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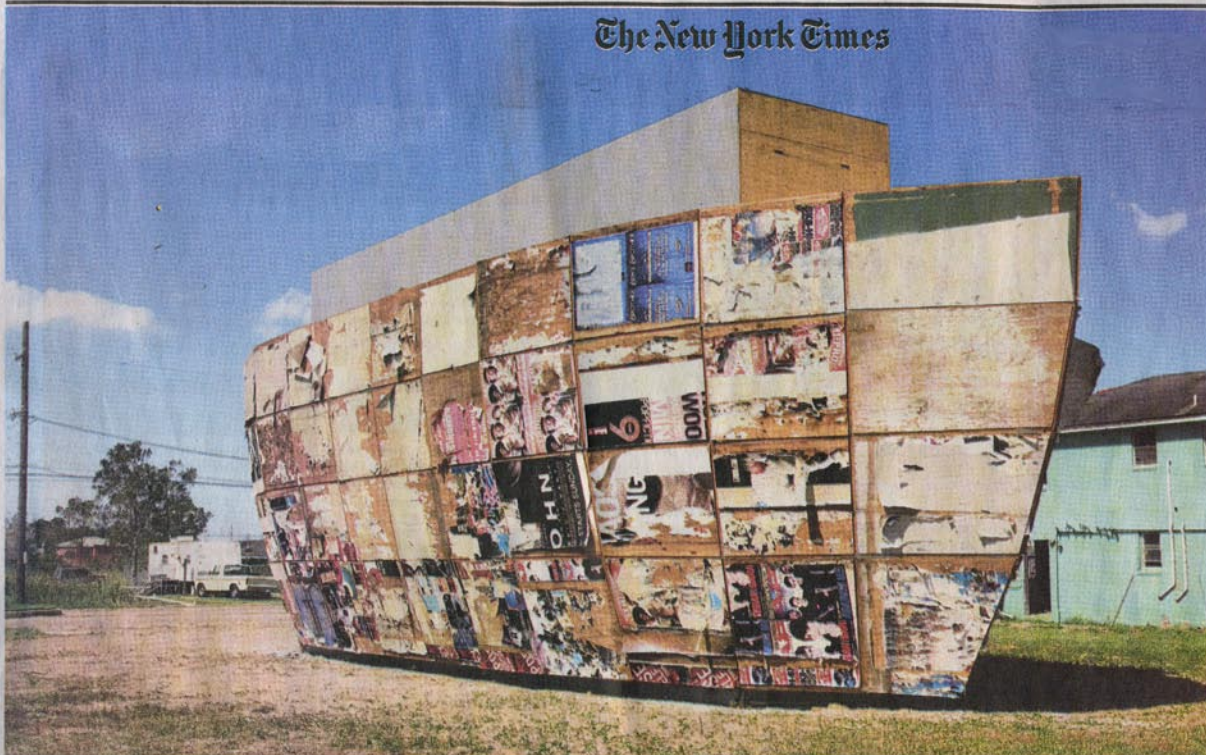
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THE Arts

The New York Times



LORI WASELCHUK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

“Mithra,” a three-story ark by the Los Angeles painter Mark Bradford in a part of the Lower Ninth Ward that experienced some of the worst flooding.

New Orleans Rising, by Hammer and Art

A New Citywide Biennial Will Include 81 Artists and Expects 50,000 Visitors

By SHAILA DEWAN

NEW ORLEANS — Over the last few weeks more than a few locals have stopped by to inform a small construction crew in the Lower Ninth Ward here that it obviously does not know what it is doing.

“The whole time we’ve been here, people have been like, ‘You know, that’s not the way to build a house,’” said Karen Del Aguila, laughing. “They’d be like, ‘Are you guys licensed?’”

Ms. Del Aguila, an assistant to the artist Wangechi Mutu, and her crew have been building the frame of a

traditional shotgun house, not as a permanent dwelling but as part of Prospect.1 New Orleans, an ambitious new art biennial that is to open here on Saturday and continue through Jan. 18.

Billed as the largest exhibition of contemporary art ever held on American soil, the biennial is intended to help restore the cultural vibrancy of a city that remains on its knees three years after Hurricane Katrina.

With a star-filled roster of 81 artists and a projected 50,000 visitors from out of town, it may indeed bring benefits to New Orleans. But it is already clear that the

arrangement has not been one-sided, and the New Orleans contribution has been rich. With its history of destruction and rebirth, artistic triumph and economic struggle, this crumpled crescent of a city provides a singular interpretive context that acts as a resonance chamber.

Some of the art refers directly to Hurricane Katrina, like Ms. Mutu’s “ghost house,” which sits on the property of an elderly woman whose attempts to rebuild were stymied by a vanishing contractor. But most of it

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Unease Sits Heavily in a Group of Black Voters

By SUSAN SAULNY

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — For

their votes 10 days early to avoid last-minute problems at the polls.

So imagine Mr. Jones’s disappointment this week when he got

it.”

But in conversations with about a dozen Jacksonville residents in cafes, outside churches

nor’s plans for dealing with the state’s growing budget deficit.”

