Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide

Edited by Paul Chan

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FILM

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KEYWORDS:
New construction, old debris, Robert Green, Willie Birch, pandemic trauma, FEMA trailer, empathy, alien abduction reports, Diaspora, Sister Ausettua Amor Amenkum, Literature, sci-fi, Congo Square, National Geographic, L.A. rebellion, dissonant melody, poverty, race and class

In the summer of 2007, I invited artist and filmmaker Cauleen Smith to make a film during the organizing and production of *Godot*. There were no parameters. It did not even have to include Godot. I wanted Cauleen to have total freedom. She ended up making *The Fullness of Time*, a science fiction allegory disguised as a parable about time and the persistence of music and memory.

— Paul Chan

CAULEEN SMITH

CONSTELLATIONS AROUND THE MAKING OF *THE FULLNESS OF TIME*

My first day in New Orleans, two years after Hurricane Katrina did her dance, was spent following Paul Chan around the Lower Ninth Ward. He was gathering petition signatures from steadfast residents so that he could stage a production of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* on their streets. We were surrounded by three-foot-high weeds in an area checkered with freshly mowed lots, new construction, and old debris. The crackled cement outlines of driveways reminded me of crop circles. The structural elements that most often survived the flood were the cement steps that once led to porches and thresholds. They perched on the lots like tombstones in a family plot. There was plenty of life in the Lower Ninth. There was Robert Green, Sr., the neighborhood's ambassador. There were his gracious neighbors, who welcomed us into their homes and told us their stories. And there were the egrets nesting in the weeds, waiting for us to understand who the wetlands really belong to.

If I had never visited this place before the flood, it would have been nearly impossible to understand what was lost. It's hard to fathom how residents even find their own lots in order to clear away weeds and avoid city fines. The hand-painted street signs helped, but all the real markers of the place had floated away two years earlier. The place felt so empty, melancholy… bucolic maybe. I felt that it should somehow be experienced alone, in silence. Paul had a strict rule about not being photographed, but he was being followed by a photographer and a journalist nonetheless. I snuck away from the group to wander amid the surviving oak trees. I stood at the corner of North Tonti and Tennessee Streets choking back tears when Paul drove around the corner with his entourage stuffed in the back seat, looking for me. It was time to go to meet the artist Willie Birch at his studio. Paul was fixing Birch's Internet connection.

> *Paper Scissors Stone: Way-finding Devices for the Practice of Ethical Image-making*: If I had picked up a video camera on August 29, 2005, I would have barely had the strength to turn the device on myself to record my own scream. Just because we instinctively gather documents does not guarantee that we come any closer to knowing. Is it really possible to instruct and inform ourselves about the structures and super-structures of pandemic trauma? Shoot, I just don't know. I've never been one to walk around with a video camera "capturing" reality. I'm actually not a fan of reality at all. The problem with sticking to the facts, to what can be detected and measured, documented and recorded, is that this data is only the frame/*structure* of experience, not its totality. New Orleans is a place with a long history and stories that live in the land and live through the people. An interview with a family living in a FEMA trailer cannot reveal what is truly vital and complex about that family. It only gives us a frame. The frame becomes so authoritative and impermeable that we cease to imagine or consider that our subjects also imagine, and remember, and wonder, and dream. It is easier, I think, to trust the frame than it is to reckon with the silent unknown, the quiet sublime, and the in-betweens that are also the stuff of us. See, the trouble with a documentary film is the complete and utter seduction of a well-told story well told combined with the appearance of complete fidelity and veracity. There is really no way, after sitting through a compelling movie about a culture-person-animal-ecosystem-city's plight, that a viewer can reconcile the viewing experience with the fabric of actual occurrences and actions that were recorded and then sewn into an artificial, time-based narrative. The consumption of empathy is rather intoxicating for those of us who consider ourselves good people. When the viewer views *The Documentary*, she mistakes the experience of watching wretchedness for the experience of having done something to correct wretchedness. And make no mistake, the bulk of the documentary industry depends on the abject wretchedness of an Other and a good person's desire to know that Other. I find this troubling. But not as troubling as watching the most historically rich, culturally complex city in my country get swallowed up first by water, then by indifference, then by a bigotry that rose to high rhetoric. If words are stones, then images are paper. *Image smothers rhetoric.* I had to try and record that scream after all. But how to find the right pitch and the proper chorus?
>
> I'm not alone in harboring an intense obsession with the way in which alien abduction reports (frequently gleaned through hypnosis) sound so much like visions of earlier epochs, perhaps of the Virgin Mary or of attentive angels. Alien abduction stories, like commands from God, place the receiver into the realm of abject submission that I feel limits the potential for redemptive narratives and self-determination. On the other hand, the fictive identities of individuals like, say, Sun Ra or George Clinton, who claim

