

# To Speak What Has No Words

PROSPECT.4 // NEW ORLEANS

By Ruslana Lichtzier



In New Orleans, I found myself wandering in a sultry haze, in an obnoxiously cute city. A condition that is not good for the senses. You cannot keep it cool when you are melting. And yet, when I arrived for the preview events of Prospect.4 and was welcomed by the exhibitions’ clumsy title, *The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp*, my senses quickly cooled. The title quotes the master saxophonist, Archie Shepp, who used the lotus-swamp metaphor in the early 1970s to describe jazz as “a symbol of the triumph of the human spirit, not of its degradation.” While it may have had a sexy-spiritual appeal during the Flower Power era, the metaphoric trope is completely dried out in 2017.

— Spread between multiple venues, Prospect.4 encourages visitors to explore a city that can barely hold its complex history under the surface. Not surprisingly, considering the title, water and jazz are central themes in the exhibition, driving the exploration of New Orleans’ past and present relationship to the world and its history of slavery and colonialization. A nucleus of both themes was carried onto the show’s investigation of *Creolization*. Unfortunately, this complex term is reduced to the repeated use of transnational identities, done with the aid of wall labels: “artist born in X, resides in X...”<sup>1</sup> Despite, or perhaps

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because of, its subject matter, the exhibition fails to integrate its themes into a compelling thesis—perhaps the empty metaphor is not a trusted guide.

— In terms of exhibition design, Prospect.4 suffered from an uneven display. Often times individual works battled each other, such as the case of two different sounds from separate works that slipped from one space to another, dismantling the possibility of experiencing a work on its own terms.

— During the preview weekend, artists’ audible gasps of frustration were heard—miscommunication, a shortage of professional technical staff on sites, and last-minute changes in the exhibition’s design left many artists whisper-screaming at their own openings. While Kara Walker has the status to voice her disappointment in public, many artists, invested in maintaining an appearance of professionalism, ended up lowering their heads and sucking it up.<sup>2</sup>

— Yet, many lilies shined despite the swamp. No. Allow me to start over—horrible metaphor...

— And yet, many works resisted—with intellectual strength and astute aesthetics—the exhibition’s redundant frame. While only three artists are mentioned for the purpose of this text, many others stood out, their works calmly claiming a space that lured the curious viewers, with beautifully idiosyncratic languages.

— On the upper floor of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, the London-based artist, John Akomfrah presented a video installation, *Precarity* (2017). The forty-seven-minute-long film traces, through an engrossing sonic and visual experience, the life of the forgotten legend Charles “Buddy” Bolden, who was also known “King









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Bolden,” and is considered by some the father of jazz. Incredibly popular in the early 1900s New Orleans music scene, Buddy Bolden was committed in 1907 to the Louisiana’s insane asylum with Dementia Praecox (a disused psychiatric diagnosis that was later relabeled as Schizophrenia). He died there twenty-four years later, at the age of fifty-four, leaving behind no surviving recordings and only a few photographs. While his music rippled into what became known as jazz, King Bolden was almost completely forgotten. Trevor Schoonmaker, the Creative Director of Prospect.4, who commissioned the work, defines it as “a crossroads, or intersection, of genres: namely, of the film essay, the historical documentary, the costume drama, and the music video.”<sup>3</sup> This unique blend of genres is displayed on three large split-screens; footage of personal

documents being washed in streams, alternating with period actors that carry their silence as words, all the while we listen to sounds of spoken poetry amid the running water. The expressive gazes of the silent actors, juxtaposed against the streams carry the vanished personal history, telling us the story of disappearance. Here, water and jazz intersect in the most poignant way—abandoning grand metaphors, but not grand emotions, this arresting video installation utters and speaks what has no words.

Across the street, in the Contemporary Arts Center, the New York-based artist Naama Tsabar presented a section of her sculptural series *Work on Felt* (ongoing). The large monochromatic felt sheets, each elegantly bent with the aid of a string, invite the audience to use them as musical instruments. Tsabar, here,

lightly reopens the heavy doors of the minimalist tradition, connecting it with participatory, audience based, musical improvisation.

