

frieze

What the Inaugural FRONT Triennial in Cleveland Highlights About the Problems with Art Tourism

At the crux of this ambitious show lies the question: who is this triennial really for?

by Evan Moffitt
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Clevelanders like to tell people that there were once more millionaires on the city's Euclid Avenue than there were on New York's Fifth Avenue. They are also often self-deprecating. Cleveland has been through rough times since the Gilded Age: in the 1950s and '60s, the Cuyahoga river was so polluted it caught fire several times, and in 1978 the city became the first in the US to default on its debt since the Great Depression. Its population is roughly a third as large as it was at its peak 68 years ago. Like so many Rust Belt cities, it has a world-class art museum, the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA), built by industrialist robber barons, but has never been on the contemporary art world circuit. What better than a triennial to change that?

So goes the thinking of Fred Bidwell, a millionaire collector and former advertising executive from Akron, Ohio. He is the chief funder and public face of FRONT International, the new Cleveland triennial for contemporary art, curated by Michelle Grabner, that opened on 13 July and continues to 30 September. Among the exhibition's 28 venues – which stretch across metropolitan Cleveland, Akron and Oberlin – is the Transformer Station, a disused electrical plant that Bidwell and his wife Laura Ruth Bidwell acquired in 2011 to stage rotating exhibitions of their collection. It serves as a hub for FRONT's film programme, as well as installations by Stephen Willats and A.K. Burns which tackle issues of urban blight and gentrification.

There are plenty of both in Ohio City, a formerly industrial district that faces downtown Cleveland from across the Cuyahoga river. For more than a century after its incorporation in 1836, its factories pumped out raw goods with increasing speed; from the tall span of its viaduct, one could spot ships hauling steel across the shallow waters of Lake Erie, and tankers packed with salt mined from its shores. The salt mine is still there, but in more recent decades the neighbourhood was home to Cleveland's gay community, with nearly a dozen extant bars and bathhouses. The gay strip was unofficially renamed 'Hingetown' in 2013 by Marika Shioiri-Clark and Graham Vesey, a couple who began redeveloping the area with retail spaces, apartments, bike racks and a full-time Airbnb shortly after they moved there. In a glowing *Vanity Fair* profile of Shioiri-Clark and Vesey in 2015, Bidwell is quoted describing the neighbourhood as 'a nowhere, toxic corner' before the couple arrived; he and Laura moved in two years later. 'Hingetown was a branding exercise in 2013 on the warm corpse of Cleveland's queer scene,' sociologist Greggor Mattson later wrote in *Belt Magazine*. A complex that included bars such as The Tool Shed, A Man's World and Crossover is now a high-end gym and pet day-care. Bounce, the city's most prominent LGBT club, closed in 2017, while a craft juice bar and a coffee shop have opened across the street.

On the Transformer Station's clipped front lawn, A.K. Burns has installed *The Dispossessed* (2018), a gnarled, jet-black chain-link fence. Chain link is ubiquitous in the neighbourhood, cordoning car parks, construction sites and fast-disappearing vacant lots. A small silver plaque notes that the art space is 'part of a wave of gentrification' and states that the sculpture stands 'in critical dialogue with various modes of local "revitalization".' It's a relatively oblique artwork, but a brave and indignant gesture by an artist in response to a financial backer. The ethics of development plague FRONT, which largely ignores the socioeconomic conditions of greater Cleveland in order to repackage it for high cultural tourism. Despite the fact that Cleveland clocked the country's second-highest poverty rate and its ninth highest crime rate just last year – both functions of its declining and disenfranchised population – almost none of FRONT's projects represent local people or the problems they face.

The notable exception, *A Color Removed* (2018), is FRONT's most powerful, socially-engaged work. Michael Rakowitz has filled the main gallery of nearby SPACES – an arts non-profit founded in 1978 that moved to its current location, below the Bidwells' loft, in 2017 – with orange objects: traffic cones and umbrellas, milk crates and construction gear. In 2014, Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old African-American boy, was fatally shot by Cleveland police officers, who were acquitted because the 'safety orange' cap from Rice's toy gun had been removed. For the course of the triennial, Rakowitz and volunteers will try to remove safety orange from Cleveland, for, as the artist puts it, 'if Tamir can't be safe, no one can.' When I visited, Rice's own mother, Samaria Rice, had left an artwork of her own: beneath a battery of orange plastic revolvers, mounted on white board, a handwritten message notes that 'Ohio is a open carry state'. (Even if her son had been carrying a real gun, it would've been legal.) Rakowitz's project will host community discussions with various non-profits as well as local law enforcement, and a dinner serving Tamir's favourite junk foods, cooked with Rakowitz's signature date syrup. (Tamir is Arabic for 'date'.)

