cropped close-ups. In the New Orleans photographs, the mould that trailed closely behind the receding waters during the searingly hot days, weeks and months that followed the deadly hurricane blooms over walls, clothes and framed family portraits, covering all remnants of life. The photographs from outside Cape Town are similarly marked by damage from the water used to extinguish the fire. There are no homes left in the hard intersections of corners, walls and ceilings that fill each composition. Instead, all traces of life have been rendered abstract

1 It is with great unease that I include the work of Mthethwa in this article. While I only know the most basic information about Mthethwa's current trial and indictment for murder in South Africa, the sexual and gendered violence of which he has been accused is deeply and systemically entangled with the biopolitical forms of control and devaluing of populations against which this article is utterly opposed. I hope that evoking Mthethwa's work, as if disregarding the complicity that the artist seems to have with violent and unjust raced, sexed, gendered and classed fictions, does not serve to shore up these systems.



Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Untitled (from Common Ground Series)*, 2008, C-print on, crystal archive paper, 59×76 1/2 inches, © Zwelethu Mthethwa, Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

2 I was a long-time resident of New Orleans at the time of the storm. During and after the biennial, it was notable how many of my friends and acquaintances talked about Mthethwa's works and how they mirrored the kind of profound estrangement city inhabitants suffered in the months after the storm. I had a similar experience looking at the work – I was struck by how the photos defamiliarised the city in a way the storm had already done by visualising racial and economic inequities normally hidden in the vibrant culture of the city.

through the markings left by destruction. The blackness of mould forms a gestural mark that moves the images out of time and place and composes an aesthetics of trauma that knows no geographic or historical bounds. When these images were shown in New Orleans amidst the ongoing turmoil of people struggling to return to their homes, and battles waging about rebuilding flood-prone areas, the de-familiarisation of local places that takes place in the aestheticised images reflected the affective response many had in the city after the storm.² In a city that had been made strange by both the destruction from the hurricane and the government response to it, there seemed to be no limits around the despair wrought by the storm, or the systems that produced it. Questions without answers refracted off the glossy surfaces of the photographs. What could contain a storm of this magnitude? What could contain the histories that conspire to make poor people and people of colour, often the same people, always already the victims of every ecological disaster?

IN THE LINGERING AFTERIMAGE

This article opens with the large-scale photographs in Mthethwa's 'Common Ground Series' and lingers at the moment when the images

cause the borders between geopolitical traumas to blur (and disasters to become uncontainable) as a point of entry into two entangled spaces of inquiry. First, this blurred vision focuses a line of questioning on how art, and the biennial project, was imagined to function in New Orleans after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. A decade has passed since Okwui Enwezor theorised the abundance of large-scale international exhibitions of art that cropped up around the globe in the latter half of the twentieth century as ‘responses to events connected to traumatic historical ruptures’.³ Biennial art exhibitions have proliferated in sites like Johannesburg after the end of apartheid, Kassel after the destruction of World War II, Gwangju and Angola at the transition to a democratic form of governance after years of repressive military dictatorships, and now New Orleans in the aftermath of environmental and social disaster. This signifies, in Enwezor’s appraisal, a recognition that art has a function in social and political transitions and transformations; as he elaborates, these exhibitions show countries, cities and institutions acknowledging that ‘the work of the imagination’ has a role in the ‘transition towards democracy and the development of new concepts of the citizen’.⁴ Thus, art and exhibitions are being produced under the premise that art *does something* when set into contexts of social, political and environmental upheaval. Less clear is *what* art does in these circumstances. This article considers the biennial developed in New Orleans after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in order to think about the role being imagined for art in that context. It focuses particularly on the first iteration of the biennial in 2008 (Prospect.1) to consider what kinds of social and political transitions and transformations the artworks and biennial project were imagining at this scene of ongoing trauma. Looking closely at the visions produced at Prospect.1, then, provides a glimpse into the ‘imaginative’ work being done in one instance of socio-political upheaval.⁵

This leads to the second, if related, point of enquiry found within Mthethwa’s aesthetic proposition. The ‘common ground’ to which Mthethwa’s work alludes as it merges two distinct crises and two political systems lies in the connections between images, environmental disasters and the seemingly global, social and political policies which ensure that crises disproportionately affect populations along class and racial fault lines. In front of these eerily similar photographs, it is made obvious that populations and people have already been visualised within the systems that engender both environmental and economic disasters. Thus, questions form about how visions at individual scenes of social, political and environmental crises work within wider contexts of ‘visuality’. Visuality is, in Nicholas Mirzoeff’s tracing of the concept through scholars like Thomas Carlyle, Michel Foucault, Frantz Fanon and Hal Foster, an act of authority that names, categorises and defines – what, Mirzoeff reminds us, Foucault called ‘the nomination of the visible’.⁶ It is also the further exercise of authority that accompanies this classification: ‘Visuality separates the groups so classified as a means of social organization . . . Finally, it makes this separated classification seem right and hence aesthetic.’⁷ This means that what Mirzoeff calls ‘complexes of visuality’ includes the historical mechanisms that prescribe ‘how we see, how we are able, allowed or made to see’, how these visions form classificatory and regulatory systems, and how these visions and the

3 Okwui Enwezor, ‘Mega Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form’, in Elena Filipovic et al, eds, *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2010, p 435

4 Ibid

5 In 2014, Jens Hoffmann named Prospect.1 one of the ‘50 most influential exhibitions of contemporary art, on artists and curators’. I am interested in tracing how this ‘influence’ operated within the complexes of visuality in New Orleans specifically while keeping in plain sight the complexes of visuality that operate within art discourse. Jens Hoffmann, *Show Time: The 50 Most Influential Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, DAP (Distributed Art Publishers), 2014.