to have traveled to earth from other planets or galaxies, speaks directly to the historical experience of Africans in the Diaspora. Rolled into these science fictions is both the traumatized victim of abduction and the imperial, technologically (and usually morally) superior alien. To be an alien is to have landed after traveling so long that you have no recollection of where you're from, and are not even sure you have arrived at your intended destination. To be an alien is to have generations of memory, language, and culture absorbed by the hull of your mothership (or the bottom of the ocean, or the red dirt of plantations). To be an alien is to be unable to communicate this dilemma to anyone because they will not believe you. Or they will fear you. Blinded by your light, *they* (terrestrial-based life-forms) cannot hear you. To be an alien is to be a survivor of trauma. The alien not only survives, the alien triumphs, conquers, and converts. The alien assimilates, inseminates, and miscegenates. The alien has access to radical forms of energy. Energy that Sister Ausettua Amor Amenkum points out could "manipulate the atmosphere" through movement and sound (i.e., dance and music). These energies can seduce and destroy. These energies can propel and create. The character Gigi/Lu Tepo (an anagram of Tupelo Street, which is in L9), so fearlessly played by Troi Bechet, has replaced one kind of trauma, that of losing her home, family, and self, with another—that of traveling from one galaxy to another to explore an incomprehensible post-flood urban grid. In this way, she can re-map herself onto the new post-apocalyptic/pre-utopian landscape that presents itself as New Orleans.

Science-fiction narratives are rarely candidates for the canon of "legitimate" literature. Moreover, the ivory-tower bonafide gate-keepers of black culture tend to dismiss the hyperstitial among their ranks. Dusky paperback racks are familiar and comforting landscapes to those of us who prefer to resist the orbit of the canon's tantalizing gravitational pull. And that speaks so vividly to the reasons why novums, devices that illustrate estrangement, are an ideal tool for deconstructing gender, race, and class. A society in which cognitive estrangement is induced simply by listening to AM radio pundits like Bill Bennett (who, shortly after the floods, extemporized on-air his theory that if black women aborted their babies society would surely suffer less crime) can really only find expressive modes in extreme metaphor. Why wouldn't black women turn to sci-fi to describe the radical alienation one might feel from casually uttered conceits like Bennett's, if not to the physical principles of the universe itself? I can look through a telescope and speculate on the potentialities of habitation in the second nearest galaxy to our own Milky Way. I can roll the language of physics around on my tongue and compare the light years from Earth to Mars to the ocean nautical miles from Senegal to New Orleans.

This was on my mind as I watched Paul listen to people. And I listened, too. I listened to the kids at the café in the French Quarter making my coffee, or to the man at Verdi Mart behind the counter ringing up my po' boy; to the educators and students at Xavier Art Village; to painter Willie Birch; to my filmmaker friends Henry Griffin and Rebecca Snedecker. They all presented concepts that spoke to the surreality of the condition of their city. And these things I heard seemed like malleable truths to me, ready to invert or mutate given the slightest opportunity. The reality of New Orleans seemed suggestible, as if we were all under hypnosis, our glass hearts brittle and wobbly in our chests. It became very clear that the only way that I could approach the present state of New Orleans was to confront the traumas of nature and neglect, and to find a narrative that moved us through the long memory and the irrepressible future of the city.

