Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide

Edited by Paul Chan

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PICTURE

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(Pause. Vehemently.), Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, November 2006, Bill Quigley, Voices in the Wilderness, U.S. government, 2nd Gulf War, Memorial Hospital, FEMA, Baghdad, Ronald Lewis, "A shadow fund," Jana Napoli, Pamela Franco, Gentilly, Greta Gladney, Frederick Douglass High School, art, Broadway, San Quentin, Sarajevo, Susan Sontag, burden of the new, anabasis, via negativa, University of New Orleans, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Disaster Capitalism, Robert Green, Saul Alinsky, Jacques Rancière, Naomi Klein, Ron Bechet, Malik Rahim, Common Ground, J Kyle Manzay, T. Ryder Smith, Wendell Pierce, Group Material, Jeremy Deller, Augusto Boal, Chris Marker, Classical Theatre of Harlem, Didi and Gogo, Pozzo, Mark McLaughlin, Michael Pepp, Tony Felix, St. Mary's Elementary School, Tyrone Smith

PAUL CHAN

WAITING FOR GODOT IN NEW ORLEANS
An Artist Statement

> Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! (*Pause. Vehemently.*) Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! What do you say?
>
> —*Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett

In November 2006, I visited New Orleans for the first time. Tulane University's art gallery was exhibiting one of my animated projections and the art department invited me to lecture at the school. I readily accepted. It was a chance to see the city for myself. It was also a chance to visit with friends and colleagues like Bill Quigley. Bill was my lawyer in 2005 and defended me and other members of the Chicago-based anti-war group Voices in the Wilderness in federal court. The U.S. government charged that we broke the law by bringing aid and medicine to Iraq before and during the second Gulf War. An unjust law must be broken to serve a higher law called justice, Bill argued before the judge. I found it moving and convincing; unfortunately, the judge did not. We lost the case.

Bill and his wife Debbie (an oncology nurse) spent five days in New Orleans' Memorial Hospital without electricity or clean water or phones, trying to save people from the flooding during Hurricane Katrina. After the storm, Bill and Debbie found refuge in Houston. They returned to New Orleans almost four months later and Bill began to write a series of articles exposing the absurdities of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the pathetic governmental response to rebuilding efforts, and the political fight over the rights of returning New Orleanians. Bill's writings were my first encounter with New Orleans after Katrina.

What surprised me about seeing New Orleans for the first time was that I couldn't put together a complete picture of the city. I expected comparative contrasts but not wholesale contradictions. Some

neighborhoods, like the one around Tulane, seemed virtually untouched by Katrina. But in the Lower Ninth Ward and parts of Gentilly, the barren landscape brooded in silence. The streets were empty. There was still debris in lots where houses once stood. I didn't hear a single bird.

I have seen landscapes scarred by disasters of all sorts. In Baghdad, I saw kids playing soccer barefoot around the concrete rubble that came from U.S. troops shelling the buildings near the Tigris River. They seemed like the same kids I had seen playing on a ghostly Detroit side street during an enormous labor demonstration in 1999—with shoes but no shirts. Life wants to live, even if it's on broken concrete.

New Orleans was different. The streets were still, as if time had been swept away along with the houses. Friends said the city now looks like the backdrop for a bleak science-fiction movie. Waiting for a ride after visiting with some Common Ground volunteers who were gutting houses in the Lower Ninth, I realized it didn't look like a movie set, but the stage setting for a play I have seen many times. It was unmistakable. The empty road. The bare tree leaning precariously to one side with just enough leaves to make it respectable. The silence. What's more, there was a terrible symmetry between the reality of New Orleans post-Katrina and the essence of this play, which expresses in stark eloquence the cruel and funny things people do while they wait—for help, for food, for tomorrow. It was uncanny. Standing there at the intersection of North Prieur and Reynes, I suddenly found myself in the middle of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

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The longing for the new is a reminder of what is worth renewing. Seeing *Godot* embedded in the very fabric of the landscape of New Orleans was my way of reimaging the empty roads, the debris, and, above all, the bleak silence as more than the expression of mere collapse. Seeing gave way to scheming. How could it be done? Was it worth doing? I had never worked on a professional play, much less produced one outside, in the middle of a street intersection, in a city I had only come to know through one visit and the work of Bill and other writers and activists. Making a play is also an inherently collaborative process and I'm allergic to working with people. If someone were to stage *Waiting for Godot* in the middle of the street in the Lower Ninth and mobilize the given landscape to tell the twentieth century's most emblematic story on waiting, that someone would probably not be me.

I started asking around. I went back to New Orleans and talked to people about what they thought of the idea. Bill said, "Great, a public performance. I love it." I respect Bill very much but you can't trust lawyers, even anti-war ones. So I talked to more people.

Ronald Lewis, who lives in the Lower Ninth and runs a small museum in his backyard dedicated to the history and tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians, called The House of Dance and Feathers, had never seen *Godot* and so couldn't say whether or not it was a good idea. But he told me many art projects have come and gone without leaving anything behind. "You gotta leave something behind for the community," he told me. We talked some more. I noticed on the ground the shadow of a tree similar to the leaning tree I saw at the intersection of North Prieur and Reynes. I had recently finished a series of animated projections that deal with shadows, so I was sensitive to their mute presence. It occurred to me while listening to Ronald that *Godot* needed a shadow. I asked him what he thought about a fund that would be set up to shadow the production budget of the play at whatever the cost. These funds would stay in the neighborhoods where *Godot* would be staged in order to contribute to rebuilding efforts. "A shadow fund," I said. Ronald thought about it a bit and replied, "It's a start."

Artist Jana Napoli liked how staging it outside connected with the city's storied tradition of street performance, from Mardi Gras to the Second lines that leisurely snake through streets and neighborhoods. Pamela Franco, an art historian from Tulane, thought the play should be in two locations, not just one. The sense and nonsense of waiting engulfed other neighborhoods as well, where people still lived in trailers almost two years after the storm, hoping for some type of relief to come from city, state, or federal authorities. To bring *Godot* to New Orleans, Pamela thought, meant that one had to expand the place where the tragicomedy of waiting occurs, beyond the borders of one neighborhood. "What about Gentilly?" Pamela asked.