6 Nicholas Mirzoeff, ‘On Visuality’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol 5, no 1, April 2006, pp 53–79

7 Nicholas Mirzoeff, ‘The Right to Look’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol 37, no 3, 2011, pp 473–496

8 Hal Foster, ed, *Vision and Visuality*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1988, p ix

9 In Guy Debord's writings, the 'society of the spectacle' emerged when society reached the point where social relationships were mediated through images, and lived experience was inseparable from how images represented this experience. Reflecting on the condition of capitalist production at the time in which he was writing, Debord argued that as commodities became more and more intangible, social experience was increasingly, passively, arbitrated through images. While Debord's critique is historical, his ideas resonate with how the term *visuality* is being used in this article; Debord was similarly marking the inseparability between representation (images) and the 'real' (how life is experienced). Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Black & Red, Detroit, Michigan, 1977.

10 I am recalling here the argument forcefully made in David Marriott's *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*. In that insightful book, Marriott argues that media technologies are 'haunted' by 'racial slavery'. For Marriott, 'the racial logic of culture' is encoded into visual culture; images of slavery and of brutality towards black bodies are the 'footage' that 'keeps repeating' in contemporary culture, stoking fears of blackness and ensuring racism does not cease. David Marriott, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2007, pp xxi-xxiii.

11 Henry Giroux, 'Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability', *College Literature*, vol 33, no 3, summer 2006, p 172

systems of authority they support become naturalised.⁸ Thinking through the complexes of *visuality*, therefore, is to think not only about what kinds of visions were produced at the New Orleans biennial, but also to think about how these visions worked within or against the authoritative structures that helped ensure that the storm was so very devastating. It took many images for the way things are now (the endless wars, environmental crises and vast disparities in quality and length of life for different populations across the globe) to 'make sense', to adopt Jacques Rancière's terminology. This article aims to look at how the biennial project in New Orleans and the artworks shown there work within, or propose to adjust, what Rancière has called 'the regime of the sensible'.

LOOKING FOR PROSPECTS AFTER DISASTER

Hurricane Katrina was a very visual disaster; people watched from all over the United States and the world as levees broke and water filled the city, as people were stranded on rooftops, and as shelter from the storm became increasingly precarious and nightmarish. The effects of the storm visually unfolded in real time as days passed with water undrinkable, food undelivered and people unrescued. In the United States, people sat glued to their televisions, consuming the horrible imagery of the storm. In retrospect, the images emanating from New Orleans did more than expose the depths that the society of the spectacle, to recall Guy Debord's term, had reached.⁹ Encoded into the images of human plight in New Orleans were the racialised, class-based social and political structures that permitted such a disaster to happen. The mechanisms at play in the United States, the reproduction of class and race inequality, were not only exposed but also reinforced in the images of African-Americans abandoned in an archipelago of hot tar and filthy water. Pictures of people futilely tracing the words 'Help Us' onto rooftops, of a young man carrying a television through flooded streets, or of bodies pressing together to board buses, when shown repeatedly (in a seemingly endless loop) on news programmes and in newspapers, became the rationale for the flawed governmental response.¹⁰ As Henry Giroux pointed out, the images of the victims of Katrina not only revealed 'the racial and class fault lines that mark an increasingly damaged and withering democracy', but visualised a society in which 'entire populations are considered disposable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and consigned to fend for themselves'.¹¹ These images fit effortlessly into a long history of how suffering is visualised and ideologically consumed. Who suffers, who deserves to suffer, who brings suffering onto themselves? In the history of the United States these questions have been attached to, and answered overwhelmingly with, specific bodies. And, the images of Katrina only re-inscribed this.

If the imagery coming out of New Orleans could so clearly both evoke and maintain a system of institutionalised racism and policies of economic neglect, it is worth thinking more carefully about why a large-scale exhibition of art was proposed in the aftermath of these images. Images have played an intrinsic role in how people have been configured into systems that decide who lives and who dies, who thrives and who struggles – as has been compellingly argued by not only Mirzoeff but

also Stuart Hall, David Marriott, Jennifer González and many others subsequently – making visual culture a battleground. Therefore, vision and visuality could be the very place where the existing systems of oppression and injustice can be most powerfully fought, critiqued and transformed.¹² Jacques Rancière's concept of aesthetics is helpful in thinking more specifically about how art operates within this visually contested terrain. As Rancière explains it, art is capable of 'modifying the visible, the ways of perceiving it or expressing it, of experiencing it as tolerable or intolerable'.¹³ Thus, as visuality 'classifies, separates, and aestheticizes', art has a role to play in that last stage, the aestheticising (the rendering natural to vision).¹⁴ It is useful to quote at some length here:

Artists are those whose strategies aim to change the frames, speeds and scales according to which we perceive the visible, and combine it with a specific invisible element and a specific meaning. Such strategies are intended to make the invisible visible or to question the self evidence of the visible; to rupture given relationships between things and meanings and, inversely, to invent novel relationships between things and meanings that were previously unrelated.¹⁵

In this conception, art can alter (or aim to alter) the relationship between images and what they have come to mean. The semiotic chain that links thing-to-image-to-meaning through a complex set of ideological and authoritative structures, in Rancière's summation, is where art does its work; it is the wedge in this chain that renders strange relationships of meaning that have become utterly normalised. To return to New Orleans, since the problem with the images disseminated from Hurricane Katrina is that they made sense within a system of visuality in which certain populations are always already victims of every storm, art could aim to insert what Rancière might call 'autonomous dissent' into this picture. Many meanings, even unpredictable, contradictory meanings, could form around art practices, tearing apart any authoritative image structure. From this perspective, the artworks of Prospect.1 could potentially undermine the systems of meaning-making and belief, racialised and class-based as they most decidedly are, within the image discourse of Hurricane Katrina.

