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## By editorial staff

### Interview with Claire Tancons.

*Massimiliano Scuderi*

The comparison between two distant countries, New Orleans and L'Aquila, allows us to understand how two realities struck hard by tragic events can also be reborn through innovative cultural policies. We asked this to one of the most interesting international art curators: Claire Tancons. From the New Orleans Biennial to the same in Harlem, she is responsible for the organisation of events inspired by the concept of the Carnival, between creolisation of culture and new relational models

**MS:** For many years your artistic research has centred on the paradigmatic concept of Carnival applied to art. Can you better explain what the reasons and the cultural origins are for choosing this field? Does it have something to do with the idea of métissage of Modernist and Post-Modernist western culture?

**CT:** *Carnival is not so much a domain of application of art, but art itself. Having researched Carnival from Trinidad to Brazil since 2004, I have come to consider it as the Americas' as-of-yet undiscovered Modern Art. This is more than a provocation on New World Discovery. It is rooted in the belief that, as eloquently phrased by Sylvester Ogbechie, Western and non-Western "contexts owe their canonical forms to reciprocal appropriations engendered within an international context of modernity"[1]. I am specifically interested in framing Carnival in its Modern, New World, incarnation following its disaffection from Europe as a mainstream form of popular entertainment and its transplantation to the Americas during the Enlightenment which accompanied European colonization.*
*I am wary of the biological connotations of the term Métissage, and prefer Creolization which describes more appropriately what can only be appreciated as a cultural process. In light of my quote from Ogbechie, you understand that I consider Modernism as inherently cross-cultural, be it in Europe or the Americas. I thus see my Carnival project as concerned with Modernity rather than Métissage.*

**MS:** Do the Carnival-inspired parades you have organized come about as forms of protest from a condition of repression in some cultures?

**CT:** *I have curated two processions inspired by Carnival: Spring (September 5, 2008) for the 7th Gwangju Biennale, South Korea and A Walk into the Night (May 2, 2009), for the opening of CAPE09, South Africa. Spring was inspired by the May 18 Democratic Uprising of 1980, student-led protests that paved the way to*

*South Korea's democratization. It took place around the May 18 Democratic Square, the very location where the uprising took place 30 years ago, and was conceived with and performed by 200 students, the symbolic descendants of those who fought and died on these very grounds. A Walk Into the Night referred to Apartheid-era Forced Removals which dislocated non-white populations from the city centre to its outskirts, now townships. It took place in the Company Gardens and staged the symbolic return of these populations with 100 participants, most of whom from the Cape Town Carnival, historically a tradition of the Coloureds.*
*In the Americas, Carnival and protest are intimately linked. Carnival was used as a means of covert and at times overt rebellion under the mask and the pretext of merriment. What I hope Spring and A Walk Into the Night conveyed is how political and cultural resistance are intertwined and played out in such artistic practices as Carnival, seen as marginal but, in fact, core to crucial societal debates.*

**MS:** In a conversation with Daniel Birnbaum, Sarat Maharaj speaks about Stuart Hall and his capacity to talk in Great Britain about "the invisible colonial subject now present in the heart of the old empire"[2]. Do you find the sense of these words in your work, and can your approach be considered a sort of "culture switch"?

**CT:** *That invisible colonial subject was, for instance, a subject of Britain's Caribbean colonies, be it Trinidad or Jamaica, involved in the Notting Hill riots. There again, Carnival was at the centre stage of political and cultural resistance. The London-based Trinidad Carnival-inspired Notting Hill Carnival, a Pan-Caribbean Carnival now recognized as a UK national festival, was the stage of violent protests between the Carnival's black revellers and the London police. This, and other issues related to retro-colonization, was commemorated in Territories (1984) by filmmaker Isaac Julian whose work is very much concerned with "creolizing vision". If my work is about bringing visibility to invisible subjects, it aims to do so with the their cultural strategies, such as Carnival. I am interested in empowering communities within their cultural practices rather than legitimizing them through appropriation by the mainstream. My interest being in New World Carnival and their diasporic counterparts in North America and Europe, I find the street context and the processional format more relevant than the museum institution and the exhibitionary complex. In that sense, my work operates a "culture switch" based on the terms of the culture whose interests it seeks to serve.*

**MS:** Talking with Vito Acconci in Rome, during the latest American elections, we wondered what the result of the creolisation of western culture could be, and if the advent of Obama could favour the success of this new cultural trend. What do you think about this question? Is something happening, in this sense, in America?

**CT:** *Like Édouard Glissant and in contrast with Stuart Hall who locates Creolization within the Black Atlantic, I believe that the world was undergoing such a process long before European colonization in the Americas. Creolization may seem a new trend in the US but that's erroneous, particularly from the vantage point of New Orleans, one of America's most diverse cities, closer to the Caribbean than to North America, although shaped by the US's segregationist history and racial bias. President Obama crystallizes the hopes and fears of those who are on either side of the multicultural line. To me however, his ability to shape a new vision for the US has less to do with his multiracial heritage which, in itself, does not imbue him with special insights, as it does with his humanist outlook on the world beyond the US's shores.*

**MS:** Among the many initiatives to which you contributed was Prospect.1 New Orleans, the New Orleans Biennial. As we know, the Biennial also came about with the aim of relieving an affected community with major difficulties. Can you tell me about the project and the repercussions on the territory and on the community itself?