Greta Gladney, an organizer who runs a local farmers' market in the Lower Ninth, and whose husband Jim teaches at Fredrick Douglass High School in the city, thought that, if such a project were to happen, the schools ought to be involved. Ron Bechet, an artist and professor at Xavier University, thought the same thing.

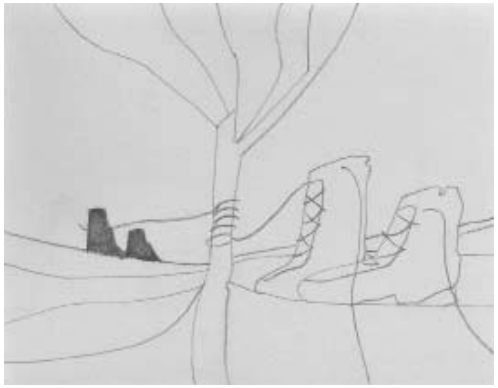
"If you want to do this, you got to spend the dime, and you got to spend the time," someone said to me. The idea of staging *Godot* in New Orleans began to take shape. I hoped the naturally collaborative process of producing a play, in addition to the necessary give and take of working on the streets, would help me reimagine how art—as the form freedom takes without the use coercion of force—can become a means to enter and engage with the myriad dimensions of life lived in the midst of ruin—

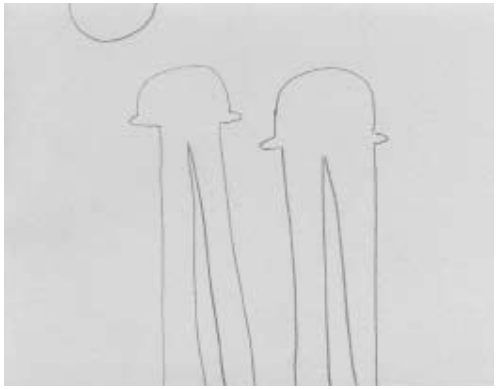
without succumbing to the easy graces of reducing it to either knowledge or illustration of that life. It is fashionable today (still?) to claim that there is nothing new beyond our horizon of art, that everything worth doing has been done. But this seems to me an altogether specious claim, for it ignores the vast undiscovered country of things that ought to be *un*done. In these great times, the terror of action *and* inaction shapes the burden of history. Perhaps the task of art today is to remake this burden by suspending the seemingly inexorable order of things (which gives the burden its weight) and allowing a kind of clearing to take place so that we can see and feel what is in fact worthless—and what is in truth worth renewing.

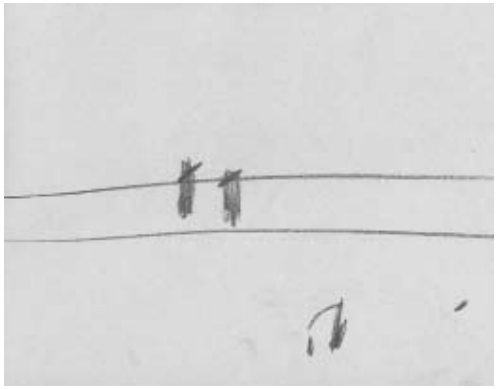
Waiting for Godot has been staged on Broadway (in 1956), at a prison (San Quentin), and in the middle of a war (during the Siege of Sarajevo, directed by Susan Sontag). It is a simple story, told in two acts, about two tramps (we have other names for them today) waiting for someone named Godot, who never comes. In New Orleans in 2007, Godot is legion and it is not difficult to recognize the city through the play. Here, the burden of the new is to realize the play through the city.