CURATING A DAMAGED CITY

Before looking at how the art at Prospect.1 attempted to modify the visual terrain of New Orleans, it is worth considering how the biennial project itself engaged complexes of visuality. The idea that the biennial could work within these complexes, after all, was broached by Dan Cameron, founder of the New Orleans biennial and director and curator of Prospect.1, in the catalogue. There, Cameron explains that the question most on his mind in the aftermath of Katrina as people remained stranded without food and water and news broadcasters stoked fears of an 'alleged outbreak of looting' was 'what do most Americans – or most non-Americans, for that matter – envision when they think about New Orleans?'.¹⁶ For Cameron, there was a profound 'incongruity between the way the city is represented in the media (and the popular imagination) and the actual place and the people in it'.¹⁷ It was misrepresentation, in Cameron's summation, that conditioned the response to the storm.¹⁸ Therefore, he

12 This is an echo of Jennifer A González's compelling argument that vision and visuality are potent sites of resistance towards racist identificatory structures that she makes in both 'The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy, and Digital Art Practice', *Camera Obscura*, vol 24, no 1, issue 70, 2009, pp 37–65, and in *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2008.

13 Fulvia Carnvale and John Kelsey, 'Art of the Possible: An interview with Jacques Rancière', *Artforum*, March 2007, pp 256–269

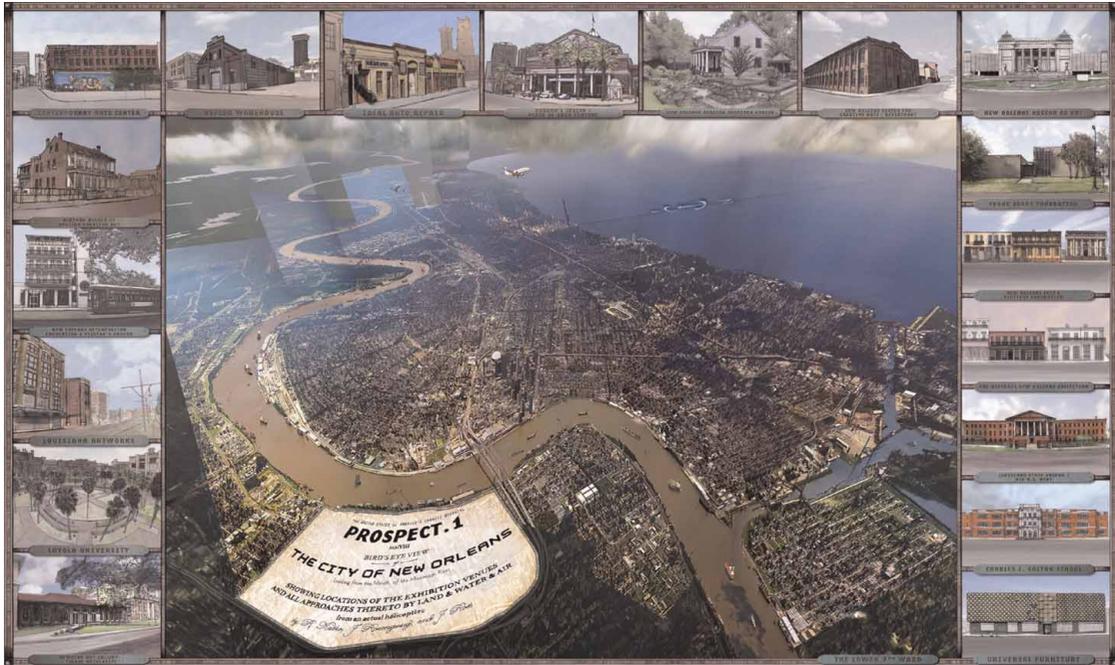
14 Mirzoeff, 'The Right to Look', op cit, p 474

15 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, Steve Corcoran, ed and trans, Continuum International Publishing, London, 2010, p 141

16 Dan Cameron, 'A Biennial for New Orleans', in Barbara Bloemink, Dan Cameron, Lolis Eric Elie and Claire Tancons, eds, *Prospect.1 New Orleans*, PictureBox, Brooklyn, 2008, p 15

17 Cameron, op cit, p 16

18 In his catalogue essay, Cameron traces this misrepresentation to the civil war and suggests that the US continues to suffer from an un-reconciled split in how different parts of the country view the South.