I knew of a writer based in New Orleans, Kalamu Ya Salaam, who wrote beautiful afro-futurist short stories. Back in Boston, trying to write the story of Gigi/Lu Tepo, I called Paul and asked him to find Salaam for me. Paul laughed and said that he'd just left Kalamu's office; he'd introduce us as soon as I returned to New Orleans. So I met Kalamu and his students, a cadre of young men and women that Kalamu mentors in writing and video-making. They were having a group meeting, and they screened their work for me, Marlo Poras, and Paul. It was impossible not to be immediately smitten with these young people. As we left, Paul and I fell into an implicit agreement that they would make an excellent film crew. And so it went. My crew of Alex Lear, Ashley Jones, Chris Burton, Gabe Turner, and Kourtney Keller (and often Marlo, bless her heart) brought me so many gifts. Kourtney, hearing about my sci-fi angle, directed me to the solarium that becomes Lu Tepo's shelter. While filming in this haunted place, Alex told me that she had been a lifeguard there. She described the life of the place before Katrina broke the windows and flooded the pool. Troi Bechet took us into her home and fed us during rehearsals; and she never once complained that my set was not as well run as David Fincher's, and for that alone I love the woman. My friend and long-time collaborator, Alem Brhan Sapp, flew in from Los Angeles to play the foil in the video; but he ended up, as usual, being a keen observer whose insights informed the editing process. Kalamu sat with me for hours in the lobby of my hotel to talk about his experience and the reclamation of his life after Katrina—and we geeked out on sci-fi. Chris is a walking fountain of New Orleans lore, and he generously shared it with me as we scouted locations.

Ashley reeled her family into acting in the film, and her friends into loaning us their houses. She cajoled the Yellow Pocahontas Mardi Gras Indians into appearing before us on Congo Square to send Gigi/Lu Tepo back home. Almost every element of the video came from New Orleans creatives loaning me their visions, sharing their resources, and working very damned hard to help me tell the story of an extraterrestrial. These are just small samples of the propulsion and creation that made the images of *The Fullness of Time*. When I think about it now, I find this unimpeded generosity quite remarkable. Much more remarkable than anything that we placed within the frame.

CAULEEN SMITH

EXCERPTS FROM PRE-PRODUCTION NOTES FOR *THE FULLNESS OF TIME*

September 2007. Links: Sun Ra, Sayles' Brother from Another Planet, Herzog's Lessons of Darkness, Waiting for Godot, Jazz, cosmology, Michelle Wallace, NASA, Jimi Hendrix, James Broughton. Blues People- Amiri Baraka. Before the Mayflower- June Jordan, Pearl Cleage, Wole Soyinka, Science Fiction and The Trauma Question by Roger Luckhurst.

STUFF I HEARD Conversations//Eavesdrops// Panel Discussions
(August to October of 2007)

"In New Orleans everything happens so fast, but it also feels like stuff just be draggin'." – Kalamu Ya Salaam, lobby of International House Hotel

"I saw a National Geographic magazine with an African Tribe that had bare-chested women with tattoos. That's when I realized that I loved bare-chested women with tattoos." – Café Launderette, French Quarter. 9:43am, 9.28.07. Conversation between café barista and two male customers

"For the first time in my life people around the world looked at the culture of New Orleans and said, "This is important." Not just to us, but to the entire world. So for that, I thank Katrina. And besides, she's not the worst thing that's ever happened to New Orleans." - Ausettua

"If we keep Congo Square, but we lose the people, we won't have Congo Square for long." – unknown elder

" I was waiting on the city to declare my house a disaster. But didn't nobody come out here. So I went on google and there was a picture of my house – from the

air – and you could see that my house was completely underwater. So I took that picture to the city. That's when they told me they were waiting on my insurance." – A woman Paul Chan asked to sign a petition that would allow for the production of "Waiting For Godot." She invited us into her FEMA Trailer.

How does
Godot
figure?

Doesn't
really.