June 2007
New York City

Dusk on levee, 2006







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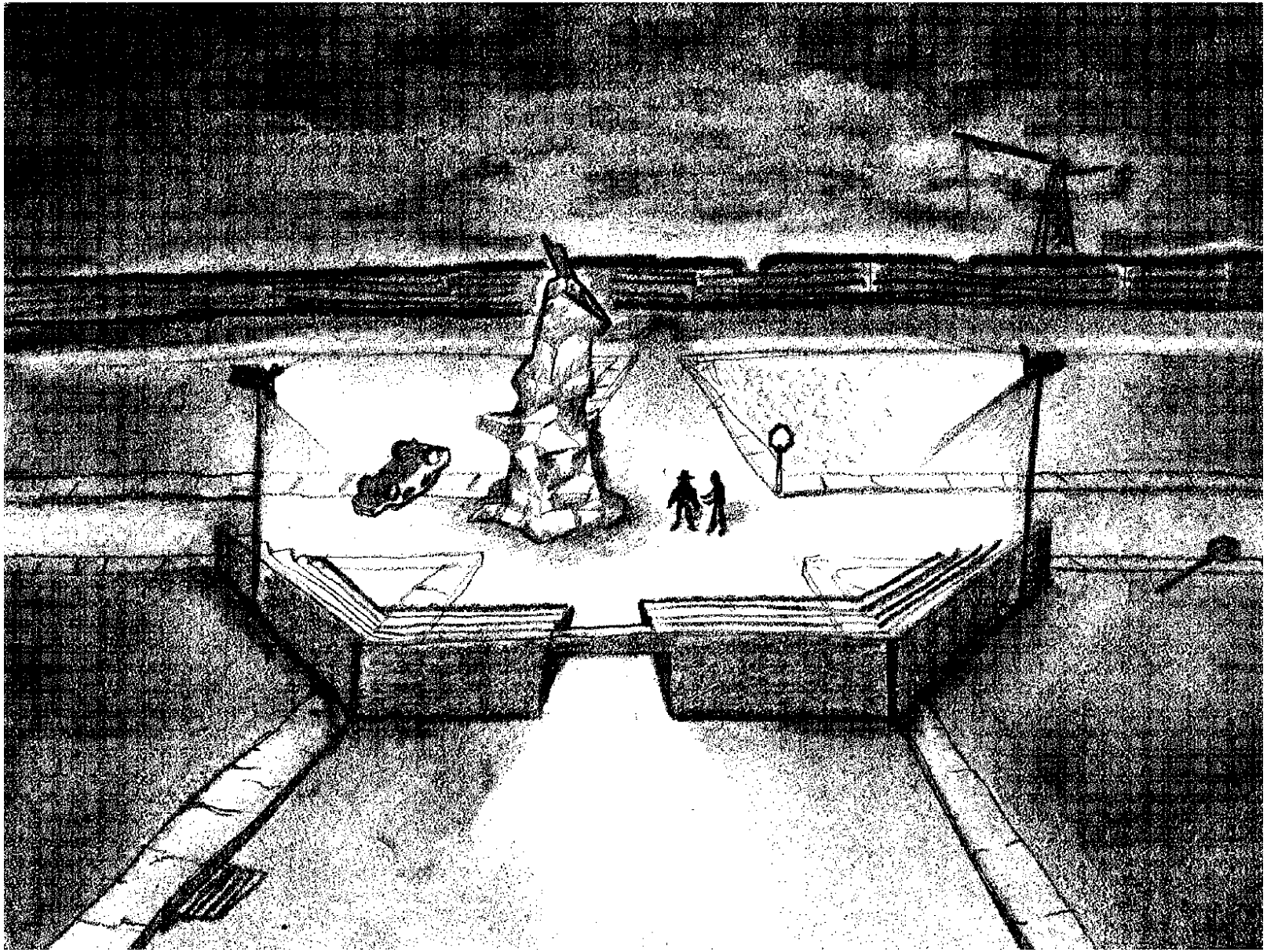
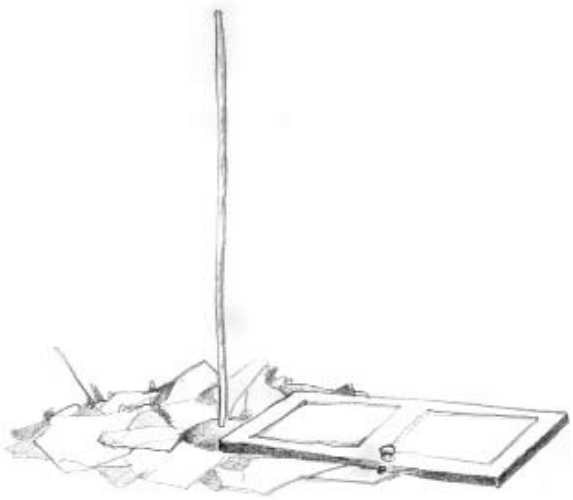
Sketches for *Godot*, 2007,
pencil on paper



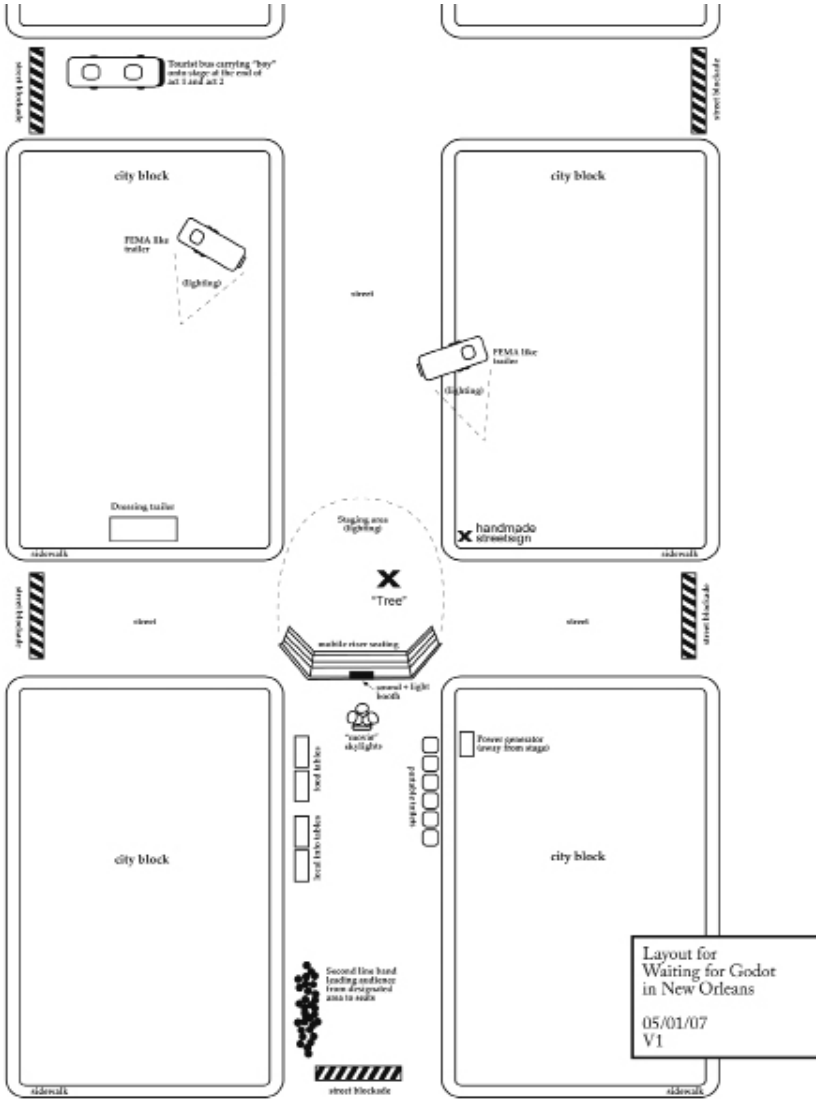
How it will be, 2006, charcoal on paper



(Top) Tree, 2007, pencil on paper
(Bottom) Messenger disaster tour van, 2007, pencil on paper