Prospect 1 Map, Designed by Atelier Fleufhaus, 2008, Courtesy of Prospect New Orleans

proposed a curatorial intervention that could correct this misrepresentation and re-vision a city worth rescuing. This re-vision was most clearly (and rather beautifully) articulated through the map of the twenty-two official exhibition sites throughout the city. The map of the Biennial, produced by local design firm Atelier Fleufhaus, encompassed almost the entire city. For the biennial artworks were installed in cultural institutions and warehouse spaces in the French Quarter, Central Business District, in Uptown New Orleans and in the Marigny, areas relatively untouched by the devastation wrought on the rest of the city by Hurricane Katrina. To show the 'actual place and the people in it', installations were also sited in community centres and twelve empty lots in the Ninth Ward, an area decimated by the storm.¹⁹ Houses and stores emptied by the disaster were used for some of the site-specific installations that proliferated, and the map dissolved the boundaries between the 'official' biennial sites and 'unofficial' information with which the map was rich. Satellite exhibitions at commercial galleries, ad hoc project spaces and shoestring artists' collectives were on the map, as well as information about other notable sites. The city blended into the biennial in the overarching vision of the map, with the distinctions between art and the city broken down as if to highlight Enwezor's ideas (and echo theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord) that the work of the imagination is an imperative in rebuilding a city or transitioning into a more just politics.²⁰

On one level, the map provided a counter-vision for the proliferation of maps of New Orleans that had been consumed by the spectators of Katrina. These maps visualised the city as seascape; varying shades of

19 Cameron, op cit, p 16

20 Chelsea Haines noted what she called the 'successful' incorporation of the city into the biennial (or the biennial into the city) at Prospect.1, with local artists staging exhibitions alongside exhibitions of international artists. Considering how the New Orleans biennial 'successfully adapted to connect and engage art, audiences, and local environments', Haines has proposed that Prospect.1 can be considered a model for ethical exhibition practices. Chelsea Haines, 'A New State of the Arts: Developing the Biennial Model as Ethical Art Practice', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, Special Issue: New Directions in Museum Ethics, vol 26, issue 2, 2011.

- 21 Edward L. Glaeser, 'Should the Government Rebuild New Orleans, Or Just Give Residents Checks?', *The Economists' Voice*, vol 2, no 4, article 4, September 2005
- 22 Steven Stern in *Frieze* perhaps summed up Cameron's stance on 'cultural tourism' best when he wrote '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.' Steven Stern, 'Prospect.1 New Orleans', *Frieze*, issue 120, January/February 2009
- 23 Joshua Decter, 'Art and the Cultural Contradictions of Urban Regeneration, Social Justice and Sustainability: Transforma Projects and Prospect.1 in Post-Katrina New Orleans', *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 22, autumn/winter 2009, pp 16–34
- 24 Cameron, 'A Biennial for New Orleans', op cit, p 16
- 25 In the biennial's neat and colourful re-mapping of New Orleans, left off the purview of the map is the fact that tourists have historically come to the city to gaze at the scene of fraught racially inflected trauma. In fact, the city's economy is premised on that fact. After all, New Orleans was founded by the French as a port city in the early eighteenth century to be a destination for slave ships. Its bustling tourist economy is predicated on the slave trade and the creolised culture built around it. By the 1840s, New Orleans was the centre of the slave trade, and people from all over the South and the Southwest of the United States came to the slave market, the original tourist destination, to look and to buy. The current vibrant culture of music, food and art in New Orleans, as well

blue indicated the water levels in neighbourhoods after the levees broke. Some of these flood maps were interactive: neighbourhoods could be clicked on to reveal more detailed information on the devastation. The maps were scenes of a landscape without people, un-navigable streets, a city and all signs of life returned to a primordial sea. With local neighbourhoods reduced to abstractions, it was not difficult for economists like Edward Glaeser to dismiss the idea of rebuilding New Orleans altogether. Buoyed by the peaceful, unpopulated variations of blue in the flood maps and with the afterimages of the other images that abounded of the post-Katrina city – of poverty and violence, of citizens abandoned by their government, of people marginalised – still lingering, Glaeser found it easy to turn his back on and devalue the messy reality of human life that had been so utterly visually undermined. Glaeser, in an article published in *The Economists' Voice* shortly after the storm, noted that New Orleans' functional contribution to the US economy, as the port that moves traffic between the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico, requires the services of only a tiny portion of the city's 485,000 pre-Katrina residents. Against the backdrop of the ample visual evidence of this dysfunctional city, of urban dysfunction, of crime and unemployment, of a corrupt and inept government, Glaeser asked why the US government should spend money to maintain this population, making an argument that rendered not only the population but indeed the entire city expendable.²¹ When the map of Prospect.1 provided a visual replacement for the flood maps, it made the case against Glaeser's assertions. The map visually reclaimed the city and its population from the sea and marked the city as vibrant, lively and creative, mapping explicitly the cultural stakes in ceding the city to the sea.

This reclamation was not without its problems. Despite the idealised form this map took, maps usually provide only topographical information. At another level the biennial map was true to form and really only glanced across the surface of the deeply embedded problems in New Orleans. As many critics noted, this was indicative of the larger biennial vision; Cameron made it his mission to bolster, not challenge, the ailing social, political and economic structures of the city.²² The biennial was proposed to bring back tourism to New Orleans, not to counteract the long history of inequities in the city. Drawing on what Joshua Decter calls the attraction and drawing power of international expositions in relation to the growth of contemporary art-oriented tourism, which may function as an incubator for broader economic growth within cities and nations, Cameron made clear that the biennial was being imagined as a draw for moneyed tourists.²³ As the exhibition's official website urged:

[An] important reason to visit 'Prospect.1 New Orleans' is that New Orleans' economy runs on tourism. For every night you stay in a hotel, every meal you eat, and every musician you hear performing in a local club, you contribute directly to the rebuilding of New Orleans.²⁴