For the opening day of Prospect.4, Tsabar constructed an elaborate outdoor performance, *Composition 21* (2017), which expanded on her ongoing investigation of sculptural-performative field. The fifth in the artist’s *Composition Series*, the piece brought together twenty-one local female and gender-nonconforming musicians. On a bright day in Washington Park, the participants were arranged in a diamond formation, standing atop amplifiers used as pedestals. They played, sometimes in turns and at other times simultaneously, separate musical pieces that were commissioned for the performance. The sound progressed throughout the park, propelling a circular audience movement and creating what Tsabar describes as a “live sculptural field.” Watching the performance after days of wandering through New Orleans, witnessing its empty plinths of the recently removed Confederate statues, gave the performance a particularly acute gravitas. As I write about the work, months later, I cannot resist but to attach the image of these mostly women performers standing proudly, united in their different acts, to the force of what the #metoo movement had produced.

At the site of the New Orleans Jazz Museum at the Old U.S. Mint, Houston-based artist Dario Robleto exhibited two installations. The first was created in collaboration with Lance and April Ledbetter, the duo behind Dust to Digital, a record company that specializes in documenting historic recordings of gospel, blues, and country music. Divided between three adjacent vitrines, *Goodbye Babylon* (remix) (2015), *The People’s Intoned Praise of Their Maker* (2017), and *Washington Phillips and His Box of Angelic Strings* (2017), bring to life soundscapes of the early 1900s through the 1960s American South. The vitrines contain lathe clear vinyl records, displayed next to their costumed wooden boxes, which are engraved with portraits of the musicians and their stories. Several headsets are positioned outside the vitrines, playing the recordings and furnishing a deep-dive into the wealth of the archival material. In each vitrine, a big flat wooden box is divided into specific sections. The different elements fit into these boxes, to allow an easy seal and provide safe transport. One of their earlier versions arrived into the hands of Neil Young, as a gift from “a good old friend of his,” Bob Dylan. Curiously, Dylan



is the conduit of Robleto’s second installation.

— *American Seabed* (2014) is displayed in a vitrine of fossilized prehistoric whale ear bones, salvaged from the sea (one to ten million years old). Each bone is paired with a dried butterfly and held by a brass rod extended from individual pigmented concrete cubes. Some of the cubes are slightly elevated from the pedestal surface, exposing what can be thought of as the remains of a sub-aquatic landscape. Here, the butterflies have new antennas, made of a magnetic tape, which carries a recording of Dylan’s “Desolation Row.” The work provides for us a riddle: one part of it points to the past—to the sound waves that never disappeared—as vibrations that can be traced today in ear bones. The other part, leads us towards the outside of time, where butterflies transmit the music, “nobody is escaping to Desolation Row.”

Each of Robleto’s installations passionately battle against the unavoidable oblivion, as he writes, “What do

we owe to each other’s memories, hopes and fears, and what right do we have to forget them?”

— ‘What we owe to each other’ is a wonderful question to keep asking ourselves, not only in the context of sonic explorations, but also in our ways of living and working. At its best, Prospect.4 exhibited works that practiced attention and compassion, without the use of didactics—featuring works that speak for themselves in their own wonderfully idiosyncratic language, and we were able to listen.

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***Prospect.4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp* ran from November 18, 2017—February 25, 2018.**

**TITLE PAGE, PAGE 17, PREVIOUS SPREAD:**  
John Akomfrah, *Precarity*, 2017. Three channel HD color video installation, 7.1 sound Dimensions variable. © Smoking Dogs Films; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:**  
Naama Tsabar, *Composition 21*, 2017. Performance. Photograph by J Caldwell.

**ABOVE:**  
Dario Robleto, *American Seabed* (2014), detail. Photograph: Zach Smith; Courtesy Prospect.4.

- 1 It is important to note that these labels did not follow a singular template, and were at times repetitive, the reason remaining unclear.
- 2 As voiced in the *New York Times*, “After A Blowup, Kara Walker Lets Off Steam in New Orleans,” Online, February 2018.
- 3 As quoted in the text accompanying the work in the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.