(Top) Bicycle for Pozzo, 2007, pencil on paper
(Bottom) Cart for Lucky, 2007, pencil on paper

Keywords, 2007, pen on paper



L9 staging version 1, 2007, pdf

NATO THOMPSON

DESTROYER OF WORLDS

"I am become death, destroyer of worlds." Standing in the front of the class at the University of New Orleans, Paul Chan borrowed a statement by Manhattan Project director J. Robert Oppenheimer, who uttered these words upon seeing the first atomic bomb explode. Originally from the mouth of Vishnu in the Bhagavad-Gita, the words stood resolute, terrifying. Never afraid of complexity verging on contradiction, Paul considered his role in the production of *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* as a chance to tear through the fabric of the expected and bring to light something altogether unlikely. "I am attracted to whatever disrupts the social order," he added. In post-Katrina New Orleans, a place that Naomi Klein has described as the first twenty-first century city to endure "disaster capitalism," one must trod carefully when attempting to disrupt a social order already in the throes of deep disorder.

Traveling to post-Katrina New Orleans to organize the staging of an obtuse play by a white European author requires more than a touch of political and organizational analysis. From the very beginning two distinct and countervailing tendencies, a dialectic if you will, summoned a unique effort. First, the enormity of the tragedy that befell a vast population of poor American whites and blacks demanded a response. A mixture of political conditions (racism, housing, environmentalism, infrastructural collapse) were revealed instantly on the front pages of newspapers and television screens worldwide. The total injustice of neoliberal capitalist policies, which had predominantly affected the nation's black communities, called out for action. But, second, the spectacular quality of this colossal disaster created an extraordinarily complicated situation for an artist who wanted to lend a hand. Cutting directly against the imminent necessity for political action was the problem exposed in Susan Sontag's 1977 book *On Photography*. "Although the camera is an observation station, the act of photographing is more than passive observing. Like sexual voyeurism, it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening. To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged (at least for as long as it takes to get a 'good' picture), to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing—including, when that is the interest, another person's pain or misfortune." When Lower Ninth Ward resident Robert Green, Sr., told us that he didn't need another documentary made on Katrina, his skepticism of spectacle made itself known. One could not help but take into account white tourists surveying people's homes like awestruck children on disaster tours that wound their way through devastated neighborhoods. In an atmosphere desperate for the production of meaningful gestures, the tragedy in New Orleans became a garden of metaphoric fruit. The tragedy was there for the taking. The political question was: How can we help alleviate this political disaster without unjustly exploiting its metaphoric fecundity?

These two pressures forced upon us the need to employ skill sets that borrowed not only from the history of socially engaged art practice, but also from activist organizing in the Saul Alinsky tradition. Founder of what many call modern community organizing, Alinksy concentrated on face-to-face interactions with the poverty-stricken and oppressed. As a curator who has worked frequently on political art projects, I quickly realized that hermetic references to European social aesthetics would fall flat on their face and that clever interventionist practices would seem inappropriate. The realities on the ground were too tragic. Something altogether new would have to be developed.

The complexity of the project forced everyone involved to draw upon the skills they developed in other disciplines. I found myself increasingly relying upon my early college years as an activist. My time at UC Berkeley during the early '90s, when I was involved with a group called Students Against Intervention in Central America, taught me about anti-hierarchical organizing, about how to consider one's relative position within a large framework of racial and economic power, and, of course, about the value of moving across racial and economic boundaries. I also became familiar with the slow processes by which effective decisions are made. These lessons, which Paul also learned in his work as an activist, would prove far more helpful on this vast project than would those I'd learned in formal institutional settings.

Yet several of the art projects I've shepherded over the last decade have dealt with the political realities of capitalism in general and the Bush administration in particular. In 2004, during a large survey exhibition of political art practices titled, "The Interventionists," the art collective Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) was swept up in a surreal political drama. CAE member Steve Kurtz faced indictment charges stemming from a bioterrorism investigation undertaken during the tragic death of his wife (and collective partner) Hope Kurtz. The FBI poked their noses around. Major press outlets covered the case. Through the crucible of this specific drama one could witness a change in the public's perception of the Bush administration. Not to suggest that this specific trial upended public perception, but I witnessed firsthand how the force of culture and

its corollary public debates had played a tangible role. I realized at the time that cultural production can not only address the most pressing social issues facing the world but also play a role in shaping the terms of political debate.

French theorist Jacques Rancière has referred to an understanding of a specific field of activity as "the distribution of the sensible." His analysis suggests that cultural production can do much to expand the framework for what is legible to us as reasonable. To my mind, cultural production can expand what is considered legitimate political discourse to those issues that actually touch the lives and minds of regular people. It can upend the traditional manner in which a certain discourse (say, art) functions and has implications beyond any specific project. Perhaps Paul's use of Oppenheimer's words points towards this strategy of cultural production whereby the rupture of a perceived method in some way becomes the work itself.

By the time I arrived at Creative Time in early 2007, I had already been on the phone with Paul and Anne Pasternak about the possibility of a project in New Orleans. I was excited and terrified. While much of the work I enjoy most dives right into the heart of a political problem, I was humbled by the scale and complexity of the disaster that was post-Katrina New Orleans. While I was used to bringing art addressing political issues into the space of a museum, I hadn't actually produced art that would operate at the site of public political conditions. This form of working would be new to me and would be the vehicle for conveying to me the enormity of the tragedy in New Orleans.