While issuing a call to rebuild New Orleans, neither the map nor the biennial literature confronted the underlying racialised and class-based ideologies that are buried within the economic policies of the city or within its history of tourism.²⁵ This led some critics to suggest that, far from disrupting the complexes of visuality that ensure that people are of

as the mythology of the city, derives almost entirely from that history – as does its continued touristic economy.

unequal value, the biennial was merely an extension of the ‘disaster tourism’ that flourished in the aftermath of the storm with tour buses ceaselessly circling the most damaged neighbourhoods in the city.²⁶

For instance, as biennial visitors consulted the map to undertake a pilgrimage of disorientation through potholed, untended streets amidst fields of high grass that hid cement foundations (all that was left of neighbourhoods) to see Mark Bradford’s *Mithra*, a large ark towering over an empty lot of sand and sparse grass in the deserted Ninth Ward, it was hard for many scholars and critics to see how the art was doing anything but conspiring with the biennial project to naturalise the storm.²⁷ After all, in a city where some houses became islands, others vanished, and yet others stood as precarious monuments of ruin, windowless and unstable, the ark did not render strange the relationships of meaning that made whole populations disposable. Instead, in the apocalyptic shadow of the ark, the economies of the storm were rendered biblical. Bradford’s *Mithra*, constructed out of plywood previously used to board up windows against the storm, was as useless in counteracting the complexes of visibility as the plywood turned out to be against the devastation of the hurricane. In the shadow of this apocalyptic narrative and as the visual evidence of the ravages of institutional racism and economic injustice became tourist stops on the map of a damaged city, it was difficult at times to see what other social, political or economic ‘prospects’ were being proposed for New Orleans.

AGAINST THE TIDE

The biennial at times listed perilously close to re-inscribing the complexes of visibility that ensured the storm was so disastrous. However, despite these problematics, the question remains. If, as Rancière assures us, art can make strange the relationships between images and what they have come to mean, was there something else to be seen at Prospect.1? Critiques of contemporary art exhibitions often stop with the evocation of art markets, spectacle and the distorted economics of cultural capital. The economies of art are used as evidence that art discourse is so thoroughly assimilated into flawed social, economic and ideological networks that art practices and exhibitions cannot pose any problems to those systems.²⁸ After all, far from challenging these systems, the forms that exhibitions and art discourse take seem ideally suited to strengthen them. This is the problem of the biennial map. Any attempt to remap a city or any attempt to narrate art into a single system (an exhibition, a market) is, after all, already an exercise of what Mirzoeff describes as the ‘authority of visibility’. As Mirzoeff explains this, in the ‘visualization of history . . . [the] ability to assemble an authoritative mode of visualization manifests the authority of the visualizer’.²⁹ To offer an overarching vision of a place and a history can become (or is already) an attempt to consolidate authority. Both maps and exhibition structures are enmeshed into a visual culture that conspires to ensure that they can only re-articulate a mode of authoritative envisioning. However, to stop at this critique is to succumb to the authority of this envisioning. As Mirzoeff insists, this system is not absolute; as he explains, ‘the authorizing of authority requires permanent renewal in order to win consent as the “normal”’.³⁰

26 Joshua Decter connected the biennial to the rise in so-called ‘disaster tourism’ in New Orleans in the years after the storm in his article ‘Art and the Cultural Contradictions’, op cit. In this article, Decter points to the tour buses filled with tourists visiting neighbourhoods most damaged by the storm to question the role of an international biennial in that city – and asks whose interests were being considered in the project.

27 Mary Legier Biederman, like Joshua Decter, raised the relationship of Prospect.1 to disaster tourism in her dissertation, *Biennial Rising, Prospect.1 New Orleans: The Spectacle of Disaster/The Disaster of Spectacle and the Aesthetics of Globalization*, University of California, Los Angeles, 2010. Biederman suggests that the population of New Orleans and the misery inflicted on it was commodified by the art and exhibition practices of the biennial.

28 Joshua Decter suggests this problematic in ‘Art is a Problem’, *Guernica: A Magazine of Art and Politics*, 2013, <http://www.guernicamag.com/art/art-is-a-problem>.

29 Mirzoeff, ‘The Right to Look’, op cit, p 474

30 Ibid

Thus, although ‘visuality presents authority as self-evident’, questioning that authority, and withdrawing the ‘authorizing of authority’, is possible.³¹ This is where Mirzoeff claims the ‘right to look’. As he elaborates:

The right to look claims autonomy from this authority, refuses to be segregated, and spontaneously invents new forms . . . It refuses to allow authority to suture its interpretation of the sensible to domination, first as law then as the aesthetic . . . The right to look, then, is the claim to a right to the real. It is the boundary of visuality, the place where such codes of separation encounter a grammar of nonviolence – meaning the refusal to segregate – as a collective form.³²

The right to look insists that there are things to be seen outside of the authoritative structures of visuality – that we can see and be seen as other than how visuality dictates. It is to refuse the aestheticisation of visuality – where visualisations (classifications and separations) become natural and lived (become the ‘real’). Putting this alongside Rancière’s assertions that art can make

. . . some breathing room, to loosen the bonds that enclose spectacles within a form of visibility, bodies within an estimation of their capacity, and possibility within the machine that makes ‘the state of things’ seem inevitable, unquestionable. . .

It seems that even within market-driven economies, and even as art is mobilised to produce cultural capital to aid in unequal recovery, there could be something else to see in New Orleans.³³ It is time to cast another look at the biennial.