Scribbled
October
4, 2007

OCTOBER 5, 2007. I've met six young women and one young man who are active writers in Kalamu's Students At The Center program. Kalamu helps them turn their stories into video melodramas. Totally charming – as are the young people themselves. They will be my video crew. I wonder how that will go. I can take nothing for granted now. I have to ask questions that I'd already answered for myself before the world went under water and I got floated in. Specifically, how does one create a sustainable community-based platform on which to produce narrative time-based media? Sure, documentary filmmakers claim to have this figured out. The difference there is that the work of documenting requires a subject willing to be documented - a cause that demands advocacy. But when I survey the landscape of New Orleans, two years after Katrina did her dance, I'm reminded of the L. A. Rebellion '91 – a city on fire, busted windows, uzis on the roof. The shock, the awe, the shame. And out of that came something far from wretched, far from tragic, L.A. became a defiant city – self-aware, a city with aspirations that could not be restrained to quadrants northwest of the freeways. A city unwilling to let the judgement of pundits define its destiny. LA could not have articulated her desire for this renewal until after it happened – after her inhabitants were confronted with their fierce love of the place. I do not have any intelligent analysis of what happened here in N.O., or why it happened or what should happen now. I'm too pissed off with my government to think such constructive thoughts or make such prescriptive work. Making something out of nothing is a magic trick I haven't mastered. I need the support of a community, but I've only got three weeks to build a studio and shoot a movie. I've never been one to buy into the platitudes about how you can do so much with video with so little money. Video does not compose itself, it does not light itself, it does not place the microphone, and it does not feed your crew. There seems to have been a mild flurry around my desire to hire a helicopter for aerial shots. My own flurry is over the use of this youth brigade for labor in the making of this science-fiction art video. These kids don't know it yet, but they are going to work as hard as I do, which is often pretty hard. And they probably won't like it. But, what the heck, maybe they'll like what we make. Improvization will be key. Respond to circumstances, but do not succumb. Bend the circumstances into a dissonant melody. Music. New Orleans. The camera as an instrument. Not Louie's trumpet... a trombone, I think. How do we play the camera? Do we push past its limitations? Embrace them? Or force the materials to reveal their limitations – an eye as fragile as the body it examines. We will watch pixels rot and decay before our eyes. Do not allow the materials to limit your video. We must imagine a straight line where a jagged one scans across the screen. Do we seek the high notes or scurry madly over the mid range? Can one video have many soloists? I need to keep my crew on board. How do they become a part of it? I wish I had more time.