New Orleans features prominently in Naomi Klein's book *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. A chronicler of the alternative globalization movement, Klein has followed the major events of the last decade, including the Iraq War, the internment of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, the 2004 tsunami, and Hurricane Katrina. These disasters, as she describes them, share a similar economic fate, in which particular formations of capital and urban structure are reproduced. For many industries, disasters offer opportunities that range from basic emergency recovery to the restructuring of entire cities. As one drives through the neighborhoods of New Orleans, one sees frequent references to the Iraq War. The word "Baghdad" routinely appears on buildings. This is not simply a metaphor: Companies shaping the future of Iraq, including Halliburton and Blackwater (now renamed Xe Services Worldwide), are profiting from the reconstruction of New Orleans. Klein's convincing argument is that the recovery effort in Louisiana (or, rather, a lack thereof) is driven by a model of privatization being applied globally at the behest of capitalist power players. In the wake of total social devastation, massive urban plans are being put into place that undercut the social welfare programs of the past: they are closing public housing (in a city desperate for housing stock); they are replacing public schools with charter schools; they are turning over decisions about residents' right to return to predatory insurance agencies. What Klein's book makes clear is that New Orleans is not just a tragic city; for many in power it is also a model of things to come.

Yet, as much as New Orleans may be emblematic of the future, it is also extraordinarily peculiar. Originally a French colony, this city below sea level has been a hotbed of African-American culture for as long as the United States has existed. Unlike the itinerant nature of those living in the United States' global cities, New Orleans' working-class locals are often the fifth generation to live in the same house and are therefore not uprooted so easily. Vast, politicized social networks, unafraid of speaking truth to power, have prompted now-retired New Orleans city planner Ed Blakely to refer to the city as home to whiners. As Xavier University of Louisiana art professor and activist Ron Bechet told me during an initial meeting, "After the hurricane, New Orleans became one big meeting." The city had become host to a complex array of activist organizations entrenched in neighborhoods and driven by a fierce sense of political urgency. During the first-ever U.S. Social Forum, held in 2007 in Atlanta, the Gulf States were represented in full.

Taking a play like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* into New Orleans may appear either painfully arrogant or, worse, absolutely ineffective. How would it resonate locally? Why should anyone care? Furthermore, how does one navigate the potential for a New York–based organization and a world-renowned artist to generate acrimony and more social tension? These fears prompted a model for organizing the project that departed from what is often described as a "parachute" approach: Drop in, do your work, promise to assist by raising visibility.

Do the Time, Spend the Dime

Before undertaking the project, Anne Pasternak, Paul Chan, and I flew to New Orleans in March 2007 with the intention of discovering whether or not such a concept was both feasible and ethical. We set up meetings with many artists and community members whom we thought could provide a sense of the pulse of the city. Efforts such as ours often are limited to a specific race and class, so we pushed hard to transcend the possibility of our own myopia. Paul worked through his connections to the lawyer and New Orleans housing activist Bill Quigley. Anne reached out to city officials and to artist Rick Lowe, who had begun a loose-knit organization called Transforma that also was attempting to bring in artistic resources from outside the city. Casting a wide net, we found

some principal New Orleans organizers and activists with whom we could work, including Ron Bechet, Willie Birch, Mel Chin, Greta Gladney, Ronald Lewis, Abram Himelstein, Dan Etheridge, Jordan Flaherty, Malik Rahim, Rachel Breunlin, Jana Napoli, and Jan Gilbert. In meeting with them we received feedback, heard their concerns, and benefited from their stories.

It quickly became evident that the theme of waiting resonated more deeply than as mere existential dilemma; it touched a nerve. "Everybody knows about waiting," said Ninth Ward resident Robert Green. "Whether you are waiting for FEMA to call you, or for The Road Home to call you, or for Red Cross to give you an appointment three months down the line, everybody knows about waiting." Green lived in a FEMA trailer one and a half blocks from the eventual site of one *Godot* production. He rode out the hurricane on the roof of his home with his three granddaughters, his brother, a disabled cousin, and his mother. As the roof detached from the frame of the house and the family floated through the neighborhood during the early morning hours of Katrina, he lost one granddaughter into the waters. His mother passed away not long thereafter. After the storm, Green attempted to make Nashville his home, but he couldn't stay away from the neighborhood he loved and was the first person to return. He took it upon himself to fight for the right of Lower Ninth Ward inhabitants to return to their homes. Every day he would hand out flyers and talk to passersby, whether they were tourists, a media crew, a humanitarian group, an anarchist collective, or an art organization. Talking to Robert Green became one of many methods to gauge the effectiveness and resonance of our work.

Not all of the responses were enthusiastic. Organizers such as Greta Gladney (of the Renaissance Project), Ronald Lewis, and Green shared their uncertainty. There resided in them and others a deep skepticism of the nonprofit recovery organizations that sucked up valuable assistance dollars and never visibly passed them on to the citizens. In relation to this dilemma, art was a nice idea but the practical realities were too difficult to ignore.

We visited with the Common Ground Collective as well. A group dedicated to assisting the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward, it had emerged three days after the storm and its members had been working hard ever since. Initially a group who had been doing activist work on behalf of the Angola 3 (three African Americans incarcerated in Louisiana's Angola Prison for three decades), the Katrina tragedy prompted Common Ground to expand its work. Its dynamic leader, Malik Rahim, was not present when we visited, but we met with the two people then in charge, Brandon Darby and Caroline Heldman. (Adding to the surreal and politically tragic nature of New Orleans, it would turn out that Darby informed the FBI of potential activist threats.) The group had occupied St. Mary's School, a place where 300 residents had fled to escape the storm, as the emotional testimonies then still visible on the chalkboards highlighted. The scene left quite an impression. The schoolhouse was overrun with white college kids and grungy punks wearing dust masks. The gymnasium looked like a ramshackle Red Cross camp. Brandon and Caroline took us to the Ninth Ward to see volunteers cleaning up and mowing yards to prevent the city from taking away citizens' neglected properties.

The Ninth Ward at that time was especially surreal. The region abutting the edge of the industrial canal revealed blocks and blocks of abandoned tracts of land. During the storm a barge had crashed into a levee wall, allowing the canal to spill into this community. Unlike the neighborhoods in which devastation had a piecemeal effect, the catastrophe was so complete in the Ninth Ward that the landscape took on a pastoral rather than cataclysmic quality. Grass and weeds swept out to the horizon, interrupted only occasionally by a FEMA trailer or a college student in a Hazmat suit cleaning a yard. Where was the neighborhood? Where were the people? Swept away like a dream, the memory of this community was in danger of disappearing altogether. Resurrecting that community was what had Common Ground members working so hard.