Looking at the biennial outside of the complexes of visuality that constrain it is to see it mapping small openings instead of merely asserting an overarching vision of the city. It is also to insist that exhibition practices are not coterminous with art practices and that art markets and institutions cannot eclipse art practices. To only suggest that the formation of the New Orleans biennial was linked to economies and tourism, and that some artworks failed to disrupt the apocalyptic nightmare that Katrina was for the city’s poorest population, is to reduce the idea of art, and the visions it produces, to only markets and institutions. It is to, as Mirzoeff would say, ‘authorize authority’ and to succumb to the apocalyptic narrative of Bradford’s ark. The challenge is to leave behind the vision offered by the exhibition map, to step out of the shadow of the ark, and to look at the visions that multiplied in the artworks spread throughout the city. What, for instance, about the images left lingering at the beginning of this article?

Having cast Mthethwa’s ‘Common Ground Series’ only as afterimages thus far, as blurred visions imprinting ghostly lines on the retina, it is time to allow those images to come into focus. The squares of colour, green against white, against brown, against black, re-form into the lines of the cardboard wall of a home in a South African township. The thick orange diagonal lines, hard gashes across an opaque surface, cohere into the tape that was used in New Orleans in advance of the storm to keep windows from shattering; there is something to be seen that leaks out of the complexes of visuality. For Prospect.1, Mthethwa installed these large-scale photographs in a room in the old US Mint Building in New Orleans. Even if the economic and social crises of poverty and

31 Ibid, p 477

32 Ibid, pp 476–477

33 Rancière. *Dissensus*, op cit, p 149



Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Untitled (Common Ground series)*, 2008, digital c-print on crystal archive paper, 59 × 76 1/2 inches,
 © Zwelethu Mthethwa, photo: courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

enduring racism in New Orleans fell outside the purview of the biennial map, when Mthethwa's photographs were hung on every wall in a large room formerly used to print currency the indictment of these structures in his images is clear. In a building so historically inundated with the economic side of the United States democracy, the 'Common Ground Series' reveals the visual regime complicit in the valuing (or devaluing) of human life.

These photographs offer a glimpse into the conditions of what Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx called the 'reserve army of labour' or the 'surplus population'.³⁴ Structural unemployment, underemployment and undocumented labour (the economic terms for the suffering and poverty implicit within racial and class identifications) is necessary to current capitalist modes of production; huge numbers of people must be able to work but also must be left outside of the active labour force for the current system to prosper. The images of the victims of Hurricane Katrina justified this arrangement by marking bodies as disposable to the current modes of production – unemployed/ underemployed/ undocumented due to the classificatory logic of visibility. But Mthethwa's images do more than reveal this state; instead, they make illogical the chains of meaning that lead certain people to be classified and segregated

³⁴ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol 1, 1867 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch25.htm>

outside of the right to work, the right to care, the right to justice. In the images, there is a disjuncture between the conditions that create this dis-possession and the portrayal of it. The photographs do not reproduce these conditions but make them abstract, strange, as homes flatten into the uneven lines of disaster. The complexes of visibility, the classifying, separating, aestheticising, rely on aesthetics to render current authoritative structures both natural and largely invisible. Mthethwa's images are so unfamiliar as to denaturalise and make visible the visual systems that produced the conditions they reveal. In this denaturalising, the shift into vision, things begin to fall apart. To return again to an image, the window criss-crossed with orange tape has held together, but the brick outside its frame has crumbled. If glass can withstand the forces of the storm, but the solid brick can come apart, it seems even the most stable structures can begin to unravel.

Thinking with Rancière further, ideally, art not only makes strange the complexes of visibility that are usually naturalised, it also

... undoes, and then re-articulates, connections between signs and images, images and times, and signs and spaces ... [and] contributes to the constitution of a new landscape of the visible, the sayable, and the doable.³⁵

This is Mirzoeff's 'right to look' articulated through art practices. Just as Mirzoeff insists on the right to see outside of the dictates of visibility, the right to make the 'real', Rancière argues that art practices can create visions that not only call into question how things have come to make sense but can make sense *differently*. The aim is to move firmly away from what is already 'visible ... sayable ... doable' and to insist that there is something else to see, say, do. In installations like Nari Ward's *Diamond Gym: Action Network*, a work in the historic Battle Ground Baptist Church in the Lower Ninth Ward, this possibility seemed potent. Surrounded by a vast meadow of shoulder-high grasses and volunteer saplings in a once highly populated area of town, the brick shell of the church, carefully shored up with pylons, doors wide open to admit light, patiently waited for a neighbourhood to regrow around it. Inside a large, diamond-shaped, welded-steel basket made from scrap metal left over from the storm was filled with weight-lifting equipment and metal detritus. The rough diamond was surrounded by freestanding walls that function as bulletin boards for community announcements and appeals. Loudspeakers broadcast mumbled voices, snatches of music and, among less identifiable elements, speeches by Martin Luther King Jr., Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Buddhist chanting by Tina Turner. Contextualised by the church, by the neighbourhood, the work was about mobilising a repressed community. But, more subtly, it was also insisting that there are things to be seen outside of the images of Katrina, outside the complexes of visibility that made that storm so disastrous. The equipment, the tacked-up, mutely urgent signs and flyers, along with the soundtrack, project the once and future life of people with demands more complicated than visibility has allowed.

