

SPACES: ANTENNA, THE FRONT AND GOOD CHILDREN GALLERY NEW ORLEANS

Cataclysmic experiences may yield unexpected benefits, but they never come easily. The advent of numerous artist-run galleries along New Orleans' St. Claude Avenue is perhaps the last thing anyone would have expected of a Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. But with somewhere between twelve and eighteen collectives, co-ops, pop-ups, and collaborative artist-run spaces at any given time, it has become a predominantly artist-run arts district. Three of the more established co-ops located in the ardently bohemian Bywater neighborhood inspired *Spaces: Antenna, The Front and Good Children Gallery*, an exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Center [February 25—June 10, 2012]. All three are either on or near St. Claude and all are broadly representative of the district: Antenna is the art gallery for Press Street, a literary and visual arts collective; The Front is a storefront co-op gallery that was partly an offshoot of artist-activist Paul Chan's work in the area in the immediate wake of the storm; and the Good Children Gallery, established around the same time, was inspired by the original name for St. Claude Avenue—"Rue des Bons Enfants"—colloquially translated as "Good Children Street."

While St. Claude artists are increasingly represented in international art capitals and in such museum collections as the Whitney's, the galleries themselves remain doggedly democratic and estuarine by nature, spawning grounds for ideas and processes where creative freedom trumps all else. The gallery artists are all equal partners, and all were included when Amy Mackie, who was then Director of Visual Arts at the Contemporary Arts Center, decided to base a show on these venues. Perhaps for that reason, *Spaces* is a miscellany of installations, images, and sculptures that can sometimes seem disorienting; some works are enigmatic, some thoughtfully accessible, and others almost incidental. But there are some underlying subcurrents.

In this regard, Lala Raščić and Sophie T. Lvoff's *Posing Process*, 2012—ongoing, is emblematic of this curatorial approach. Featuring a simple desk and Post-it notes on the wall behind it, the work offers only one hint of its intent in a wall text explaining that the installation is a venue for the artists and their collaborators "to sit, think, and develop a multimedia installation and/or performances ... to investigate the notion of a collective action and the energy that is subsequently generated." This included flash mobs enacting brief performances of choreographically irra-

tional acts at various venues, all recorded on surveillance cameras. If nonsensical in appearance, such events are in many ways analogous to the ad hoc and often seemingly random actions that led to the creation of the St. Claude gallery district in the first place.

This was no isolated event, occurring at a time when the entire city rose up in mass protest after governmental agencies released maps of how New Orleans would be rebuilt after the storm under the direction of the Urban Land Institute, with entire neighborhoods reduced to "green space." Citizens of New Orleans, anarchic in the best of times, would have none of it. They organized into groups that successfully agitated for neighborhood self-determination—the same DIY spirit that propelled St. Claude—area artists to create their own galleries. No stranger to chaos, Raščić is a survivor of the Serbian siege of her native Sarajevo, Bosnia; she escaped to Croatia with her mother when she was thirteen, and now divides her time between Zagreb, Sarajevo, and New Orleans. Lvoff is a photographer and the scion of a Russian literary family. Both are inspired by the notions of expressive freedom within collectivity set forth by contemporary theorists Irit Rogoff and Giorgio Agamben, as well as by the late Hannah Arendt, whose resurgent influence is long overdue and whose ideals are now evident in the Occupy movement. The participatory and temporal dimensions of *Posing Process* give form to their ideas.

Other deceptively innocent-looking works include Malcolm McClay's meticulous drawings of partially built houses in his native Ireland. Rendered on collaged maps, they suggest vertiginous architectural magic realism, but it helps to know that McClay spent years in Belfast during the Troubles, when political violence was routine. His earlier sculptural works explored Foucauldian notions of the geometry of oppression. On his most recent visits to Ireland, however, he saw many unfinished homes that had been abruptly abandoned when the recession struck. His work eloquently, if obliquely, expresses the parallels between political, economic, and environmental violence. Although Europeans make up no more than fifteen percent of the artists in *Spaces*, their works are often among the most emblematic. Their prior experience with devastation and displacement may have something to do with this.

A more jocular approach to real estate machinations was seen in *Monopoly (St. Claude Ave)*, 2012, a kind of oversize Monopoly game by Generic Art

Solutions—the artist duo of Tony Campbell and Matt Vis—replete with props like champagne glasses and an ice bucket. Symbolizing the nascent gentrification of St. Claude, the game board was actually the set for their opening night performance, in which they wore tails, top hats, mustaches, and monocles and engaged in a localized Monopoly game with cards that dictated twists of fortune like, "You won a Joan Mitchell Foundation grant" or "You got drunk at the opening and missed a sale." Similarly, *See St. Claude*, 2012, by Ryan Watkins-Hughes featured a life-size photograph of a crumbling St. Claude façade, where viewers can pose for photos of themselves in front of authentic local blight. While gentrification of the sort seen in New York, or even Campbell's native London, seems unlikely, artists are determined to have St. Claude's longstanding seediness remain intact. When the CVS Corporation tried to buy Frankie and Johnnie's Furniture as a site for one of its chain drugstores, artists took it as an affront to the area's visual integrity, and their thus-far successful Occupy Frankie and Johnnie's movement was born.

The insouciant tone of such efforts is typical of a city and an arts district where even the deadliest of cataclysms provides fodder for endless jokes, parties, and art openings. At the entrance to the exhibition, visitors encountered sculptor Bob Snead's replica of an ATM machine that responds to button commands with snide or rude replies which devolve into incoherent rambling anecdotes. A central library/lounge area with chairs, tables, posters, catalogues, and gallery publications loosely connects the works, although even this did not fully unify all the meandering loose ends. In a strictly visual sense, the whole thing was diffuse and uneven. But to focus exclusively on that aspect would miss the point. The works in this show were evidence of the evolution of the St. Claude Avenue art spaces, documentation of a moment in time during their ongoing process of putting participatory democracy in the service of creative urban community building.

—D. Eric Bookhardt

INSIDE FRONT COVER: **Generic Art Solutions**, *Monopoly (St. Claude Ave)*, 2012, performance and installation [courtesy of the artists and Jonathan Ferrara Gallery, New Orleans; photo: Nina Schwanse] / OPPOSITE, LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM: **Lala Raščić** in cooperation with **Sophie T. Lvoff**, *Posing Process*, 2012—ongoing [courtesy of the artists and the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans; photo: Angela Berry]; Tony Campbell and Matt Vis of Generic Art Solutions using **Bob Snead's** *ATM: Security Guard*, 2012 [courtesy of the artist]; **Malcolm McClay**, *Dreenan*, 2011 [courtesy of the artist]; OPPOSITE, RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM: exhibition view of *Spaces: Antenna, The Front and Good Children Gallery*, foreground: **Alex Podesta**, *Self-Portrait as Bunnies (The Scientists)*, 2011; exhibition view of *Spaces: Antenna, The Front and Good Children Gallery*, foreground: **Generic Art Solutions**, *Monopoly (St. Claude Ave)*, 2012 [courtesy of the artists and the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans; photo: Angela Berry]