After nearly twenty meetings, the three of us were exhausted and excited; our minds reverberated from the many heartbreaking stories we had heard. Paul was evidently concerned about the gravity of what he wanted to accomplish. "We have to leave something," he said. Out of this sense that a rise in media visibility would not be enough, he concocted the idea of the Shadow Fund. We would raise money for local groups that would put much-needed materials into their hands. If Common Ground needed sheet rock, for example, the Shadow Fund would supply it. If an educational effort needed textbooks, the Shadow Fund would supply them. We would attempt to match the production budget, dollar for dollar. Anne agreed this was a moral imperative. "In order to do this project right," Paul said, "we need to do the time and spend the dime."

Organizing a Public

> "The organizing involved in doing this project not only went into the actual production of the play, but also the production of a public, a public that is incredibly divided and tired and waiting still for things to come." — Paul Chan

So began a journey through a new, and yet not-so-new, model of social organizing that derives from a long history of social activism and community-based practices. We took our cues from members of numerous communities and visited the city constantly before the project arrived. Out of these visits came both critical components and long-lasting goodwill. We learned that the play would have to take place in more than one neighborhood. While the Lower Ninth was clearly destroyed, it had also received a lion's share of the press coverage. Nearly all of New Orleans was devastated, not just the Lower Ninth. Driving through other neighborhoods, Paul selected the mixed-race middle-class community of Gentilly as a second site for the *Godot* production. Gentilly still retained some of its housing stock; it was standing but abandoned. In a sense, its atmosphere felt even more shocking since the remnants of the storm were more visible to a newcomer's eye. The Ninth Ward, by contrast, was simply gone.

The project's final form crystallized slowly. As simple as it appears to put on an outdoor theater production in two neighborhoods, we were attempting something more. The play was one part, albeit the most visible part, of a larger body of work focused on knitting together a larger social context. To discuss this project outside the meaning it held in its local context would miss the point entirely.

Waiting for Godot in New Orleans included numerous facets: the acting workshops, classes, potluck dinners, community meetings; the Shadow Fund, and a film; food and music; this book and, of course, the play itself. Again, from a distance what stands out is the play. Yet without these other pieces, the project as a whole would not have worked. In fact, many community constituents in New Orleans would have protested against it. You cannot work in these neighborhoods without local support.

Nonetheless, these critical steps can easily become lost in the national and international reports on such a project. While staging a play in the heart of a devastated neighborhood might make a good hook for a story, the real work transpired in the months leading up to our production of *Godot*. Frankly speaking, one cannot see community from a distance. (It is precisely this invisibility that makes discarding these steps an alluring prospect for politically minded contemporary artists on the move.) Deep community work takes time. We knew we were headed in the right direction only when, during our first potluck, Robert Green marveled at the diversity of communities in attendance. Green and many other people familiar with social arrangements in New Orleans possess the ability to literally *see* communities, to see the networks that make a city's cultural and political life function (or not function).

Theater and fine art are among the many fields that have a legacy of community-based cultural production. Combining social organizing with aesthetic gestures has long been an aim of contemporary artists, and their efforts, in part, inspired ours. Though the list of relevant projects is far too long for any single essay, a few seminal artworks come to mind, including Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's consciousness-raising feminist project *Womanhouse* (1972), and Group Material's *The People's Choice (Arroz con Mango)* (1981), which included a collection of everyday objects (wedding photos, dolls, even a cigarette-pack collage) gathered from people living on the block in the East Village in Manhattan. In fact, much of what Group Material created throughout the '80s emphasized not only collaboration, but also, and more importantly, an art project's relationship to its audience. Clearly invested in questions of power and perception, Group Material would work eventually in collaboration with a wide variety of neighborhood organizations. Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) is a more recent corollary in which the artist organized a reenactment of the pivotal 1984 miners' strike in Yorkshire, England. There is also the Danish art collective Superflex, which worked with tenants of the Coronation Court housing complex outside Liverpool to produce a public-access web community that would allow them to remain in contact during the complex's renovation. The list goes on and on. Contemporary theorists are forever trying to get a grip on the blurring of art, politics, life, and social organizing. Grant Kester has pointed towards the dialogic practice embodied in the meeting-heavy methodology of Austria-based art/activist collective Wolkenklauser. In their work, the artists often organize large summits on issues ranging from drug use to immigration in conjunction with the social organizations and individuals directly affected by these concerns. Or one can also look to Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses, a large art studio program operating in Houston's impoverished Third Ward; Mierle Laderman Ukeles' numerous collaborations with civic organizations, including the New York City Department of Sanitation; the Chicago-based collective HaHa's 1992–95 project *Flood*, a collaboratively maintained hydroponic garden for people suffering with HIV; and Suzanne Lacy's many socially engaged community endeavors. In fact, Lacy's work was important to our thinking about how to address deep political problems. A constant source of inspiration, her art uses the process of dialogue intensively. In many ways, her projects have impacted the manner in which relational aesthetics became "social practice" as it drifted towards California in the late '90s. For example, her project *The Roof Is On Fire* (1994) brought together 200 Oakland teenagers to voice their political and social concerns, as they sat in a hundred parked cars on a rooftop. The work had both a social dimension and a sense of political urgency. Of course, this brief list is just the tip of the iceberg.

The history of radical theater also has a long tradition of models similar to those deployed in our project. From the Brechtian theater of the early twentieth century to Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed to the San Francisco Mime Troup (which would eventually become The Diggers in the late '60s), public theater has an extended history of using narrative to expose latent political conditions. The Classical Theatre of Harlem (CTH) brought its own previous experience of hosting potluck dinners in which community members discuss the meaning of the play and get to know, on a personal level, the cast members. During the rehearsal period, CTH participated in five potlucks with key New Orleans community members. Each gathering, overflowing with gumbo, chicken, beans, étouffée, and crawfish, hosted between ten and twenty people and provided a tangible opportunity for the cast and organizers to get to know members of the community, and vice versa.