At the Battle Ground Baptist Church, it was not only the sound elements in Ward's art installation that suggested the profound leakage between the reductivism of visual regimes and the lives that are inscribed within them. While the church still stood empty two and a half years after

35 Rancière, *Dissensus*, op cit, p 149



Battle Ground Baptist Church, Site of Nari Ward's Installation for Prospect 1, New, Orleans, LA, photo credit: Rachel Nelson

the storm, the parishioners who had survived the storm were still maintaining the building. For the duration of Prospect.1, everyone I knew who saw the installation was greeted by a member of the church; this was an unexpected outcome of tapping into a community. And, in the informal meetings at the church, what Mirzoeff calls 'the right to look' was asserted. Individuals that saw the storm differently then how it was inscribed onto their bodies could look, and could be seen, outside of the operations of classifying, separating, aestheticizing. The artist alluded to this when he described an encounter when he was installing the work; an elderly neighbourhood resident strolled over during a break in the activity, trying to figure out what was going on. Ward

explains that the gentleman was not very interested in the art project, but only asked whether people were coming.³⁶ The man felt there was something to be seen amidst those overgrown fields, a reason to come and look. So, unwittingly perhaps, this installation served to reveal that there were other things to be experienced even at this scene of trauma.

Nowhere was it as obvious that the ‘other things to see’ at Prospect.1 confronted the deeply naturalised race discourse of the city than in Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry’s aptly titled *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*. This elaborate installation in the New Orleans African American Museum located in the Tremé – the oldest African-American neighbourhood in America – used opulent chandeliers, deep

36 Stern, op cit, p 99



Nari Ward, *Diamond Gym: Action Network*, 2008, installation in the Battle Ground Baptist Church, Prospect 1, New Orleans, LA, photo: courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong



McCallum & Tarry, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, 2008, Prospect 1, installation at the New Orleans African American Museum of Art, Culture and History (NOAAM), 104 paintings (oil on linen, toner on silk), audio, and chandeliers. Photo: courtesy of the artists. Photo Credit: Jeff Sturges

burgundy walls and the ornate architecture of the antebellum mansion that houses the museum as the charged background on which hang 104 portraits of civil-rights campaigners. The oil-painted portraits were based on mugshots of people arrested during the 1955–1956 bus boycotts protesting racial segregation in Montgomery, Alabama. These mugshots-cum-portraits include ones of Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks and Ralph D Abernathy intermingled with over a hundred others of varying sizes throughout the richly painted rooms on the first floor of the mansion. Two voices echoed through the rooms, listing the names of those pictured.

Hung in the home of a former slave-owner and in the aftermath of Katrina, this vision of the struggle for civil rights became more than a memorial to a fraught past. Instead, the artworks became ‘evidence of things not seen’ in the response to the storm. The paintings are amazingly direct in revealing how African-Americans have been historically visualised into the systems of authority: how people are classified, separated and aestheticised through both photographic and legal representation. The mugshots on which the portraits are based are evidence of how people have been literally visualised out of social structures of care, out of political rights and into criminality by virtue of the numbers held in front of their bodies. In a country where African-American men are six times as likely to be incarcerated as white men, mugshots have become a metaphor for how bodies are racially marked.³⁷ These portraits, hung in this place, visualise how this marking has been inscribed and re-inscribed throughout US history. Each portrait is constructed of two layers: one, an oil painting on linen painted from the original mugshot; and the second a photographic image printed on sheer silk. While the source image for both the painting and the photographic layer is the original mugshot of each person, the painted bottom layer is without the numbered police ID placard that marks these images as criminals. On the printed second image that hovers an inch above the bottom portrait on an overlay of silken toner, the placard is a ghostly trace over the painting – a spectral remnant that obscures and distorts the portrait as it makes the identity of the paintings’ subjects.³⁸ This ghostly layer shows the process through which people’s lives are distorted through racial subjection and racist laws. In New Orleans, where one in fourteen black men is imprisoned while one in seven is either in prison, on parole or on probation, where the African-American median income is half the median income for whites, and where the life expectancy in the poorest black neighbourhoods (including the Tremé where these portraits hung) is fifty-four years of age, the distortion of these portraits was more than haunting.³⁹ It was the evidence of how lives are destroyed. The veneer of criminality that has been systemically attached to bodies from the time of the antebellum mansion, through the struggles for civil rights and into the present deplorable conditions of racial injustices in the city, is visible and undeniable in the paintings. The portraits blur under the layers of toner, showing how law has been the destructive force that refuses to allow the portraits to cohere.

Even as these portraits make visible the mechanisms through which populations have been inscribed into a narrative that leads, as if inevitably, into prisons, poverty and early death from systemic neglect, in McCallum and Tarry’s deft handling they provide evidence for something

37 Bruce Drake, ‘Incarceration Gap Widens between Whites and Blacks’, *Fact Tank: News In The Numbers*, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/06/incarceration-gap-between-whites-and-blacks-widens/>

38 Eva Díaz offers a moving analysis of this artwork and discusses the spectral image in these portraits as linked to memory. She does not, however, connect the works, and the history, to the current racialised policies and practices in New Orleans. Eva Díaz, ‘Memory as Site in New Orleans and Beyond’, *October* 142, autumn 2012, pp 107–120