STILLS FROM *THE FULLNESS OF TIME*

Location scouting, Ashley Jones and Chris Burton, 2007. Photo by Cauleen Smith

Still from *The Fullness of Time*, 2008. Footage shot by Ashley Jones

Still from *The Fullness of Time*, 2008. Footage shot by Marlo Poras

Location scouting, Chris stands in, 2007. Photo by Cauleen Smith

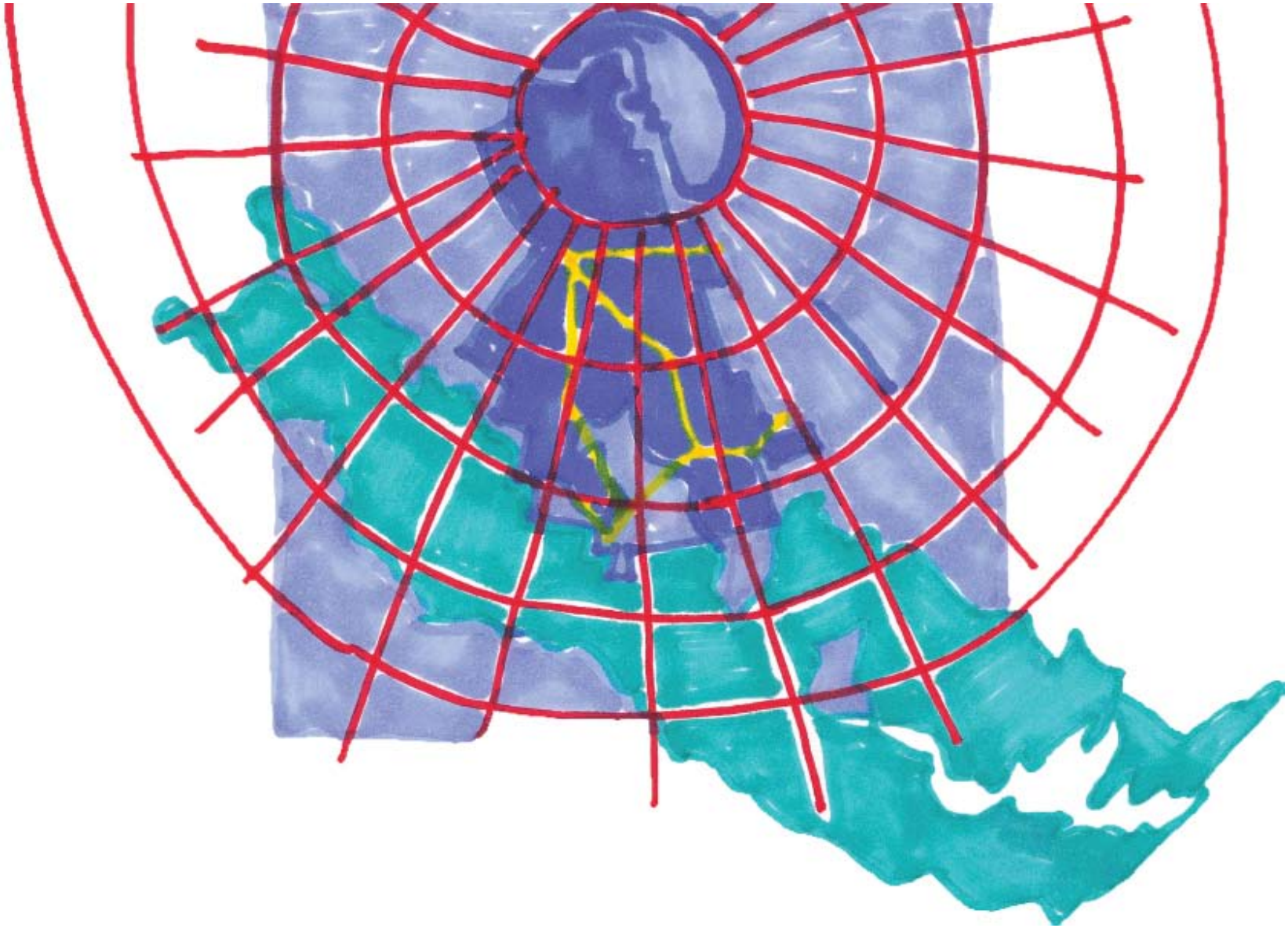
Still from *The Fullness of Time*, 2008. Footage shot by Ashley Jones

Location scouting, Chris Burton and Ashley Jones, 2007. Photo by Cauleen Smith

Location scouting, Chris Burton and Ashley Jones, 2007. Photo by Cauleen Smith

Video still from *The Fullness of Time*, 2008. Footage shot by Ashley Jones

Gabe, Marlo, Alex, and Cauleen on set, 2007. Photo by Kourtney Keller



Drawing for *The Fullness of Time* by Cauleen Smith, 2007, ink on paper

Abandoned solarium, 2007. Photo by Kourtney Keller

ASHLEY JONES

CONVERSATION WITH CAULEEN SMITH

cauleen smith [via email]: Post-Katrina, there was a huge rush of very well intentioned people coming to New Orleans to write books, make documentaries, and generally help the city and people recover, defend, and rebuild. But how did you feel about all that attention and advocacy as it was happening [or still happening]?