There is much in these traditions that supports the rationalization of this project as art. But for many practitioners, the meaning and definition of art resides not as much in the finished product as in the communication and action that feed into and come from it. It is during the search for creating meaningful experience that such limiting categories as theater, activism, art, and performance fall apart, requiring a framework for a new kind of action.

The cultural history of community building clearly also possesses examples from the fields of political activism and social organizing. Think of the civil rights movement during which young students involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organized freedom rides into Mississippi. Or, for that matter, remember the work done in the Ninth Ward by Common Ground. To do this kind of work, you go to each door, listen to people, and engage with them to address their needs. Community organizing isn't simply a process of politics, but a process of generating meaning through actions and interpersonal relations. As Saul Alinsky often told his students, organizing is a method of producing power. Going from meeting to meeting, the *Godot* project often felt like a bizarre political campaign: Sit down. Listen. Share. Work. Repeat.

We realized that this social-organizing model is endemic to how New Orleans, as a culture, gets things done. As a famous local adage notes, "If you aren't invited into the kitchen, you haven't really visited." (Surely such a thought preceded Rirkrit Tiravanija's serving Pad Thai as an art project.) And as New Orleans' most vociferous artist, Willie Birch, said, "You can tell that what we understand as today's art world is Western, because it sees community, history, and family as anathema to its mission. No wonder New Orleans isn't accepted by the Western art world. New Orleans is an African city with an African method of making art." Staying in New Orleans, you see his point and you also come to see the divide between art, life, and politics as false. The "relational aesthetics" of cultural theorist Nicolas Bourriaud or even the more politically oriented participatory projects championed by art historian Claire Bishop seem to sneak away safely into the categorized niche of "the art world" and remain disconnected from the communities in which they are supposedly involved. Having dinner, sharing, and organizing community are part of daily life in New Orleans. Death, music, and family are always at the door.

But meetings were just one aspect of a complex social relationship that evolved as we perceived the needs of the city and our desire to assist grew. Everyone wanted to give what they could, so Paul taught classes at the University of New Orleans and at Xavier University. The class at UNO focused on contemporary art, with each session dedicated to individual artists and art collectives such as Kara Walker, Kathy Butterly, Temporary Services, and Chris Marker. The Xavier University class focused on practical issues facing artists, from developing portfolios to writing press releases. The Classical Theatre of Harlem provided workshops and potlucks at the Anthony Bean Community Theatre Workshop, John McDonogh High School, and The Porch, a cultural center in New Orleans' Seventh Ward. A film, titled *The Fullness of Time*, was commissioned from experimental filmmaker Cauleen Smith. And Creative Time met, met, and met some more. It was a whirlwind of activity. These actions could easily read like a self-congratulatory laundry list of humanitarian tasks, but the fact remains that they took time, they were done, and they were part of the work of the project.

When Paul Chan states that what was required was the production of a public, his words go to the heart of the most critical element of this multi-pronged endeavor, the one hardest to see. Without a background of workshops, potlucks, meetings, and time spent among the residents of New Orleans, *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* could easily have worked as yet another spectacle that the disaster tours digest so readily. The pieces were there. Without the production of a public, the work could fall into the trap of spectacularizing the painful image of horror. In a contemporary art world full of gestures that supposedly point at problems and critique, then, how does the production of a public position itself as a substantially different aesthetic maneuver?

Ultimately, a play transpired. On November 2, 3, and 4, 2007, at the intersection of N. Roman Street and Forstall Street, and on November 9 and 10 in the front yard of a house on the corner of Robert E. Lee Boulevard and Pratt Drive, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* came to life before a beyond-capacity crowd. Each night began in New Orleans style

with gumbo and a second line band (the Big 9 Social Aid and Pleasure Club, Rebirth Brass Band, the Pinettes Brass Band, and Salty Dog) that would parade the crowd into the stadium seating built to hold eight hundred people.

On the first night, we had to turn away people who had lined up in the heart of this traumatized neighborhood. It was a strange feeling to have so many people, both white and black, present. Many white visitors admitted they had never been to this part of the city. Many black residents were still waiting to return. Robert Green walked the line looking for locals who had come back to the neighborhood and making sure they were seated. "It's strange to hear so much laughter here," he said.

As the audience members filed into their seats, we decided to let more people gather at the edges of the intersection despite the fact that they would be blocking the road. Christopher McElroen decided quickly to cut the section of the play in which a disaster bus pulls up to let a child off so that more people could see the action. After months of careful coordination, we still winged it. The Reverend Charles Duplessis took the stage and gave a sermon on hope and sadness. Three blocks behind the intersection was the break where the barge hit the levee. One block away sat Robert Green's FEMA trailer, adorned with his memorial to his mother and granddaughter. And sitting in the middle of the road was a hackneyed, cobbled-together tree that could be construed as either dead, fake, or holding onto life. After Duplessis finished, two actors appeared in the distance and walked along the road until they arrived at the center of the intersection.

An aggregate of slapstick, solemnity, absurdity, and tragedy, the actors had the audience laughing and murmuring. How to capture what happened in the play? To call it site-specific seems so limiting. In the distance, one could see the barges making their way out toward Lake Pontchartrain from the Mississippi River. You could see the foundations of homes that once stood peeking out from the encroaching weeds. The dead were powerfully present. And there was a play. The cast performed not for strangers, but instead, for a community. People had not come to just see a play. They had come to be together. It was a peculiar ritual, summoning community.

"I am become death, destroyer of worlds." When Paul said this, he did so fully cognizant of his tragically doomed undertaking. As much as this was an enormous community effort, the entire process remained haunted by the same tragic forces that hover over Beckett's words. At the end of the play, after dispensing the Shadow Fund, after the risers had been cleared away and the crew paid, after the audience returned home, these neighborhoods remained—and remain—in limbo. Many of the poorest families from New Orleans are still scattered from Atlanta to Houston. The Lower Ninth Ward remains adrift from its position as the oldest black neighborhood in New Orleans. The tragedy continues to assault a people far too used to oppression.