39 These health numbers are from a 2010 government report, while the prison statistics are from 2012. It is important to note as well the extreme discrepancies in who goes to prison in New Orleans; black men in New Orleans are 500% more likely to go to prison than white men. About 5,000 black men from New Orleans are serving time in state prisons, compared with 400 white men from the city, ‘Health Disparities in New Orleans’, *New Orleans Health Department*, June 2013, <http://www.nola.com/nola/media/Health-Department/Publications/Health-Disparities-in-New-Orleans-Community-Health-Data-Profile-final.pdf>. Cindy Chang, ‘Louisiana is the World’s Prison Capital’, *The Time-Picayune*, 2012, http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2012/05/louisiana_is_the_worlds_prison.html

else. The layering in the image of the portraits suggests it is possible to separate its reading from historical visualisations. The top layer, carrying the signifying marker of the criminal system, does not touch the body in the bottom portrait. The identity placard only hovers over the painting. While this causes the portrait to be distorted and unfocused, it also allows for another possibility. The bodies seem poised to leave this distorted visual field, to sink out of the scene of this making. There is something else to be seen here beyond the complexes of visibility that have ravaged New Orleans' African-American population. In the space between the images, the unnaturalness of how these two visions have merged and consequently been lived can be seen. It is the two images combined, after all, that is the 'real' for much of New Orleans' black population. Only here, this 'real' has begun to be undone from the bodies it realises. Here is the wedge between things/images/meanings, to recall the earlier discussion of Rancière's theoretic, which allows for hope to ferment that people, and their images, can come to signify in different ways. After all, when images mean otherwise, this alters the very foundation of the real.

AFTER THE STORM'S WAKE

This article began by recalling the connections Enwezor made between biennials, socio-political upheaval and trauma. In the decade since Enwezor made his argument that the biennials cropping up at the scenes of these traumas and upheavals signified

... that the work of the imagination, as a fundamental part of society in transition towards democracy and the development of new concepts of the citizen, is an important part of the transition ...

many people and many exhibitions have seized on the potentials Enwezor suggested for art in such circumstances.⁴⁰ However, too often these potentials have been reduced in art discourse (in exhibition practices and in the minds of critics) to that idea that art provides cultural capital and a clear economic boost for places reeling from trauma. Looking at Prospect.1, now that the waters have receded a little, it is time to ask what else art can do. In the most hopeful scenario art can perhaps leak out of the systems that are constructed to constrain it (exhibitions, markets, audiences) and wrench at least small openings into the complexes of visibility in which we are all embedded; art can aspire to render minute tears in what Rancière calls the 'fabric' of the sensible.⁴¹ In times of social and political upheaval, the fabric of the sensible is already 'wearing thin'. Therefore, these are the instances, and places, when and where art practices can worry away at the already delicate fabric of visibility.

To return to New Orleans, this means that even as systems built on racial and class inequities (and that continue to require inequities in order to prosper) conspired with the images of the storm to pin bodies into their places, the images also presented an opening. The images revealed the frayed edges of a visual system that requires constant renewal to continue to keep people outside of the logic of care, 'ineligible' and undeserving of social services and political representation. It takes a

40 Enwezor, 'Mega Exhibitions', op cit, p 435

41 Rancière, 'Conversation', op cit

lot of work, much authorising of the authoritative structures of visibility, in Mirzoeff's turn of phrase, for the images disseminated from Hurricane Katrina of a city filled with water, of people on rooftops, of thousands of people in a football arena without food and water to continue to make sense. The legal apparatus of segregation and slavery has obviously offered only the most uneasy structure on which to construct the present – after all, no one escaped from New Orleans unscathed from the storm. In precarious times, then, when complexes of visibility were either going to resolve the images from Katrina into the longer image discourse about race, poverty and crime in the United States, anything – any image or art – that could keep the instability of the moment from settling into the rigid contours of the real was worth taking time to look at closely.

In the years since the storm, and in the years since Prospect.1, other environmental, social and political crises have accumulated around the globe, and other biennials have cropped up. In the United States, amongst the devastations of more storms, increased civil unrest, the news of governmental surveillance programmes and continued mass incarceration of African-Americans, it is hard not to question whether the complexes of visibility on which present systems were constructed were ever stable.⁴² What is obvious is that there is a lot at stake to ensure that these visual regimes cannot continue. If art did in any way contribute to the instabilities of the visibility in New Orleans and create even the slightest tears in the current 'regime of the sensible', it has to keep working away at the places where image discourse is the most tenuous. Franklin Sirmans, the current curator of Prospect New Orleans, now in its third iteration, sheds some light on this continued struggle. Despite the years having passed and at least the physical damage from the storm having long since been repaired, Sirmans has said that while Prospect.3 (2014) is no longer a response to a hurricane, he does see it as continuing what Prospect.1 started; much of the work at Prospect.3 continues to 'revolve around the idea of effecting change in a city still struggling financially and socially'.⁴³ A commitment to art and the continued insistence that it has a role to play in how social and political relationships form has not abated in New Orleans even as the waters have.

42 This article was written before the police brutality and homicidal tendencies towards Black people in the United States came into strong focus with the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson. From the current vantage point, with vital protest movements and a renewed and impassioned civil rights struggle arising to confront the racist modes of power intrinsic to state and federal governments, the point becomes ever more urgent. Art can be one tactic used to denaturalize the large-scale, foundational systems of racial oppression in the United States.

43 Randy Kennedy, 'New Orleans Art Biennial to Return in October', *New York Times*, 14 May 2014, accessed 29 June 2014, http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/14/new-orleans-art-biennial-to-return-in-october/?_php=true&_type=blogs&r=0