**CT:** Prospect.1 *(November 1, 2008 - January 18, 2009) was conceived by Dan Cameron in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (2005) to foster economic re-development through cultural tourism. I was the Associate Curator of the Biennial. Though it has had popular and critical success backed up by high numbers in economic revenue (20 million at the highest) and audience attendance (between 89,000 according to the June 2009 audience survey and 42,000 according to a November 2009 Prospect.1 press release), there is room for debate as to its actual impact in and for New Orleans. The audience survey (available on the website of CAC New Orleans) revealed that 83% of its audience, local and non-local was white, while only 11%, 8% local and 3% non-local was black. Considering that New Orleans is 62% black, the proclaimed success of the Biennial is mitigated by its poor black attendance. Similarly, though New Orleans Parish boasts one of the highest numbers of black – owned businesses in the US (27,6% in the versus 5.2% nationwide – all population numbers from the 2008 US Census Bureau available online) I am curious to know how many of the stated millions benefited them. I am not an economist but understand that indirect benefits trickle down from jobs maintained or created within a wider scheme of positive economic gain. However and as we know, it is New Orleans' impoverished black community who suffered most durably from Katrina. So the question is: What exactly was* Prospect.1*'s vision of "the city", whom precisely was it supposed to benefit artistically and economically post-Katrina and what means did it devise to reach out to a diverse population?* Prospect.1*'s numbers followed general art world trends but also departed from it in significant ways: the Biennial was free of attendance and its 83% white audience, although well-educated also tended to be younger and less wealthy (contrary to the general trend). Though diversity was not one of* Prospect.1*'s stated goals (mostly of artistic and economic nature) it did attempt to reach out to a black audience through various historically black art venues. The Lower 9th Ward, a blue collar African-American neighbourhood that was amongst the most affected by the Hurricane and has been the site of Brad Pitt's much publicized Make it Right re-building initiative is one of them. Though on a much smaller scale, Mrs. Sarah's House, a three-phase project by* Prospect.1 *artist Wangechi Mutu, (15/81 exhibited in the Lower 9th Ward) contributed directly to the rebuilding. Phase 1, in Mutu's words was meant as "a site sensitive work that will be built as a tribute and a place of pilgrimage for* Prospect.1 *visitors and especially people of the Lower Ninth". It consisted in a " 'light-drawing' [which created] a kind of ghost building at night... a mirage of sorts, an attempt to describe [Mrs. Sarah's] and others' dreams of returning home" (Artist statement, 2008). For Phase 2, Mutu made a print called* Home*, the sale of which was used to create a fund for the re-building of* Mrs. Sarah's house*. Phase 3 happened recently, when the rebuilt house was inaugurated on April 11, 2010.*

**MS:** Last year the city of L'Aquila in Italy, as well as recently in New Orleans and Haiti, underwent a catastrophic natural event, a strong earthquake that brought it to its knees. In your opinion, can art and culture in general revive the sense of identity of a community beset by such events? Has this happened, for example, in New Orleans?

**CT:** *It takes time to register the impact, cultural and economic of such events, provided they can be sustained. I am skeptical of claims made on behalf of populations, particularly in culturally disenfranchised and economically impoverished locations such as New Orleans or Haiti. I also think that there can be legitimate concerns about the neo-colonial nature of the worldwide Biennial trend, which tends to impose a Western cultural model as mainstream in non-Western locales, the cultural heritage of which often belie the notion that contemporary art is a globally shared cultural value. Back to New Orleans, I wonder to what extent these culturally black artistic practices which were featured in* Prospect.1 *such as the exhibition of Mardi Gras Indian Victor Harris (which I organized) were more than mere tokens of appreciation of black culture thrown in the mix of an otherwise predominantly white cultural event in a predominantly black city. The question always is: Who speaks from where, for whom and to what ends? I think that biennials do a lot of cultural ventriloquism whereby they speak for local populations about the benefits supposedly earned by them, having defined in advance what was good for them according to an agenda that may be far from their aspirations and goals.*

**MS:** What are your upcoming projects?

**CT:** *I have just completed research travels in over 20 countries over the last 12 months that aimed at expanding my research from the Americas out into the wider Black Atlantic context and from Carnival to other masquerade and processional traditions against the backdrop of global protest movements. I looked as much at São Tomé's Tchiloli as I did at Carnival in Angola and Cabo Verde, performance art in Nigeria, and anti-capitalist so-called Konsumprocessions in Germany. I am now working on developing two related projects. One Carnival: Art to and from New Worlds, travelling and institutionally-based, comprising an exhibition, workshops and processions, slated to debut at CAC New Orleans in 2013, aims to encompass contemporary artistic practices within Carnival as well as the current contemporary art trend in parades and processions which I see as indirectly related. The other, a book, Carnival, Procession and Protest: Art, Agency and the Re-Possession of Perception, builds an argument about Carnival in the Americas as Modern Art which, unlike 19th century Western modernism defined by Jonathan Crary as a "suspension of perception" privileging vision, operated a "re-possession of perception" through pan-sensorial experiences. I am also working towards the first edition of Harlem Biennale scheduled for Spring 2012. I have been asked to design a model for a recurring procession event that, from Marcus Garvey's UNIA parades of the 1920's to the first Harlem Carnival in 1947 taps into Harlem's rich history in… Carnival, processions and protests.*

In *Arte e Critica,* n 63 - Junho/Julho 2010.

Notes:

1. Ogbechie, Sylvester: *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (Rochester U Press, 2008, p7)
2. Sarat Maharaj, *Philosophical Geographies* in *Making Worlds/Fare Mondi* (catalogue of 53rd Venice Biennale), ed. Marsilio, 2009