

Artist : Paul Chan
Location : New Orleans, USA
Year : 2007
Researcher : Jessica Fiala

Following the immediate destruction of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, residents of New Orleans were confronted with a prolonged, slow disaster, characterized by governmental mismanagement, lingering debris, stilted rebuilding, frustration, and waiting. Artist Paul Chan first visited the city in 2006 and recalled the experience: “The streets were still, as if time had been swept away along with houses...Friends said the city now looks like the backdrop for a bleak science fiction movie...I realized it didn’t look like a movie set, but the stage for a play I have seen many times. It was unmistakable. The empty road. The bare tree...The silence.”¹ The devastated city echoed the setting of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.

Partnering with the producer Creative Time and The Classical Theatre of Harlem, the project developed into much more than a series of performances. Chan spent 9 months in the city working with artists, activists, and organizers to both connect with communities and develop the performance. The project was enhanced and informed by community dialogues and listening sessions, moderated roundtables, and potluck dinners. In conjunction with the main project, Chan taught public contemporary art seminars and The Classical Theatre of Harlem offered acting workshops for community groups and high school students.

Site-specific performances were staged in two neighborhoods—the middle of an intersection in the Ninth Ward and the front yard of an abandoned house in Gentilly. Each of the four free performances began with a dinner of gumbo and a band to march the audience to the performance site. Chan himself focused primarily on the behind-the-scenes organizing work, partnering closely with The Classical Theatre of Harlem who staged and performed the play. Speaking of the cohesive nature of the project, he emphasized the importance not just of creating a performance to share, but of producing an environment and a public. In this context, the work was performed for individuals whose experiences were reflected in Beckett’s spectacle. They were an invested audience, as Chan described, “a public...incredibly divided, and tired, and waiting, still, for things to come.”²

A deep level of involvement was integral to the project’s success. In the aftermath of Katrina, New Orleans residents became familiar with unfulfilled

¹ Paul Chan. Artist Statement, *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*:
http://www.creativetime.org/programs/archive/2007/chan/artist_statement.pdf

² *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*. Film by Matt Wolf.
<http://www.creativetime.org/programs/archive/2007/chan/welcome.html>

promises and visiting art projects that barely scratched the surface of the community and had little impact on the ground.³ Local residents provided vital support to *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* and rallied their networks to get involved. Ninth Ward resident Robert Lynn Green, Sr., spoke to the relevant nature of the play for the conditions and experiences faced by himself and his neighbors. They dealt not only with the common experience of waiting—waiting for assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency or for delayed appointments with the Red Cross—but also the conundrum encountered by the play’s protagonists, whether to continue waiting knowing that help may not come, or give up, knowing that one could lose out completely if one leaves.⁴ The project therefore struck a chord in both subject matter and in the collaborating partners’ commitment to embedding themselves in the community, reaching out for input and insights, and developing a variety of free activities to engage local residents.

Beyond the events themselves, Chan sought to provide direct support to the community. Working with Creative Time, he established a “Shadow Fund” to gather donations for the host communities, raising nearly \$50,000 that was allocated as \$1,000-\$5,000 donations to local organizations working to rebuild. In 2010, a book was released about the project by Creative Time, with photographs, planning documents, and essays.⁵

³ Nick Stillman. “Doing the Time: On Paul Chan.” *The Nation*. October 6, 2010.
<http://www.thenation.com/article/155212/doing-time-paul-chan>

⁴ Interviewed in *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*. Film by Matt Wolf.
<http://www.creativetime.org/programs/archive/2007/chan/welcome.html>

⁵ Paul Chan, Ed. *Paul Chan: Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*. New York: Creative Time Books, 2010.