> ashley jones [via email]: Well, the attention and the advocacy was a bit overwhelming and at times a bit frustrating for myself and other New Orleanians. Yes, those who flooded the city came with good intentions and some with much needed resources, however, many people came in without talking to us about what was most important to us at the moment. People came with their own ideas and plans—many of these plans did not include our input. For a people who have been struggling and fighting for our voices and our ideas to be heard pre-Katrina around such issues as educational reform, crime, poverty, and then to have a government abandon us, and a school board fire veteran teachers, it was a little unsettling. We weren't being heard. Our pain was felt, but it wasn't heard.
>
> My biggest personal gripe has to do with the many groups and organizations that flooded our public schools, giving many kids access to resources that they had never had (such as video cameras, movie editing software) and then, once their year-long program was up, these groups left the city, taking these resources with them; so our young people were teased, and in the end, were put in the same position they started from in terms of resources.
>
> Now I'm a part of Students at the Center (SAC) and we have been doing video production and books of our young peoples' writing for over twelve years, and it's been a challenge funding-wise and politically. I have a serious belief in providing an environment where we truly empower our young people and provide the tools so that their empowerment builds.
>
> Now, regarding *The Fullness of Time*, the science-fiction elements. This was the first film I ever produced and I had to get over the learning curve quickly. So although I had access to the script, the story really didn't settle with me until much, much, later. I think many New Orleanians went through phases where things were happening and we were in the midst but really couldn't comprehend it, we were all kind of numb, trying to sift through the wreckage. But now, I think that sci-fi was the perfect film genre for such a story, for such a city that has always had a somewhat otherworldly charm to it. Many of us did feel like Gigi—we were in a place that should have been familiar to us, but it was strangely different, no longer our New Orleans. The film is very powerful in that aspect. Just riding down a once-familiar street, looking at the abandoned homes of people you knew, we have all felt like Gigi, some of us still do.
>
> One thing I really respect about you is that you allowed plain New Orleans folks to be a part of the film. You didn't bring in a ton of actors from L.A or New York. My little niece was in the film, my aunt and uncle, Mr. Robert Green. We used the house of a mentor of mine—Troi Bechet is a wonderful actress and she was born and raised here. Even though we were all still going through it, we all had the chance to work through everything we were feeling constructively, we had a job to do everyday of that shoot, even when we couldn't fully understand the work the job was doing on us on the inside.

cauleen: Have you yourself made any work about your experience in New Orleans since the floods? Can you describe it and/or the process of making the work? Did you make the work aimed at a large audience, or primarily for your own satisfaction?

> ashley: I am currently writing a script for a feature film which takes place post-Katrina. Initially, I wanted to minimize the storm, but the deeper I began to get into the story, the more Katrina kept picking at me. So I realized that I had to finally deal with this thing in my own way. For me, there is nothing I can do about New Orleans that won't have Katrina all over it, even if I tried. Water takes on a whole new meaning for me now. I can't see rain without thinking about that storm. So now, in every script I have been writing lately, water is always there and it will probably always be there. My work is definitely for an audience, but it's also something I have to do for me—it's a release. But part of the release is having others see it and critique it, and release their feeling too.

cauleen: Can you describe if there were any benefits to your own art practice gained from working on *The Fullness of Time*?

ashley: That's heavy because I learned so much. At the time, I wasn't in grad school so it prepared me for the first project I had to produce in class. Mostly I learned how to make it work. When people don't show up, when things don't go right that's usually when you get something good so I prepare myself for the aspects of the filmmaking process that do not come together, and I'm always thinking of how that missing element might be working for the overall good of the project.

cauleen: Do you think there have been any benefits to any of the work made about New Orleans for the residents and evacuees of New Orleans?

ashley: Yes and no. The biggest benefit obviously is that it made people look long and hard at our government.

No, because still, so much of what people believe about New Orleans and what happened is undercut by misguided views about race and class, and it's stopping folks from really comprehending everything that has happened and how easily it can happen again.

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Christopher McElroen

Christopher McElroen is the Co-founder of the Classical Theatre of Harlem (CTH), for which he produced forty productions between 2000 and 2009 that yielded thirteen AUDELCO Awards, six OBIE Awards, two Lucille Lortel Awards, and a Drama Desk Award. Selected directing credits include *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Blacks: A Clown Show*, and *Marat/Sade*. He has also directed at numerous venues, including the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Duke University, and the Walker Art Center.

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Nato Thompson is Chief Curator for Creative Time, where he has organized major projects, such as *It Is What It Is: Conversations about Iraq* (2009), a project that encouraged public discussion of the history, present circumstances, and future of Iraq. Prior to Creative Time, he worked as a curator for MASS MoCA, where he completed numerous large-scale exhibitions, such as *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*, a survey of political art of the 1990s. His most recent book, *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Age of Cultural Production*, is available through Autonomedia.org.

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