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Living in the Imagination of the World: *Treme*, Cultural Diplomacy and the International Exhibition

If you saw the premiere of HBO's *Treme* this past weekend, you'll probably remember the scene where Albert Lambreaux (played by *The Wire*'s Clarke Peters) stands in front of his friend's porch, donning an extravagantly feathered and beaded Native American-influenced costume. While most people around him are concentrating on getting their homes back in order (post-Hurricane Katrina), Lambreaux is trying to prevent his fellow Mardi Gras Indian krewe member from forgetting their collective responsibility of preparing for the next Carnival. 'Conspicuous' isn't the word to describe the image of Lambreaux wearing a densely bright ensemble fit for a celebration with a thousand of his closest friends while standing alone on a dark, dirty sidewalk. The background looks bleak at best; his friend dismisses his approach, skeptical that another Carnival would even take place for them to rehearse for. Lambreaux, chief of his krewe, isn't so easily convinced.



This scene from *Treme* instantly reminded me of the critical role of culture in the regeneration of a post-disaster community or locale. Whether the trauma is caused by a war, a natural disaster or an economic crisis, cultural outreach is a complementary tool to existing methodologies of social recuperation. *Prospect New Orleans*, which debuted in November 2008 as *Prospect.1 New Orleans*, was conceived by New York curator Dan Cameron as a cultural response to the ultimate *non-response* of disaster relief and aid after Hurricane Katrina. Cameron's efforts brought together the largest international art biennial in the United States--all within the context of a recuperating New Orleans, and he purposefully curated an international exhibition that included artworks highly sensitive to this backdrop of culture and trauma in order to contextualize the relevance of the local community itself.

Many *Prospect.1* artists used materials directly from the New Orleans environment, a significant decision that afforded the locality its own representation after years of social neglect and irresponsibility. These artists were aware of the fact that they could create works out of the self-sufficiency of New Orleans itself, in ways that were both intangible as well as corporeal. Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul held a traditional jazz funeral for local and beloved musician Narvin Kimball, which was enthusiastically embraced by familiar New Orleans families. This public event not only resurrected the long held funeral traditions from the city's cultural fabric but also melded various distinct identities that probably would not have normally gathered together at the same time. *Prospect.1* attracted 42,000 visitors and helped generate more than \$23 million for the local economy. Besides the obvious financial benefits, this large international exhibition reminded the world of this city's cultural heritage and ultimately defined New Orleans' new role as a cultural ambassador for contemporary art.

However, *Prospect.1* was not the first time that a recuperating city embraced a large scale international art exhibition in order to accelerate its regeneration process. One of the most crucial moments in recent history that exemplifies cultural diplomacy exists in the case of Germany after World War II. Much of the war-weary German public had a desire to move beyond the Nazi party's former focus on the "radical traditionalist" volkisch artists, the *Degenerate Art Exhibition*, and the maniacal anti-Semitism that informed German culture before the war.

Regarding the Nazi regime's utility of art as a social tool, German historian and critic Joachim Clemens Fest states that "rarely was a government's cultural ambition higher; never was the result more provincial and insignificant." Fest's reference to the insular and parochial qualities of Nazi-sanctioned art points to the fact that ultimately, these National Socialist leaders--despite their professed passion for paintings, sculptures and their gigantic collections of such artworks by the late 1930s--primarily used their alleged interest in art to accelerate their positions of power within Hitler's program. Though they definitely viewed art as a public status symbol, their narrow perspective of art's utility as primarily a political tool hindered a deeper understanding of the topic. This ultimately prevented the Nazi regime from exerting any resonating cultural influence over the German public that would enable the nation to further itself on its increasingly globalizing platform.

In 1955 Germany committed to a large international contemporary art exhibition titled *documenta*, curated by Arnold Bode, hoping to initiate a new form of communication and exchange with the international community. Not only was Germany's entire regional economic infrastructure dilapidated, so was the international public's view of Germany. Nazism was now a stigma in the general public dialogue; it offered no attractive, or even neutral, qualities to the global community--only hatred, disgust and ultimate shame. Germany desperately needed to not only recover physically, but also socially and culturally. Contrary to Germany's previous exclusionary position under the National Socialist party, now with a newly divided country and an uncertain future the nation finally found itself in the role of 'the other' on the global stage. Germany desperately needed to discover new channels of outreach and discourse to balance the reproach it was now, obviously, on the receiving end of.

documenta gave the German public an opportunity to view modernist art previously banned in the country, as well as the chance to participate in the European avant-garde that had been sweeping the rest of the continent even before the war. This exhibition, which now takes place every five years in Kassel, aided in the cultural regeneration of postwar Germany--in effect, Germany offered a new cultural dialogue with the international community via *documenta* and was thus able to begin moving forward from its tumultuous, repressive and shameful past. Today Germany enjoys an association with progressive and avant-garde art, visible by the explosion of influential works coming out of Berlin and many other areas. The art world continues to welcome *documenta* as a highly relevant and discursive exhibition, and Germany surely reaps the cultural and social benefits to having hosted this event since 1955. Germany succeeded in joining the rest of the European avant-garde by publicly engaging with an exhibition that was extremely current for its time--and very well received, considering that more than 130,000 visitors attended the first *documenta*. This surprisingly large number of viewers only confirms the notion that the public of Germany was hungry for a new direction in its cultural trajectory--as were the country's global neighbors.

documenta's trajectory towards cultural growth is clearly distinct from--but still conceptually parallel to--the foundation of *Prospect New Orleans*. Both Kassel and New Orleans explored their options in terms of recovery via channels of cultural communications. Though the backgrounds of New Orleans and Kassel (and their respective contexts of trauma) are obviously separate with highly divergent degrees of heinous social injury, they are certainly not incomparable or irrelative. The congruity of the large international art exhibition's actual utilization by these two cities--even in such varying moments in time--is a testament to the ultimate value of cultural dialogue and exploration in localities and circumstances challenging reconstruction and viability.

The utility of cultural outreach and cultural diplomacy will continue to tangentially develop and redefine itself, evidenced by the distinct yet analogous ways in which the large scale international art exhibition has already been interpreted and used. Though cultural diplomacy has traditionally been categorized in the realm of national governments, other definitive identities are also using their cultures to broadcast to the world. With the various cultural diplomacy endeavors that began during the Cold War, which have since exponentially evolved thanks to our vast information networks, the future of cultural discourse will be informed by our historical backdrop of diplomacy coupled with the increasing reality of a globalized society. Hopefully, however, we will continue to see identities practice the kind of diplomacy that engages the hearts and minds of not only accessible developed nation states, but face-to-face with local individuals in peripheral cultures as well. Like Albert Lambreaux's massively beautiful Mardi Gras Indian costume in *Treme*, cultural diplomacy should weigh heavy on our shoulders--not as a burden, but as an important symbol and tool for all of our diverse contributions to humanity, past and future.

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