The Assembly speaker, Sheldon Silver, a Democrat, said little beyond acknowledging “we will need to tighten our belt” while protecting the middle class

Building Up New Orleans With Art, by Hammer and Brush

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does not have to.

In a shedlike community center a few blocks from the ghost house, the New York artist Janine Antoni has deposited a "soft wrecking ball" made of lead and scarred by the act of demolition. Nearby, the Chilean artist Sebastián Preece has excavated the foundation of a Lower Ninth Ward house and transplanted it elsewhere.

Adam Cvijanovic, another New York artist, has taken a page from traditional New Orleans style and, in an unused house, installed a custom wallpaper that presents a lavish scene of a waterlogged swamp with no humans in sight. At the United States Mint in the French Quarter, Stephen G. Rhodes, from Los Angeles, is building a Hall of Presidents in which the presidents themselves are largely absent.

Other pieces mine the city and its history. The Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul will present the jazz funeral that was never held for Narvin Kimball, the banjo player for the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, who died in March 2006 in Charleston, S.C., where he went after the storm. Skylar Fein has recreated a French Quarter gay lounge that burned in a suspicious fire in 1973, killing about half the patrons.

Miguel Palma, a Portuguese artist, is building a modified Higgins boat, a World War II vessel manufactured in New Orleans that, in Mr. Palma's version, contains a mini-tsunami. "Instead of war games, you have rescue games," he said.

In this way New Orleans has become a collaborator, instigator

and subject. Residents have volunteered by the hundreds to act as docents, provide exhibition sites (admission to all events is free) and assist the artists. Dan Cameron, the impresario behind Prospect.1 and a former senior curator at the New Museum in New York, said that as he was planning the biennial, a friend frequently reminded him of a quotation from Bob Dylan's "Chronicles": "Everything in New Orleans is a good idea."

Prospect.1, Mr. Cameron said, is "just 81 people running around with good ideas, and basically everyone they meet goes, 'Oh yeah, sure, I'll help.'"

"It is American," he continued, "but it's no longer what we think of as American — it's drop what you're doing and go do what your neighbor's doing."

This is, after all, the city of spontaneous parades.

Mr. Cameron said he was careful to select artists for the first Prospect who would attract crit-

ics and collectors but were not divas whose expectations might exceed the abilities of a first-time exhibition on a shoestring budget of \$3.2 million.

"I would have liked to have taken a few more risks," Mr. Cameron said. "Curatorially, I like high-risk situations."

Almost every artist, even those whose work is not site-specific, visited New Orleans last year to get a feel for the city and the more than 20 biennial sites, which include the Edgar Degas Foundation; the New Orleans African American Museum of Art, Culture and History; the Battle Ground Church; and the Ideal Auto repair shop.

Some artists were inspired to depart from routine practice. Ms. Mutu, who created the ghost house, is best known for works on paper. The painter Mark Bradford built a three-story ark in a part of the Lower Ninth Ward that had some of the worst flooding after the hurricane.

Mr. Bradford's project gathered momentum after he met Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick, well-known local photographers who lost thousands of negatives to Katrina. (Hundreds of them are still awaiting salvage in a freezer that reeks of rot and floodwater.) Mr. Bradford met the couple as they were fixing up an old duplex they call the L9 Center for the Arts, and introduced them to Mr. Cameron. They in turn connected Mr. Bradford to people who could help him build.

Mr. Bradford auctioned one of his paintings, raising \$65,000 to help renovate L9, Mr. Calhoun said. The space has become a biennial site, and recently Anne Deleporte, a French artist who lives in New York, was there finishing an "anti-collage" of selectively painted-over newspaper.

She said New Orleans had eagerly watched the piece take shape, with some regularly checking on her progress. "There

are people, at the end of the day, they just walk by and say, 'Thank you,'" she said. "That's something I've never seen anywhere else in the art world."

Nine of the 81 artists taking part in the biennial live in Louisiana. Still, Mr. Calhoun said he would reserve judgment on Prospect.1's impact on the city. "We have so many talented local artists, I'm hoping there will be some kickback for them too," he said.

Although there is no telling how much attention will flow to the local museums and galleries, they are putting their best faces forward. And the biennial has already changed the arts environment in New Orleans. The Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans, where Mr. Cameron is the visual arts director, will open its top two floors to the public for the first time in years. Four artists are installing work at the Charles J. Colton Junior High School, which fell into disuse after the storm but is now, under the auspices of the Creative Alliance of New Orleans, offering free space to artists who agree to work with public school students.

Courtney Hopen, 23, a local artist who creates graphic novels and recently moved to New Orleans after graduating from Princeton, said she hoped that the biennial would upend some stereotypes about what constitutes art in New Orleans.

"I hope it draws in a lot more tourists, or at least a different crowd of tourists who will take a look at some of the more experimental and less mainstream New Orleans art," Ms. Hopen said. "I hope it will bring attention to people doing something other than that fleur-de-lis and jazz."



Rachel Lucas, a design consultant from New York, working on a house created by the artist Wangechi Mutu as an art installation for the Prospect.1 biennial.

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