To upset the social order means to not acquiesce to expectations and conventions. To upend narratives of class and race, and to use the chilling ambiguity that lies at the center of Beckett's play as a foil for organizing, became this project's *modus operandi*. Neither simply a grassroots campaign nor political art project, what exactly constitutes this endeavor remains difficult to define. What is more clear are the political conditions and present realities that weigh heavily on the people of New Orleans and those who hope to return. What remains is the myth of a community-organized production that worked across the boundaries of art, theater, activism, and politics.

CHRISTOPHER McELROEN

DIRECTING A POST-KATRINA *GODOT*

In May 2006, eight months after Hurricane Katrina, I had the opportunity to stage Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* at the Classical Theatre of Harlem.

Prior to my work on the play I had seen several productions of *Godot*. And, despite the varying quality of these productions, there was always one constant: the play seemed remote.

A Beckett purist would argue that this is, in part, the very point of the play, that it is about life or God or the absurdity of our existence. While this may be true in some regards, I have a more pedestrian view of the play. I believe it has the tremendous power of immediacy when it speaks for a particular community, as it has in previous productions staged in San Quentin by Alan Mandell and his fellow actors in the San Francisco Actors Workshop, or in a war-torn Sarajevo by Susan Sontag. (The San Quentin staging inspired a group of prisoners to launch the still-active San Quentin Drama Workshop.)

My original goal in working on the play in Harlem was simple and consistent with the work of CTH: to make the play as immediate as possible for a diverse contemporary audience while remaining true to Beckett's work.

At the time I began reading the play, images from the Gulf Coast—and New Orleans in particular—were part of the national consciousness. I saw simple yet devastating images that reminded me of how the simplicity of Beckett's language is juxtaposed against the devastating landscapes of his work.

I saw a picture of two men floating down a flooded street on a door and I immediately thought of Didi and Gogo.

I saw images of men wading through the water holding aloft their last remaining possessions in plastic bags and thought of Lucky.

I saw photos of our national leaders "dallying" in the wake of these events and thought of Pozzo's "dallying" among those in need.

With these images in mind I turned to the text, which speaks:

"Appalled…"
"The Dead Sea was pale blue…"
"We've no rights anymore…"
"The truth of the first water…"
"My clothes dried in the sun…"
"Where he lived it was warm it was dry…"
"Everything oozes..."
"To all mankind were addressed those cries for help…"
"What do we do now… Wait…"
"He does nothing sir…"
"And if he comes tomorrow… We'll be saved."

Without changing anything in Beckett's work, by simply looking at it through the lens of post-Katrina New Orleans, the play seemed to take on an immediacy of "waiting" and to give that word a new meaning of national implication.

And so we took the stage directions that open the play—"A Country Road. A Tree. Evening."—and flooded the country road by placing a 15,000-gallon swimming pool on stage with a rooftop and a tree peeking out from the water.

This production of *Godot* had a successful five-week run at the Classical Theatre of Harlem in the spring of 2006. The cast included New Orleans native Wendell Pierce (Didi), J. Kyle Manzay (Gogo), Chris McKinney (Pozzo), Billy Eugene Jones (Lucky), and Tanner Rich (Boy).

Several months after the close of *Godot* at CTH, Paul Chan approached me with his idea to stage a free, site-specific production of *Waiting for Godot* in the still-devastated Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans.

As our initial conversation progressed, two things became clear. The first was the sincerity of Paul's desire to execute a project that would build community rather than exploit a landscape. This was of particular importance to me, as the idea of community development through the arts is a cornerstone of the work I've done with the Classical Theatre of Harlem.

The second element to emerge from our conversation was that, as talented a visual artist and political organizer as Paul is, he admittedly (and fortunately for me) knew nothing of directing theater and therefore invited me to join him and Creative Time as part of *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*.

Eight months after my initial meeting with Paul and after half a dozen trips to New Orleans, we began our rehearsals with a cast of Wendell

Pierce and J Kyle Manzay, who reprised their roles as Didi and Gogo, T. Ryder Smith (Pozzo), and New Orleans-based actors Mark McLaughlin (Lucky), Michael Pepp (Boy), and Tony Felix (Boy).

Our goals in interpreting the text for two site-specific locations in New Orleans (as opposed to a 15,000-gallon swimming pool in Harlem) were simply to remain open to the influences of the city, to allow our experiences with residents to inform our choices, and to expand the very basic idea of theater (a relationship between an actor and an audience) as a foundation to build community. To achieve this we immersed ourselves within the New Orleans community.

We rehearsed the play for two weeks in the cafeteria of St. Mary's Elementary School in the Upper Ninth Ward, which had 300 students prior to the storm. Following the storm St. Mary's became home to the Common Ground Collective, which was one of the first community-run rescue centers in the Ninth Ward. At the time of our rehearsals the school was essentially vacant except for Tyrone Smith, a Ninth Ward resident who was living in one of the classrooms and who was a frequent and welcome presence at our rehearsals.

When we were not at St. Mary's rehearsing, we visited local universities, high schools, and community organizations to teach free workshops and master classes. We spent our evenings breaking bread with residents at potluck dinners, during which we discussed the idea of waiting in a post-Katrina New Orleans.

This direct and continuous dialogue with the city profoundly informed our work on the play. We found ourselves drawn to the hope we saw reflected in those who had returned to New Orleans. They were no longer individuals waiting for Godot to arrive. They, like Didi and Gogo, were the ones who had arrived and collectively found the strength to, as Didi says to open the play, "resume the struggle."

Interpreted through the active struggle of community, as opposed to the inert waiting of the individual, the play took on an optimistic immediacy.

Our *Godot*, while fully realizing the agony of waiting, celebrated the irrepressibility of humanity, imagination, and humor we witnessed throughout the city—as evidenced by the thousands of local residents who were drawn to a play performed on devastated streets in the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly neighborhoods.

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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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