A short walk away, Dawoud Bey has suspended a new series of photographs between the pews of St. John's Episcopal Church, a 19th century stop on the Underground Railroad. With the paint peeling from its stippled plaster walls, it seems unchanged since the days it sheltered runaway slaves, who likely stopped at the locations Bey has photographed, as they travelled north through Ohio to the shores of Lake Erie and onto Canada. Each landscape appears shrouded in monochrome darkness, like the cover of night that concealed their journeys. Though it's hard to imagine holding a church service with such gloomy obstructions, the project is an emotional and evocative response to its location, one of the most site-specific of this exhibition.

On the other side of the city, in the stately Cleveland Museum of Art, a beautiful gallery of drawings by Kerry James Marshall is one of a trio of FRONT exhibitions, and includes *Untitled* (1999), a magisterial 12 panel woodcut that spans more than 15 metres. Upstairs, in a glass-walled gallery, Luisa Lambri's suite of new abstract photographs of the CMA's striped granite extension, completed in 1971 by Marcel Breuer, have been beautifully paired with Marlon de Azambuja's *Brutalismo* (Brutalism, 2014), an installation of cinderblock towers, cinched by industrial clamps, that resembles a concrete cityscape. At the triennial's second largest venue, The Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, delicate varnished oil paintings by Eugene von Bruenchenhein – an obscure yet visionary painter of rippling, utopian skylines who died in 1983 – seem in turn to presage the socialist urban landscapes of Cui Jie's latest paintings, on view at the Baron Art Gallery in Oberlin. Both artists' works depict cities of the future to which we can only aspire. (Perhaps this is what Grabner envisioned with the inaugural triennial's bland title, 'An American City', though its noncommittal article seems to underscore unfortunate stereotypes about Cleveland.)



Barbara Bloom, *THE RENDERING (H X W X D =)*, 2018, installation view, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Cleveland. Commissioned by FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York; photograph: Field Studio

In FRONT's most ambitious project, fantastical architecture literally leaps off the walls of the Allen Memorial Art Museum in Oberlin, where Barbara Bloom's massive installation, *The Rendering (H x W x D =)* (2018), is on display. The ramparts and princess tower of an Indian illuminated manuscript from 1850 appear at child-scale, zig-zagging across the gallery floor, beside their original referent, while the delicate bridge from Kitagawa Utamaro's *The Palace of the Moon* (1789) floats toward a wall bearing the ink painting from which it was modelled. Bloom selected impossible designs from works in the Allen's collection, and made them real; many of these sources appear in a salon-style hang, covered up save for their architectural elements by grey panels. The same soporific colour permeates the room, allowing intense focus on the gallery's own wonky architecture: designed by Robert Venturi in 1977. Before a picture window that frames an oversized 'ironic column', Bloom has placed a vitrine of architectural drawings of columns by Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Art before architecture, architecture before art: here, as in all display spaces, both exist in tension with one another, subtle – and not-so-subtle – aggressions highlighted by Bloom's puckish play of sculptural form.

If Bloom's installation expands images into large, complex structures, Philip Vanderhyden's 24-channel video animation, *Volatility Smile* (2018), shrinks and flattens complex structures into images. The video's golden forms, lifted from baroque necklaces and candelabra that recall the gilded lobby of the Federal Reserve Bank where the work is installed, twist and turn in a mesmerizing kaleidoscopic jumble. Named for a graph that plots volatile stock options, it nevertheless abstracts the consequences of financial speculation, which led to some of Cleveland's current woes. 'Abstracting [the conditions of American urbanism] rather than illustrating them offers a creative interpretation of the city that can be embraced in human terms,' Grabner writes in the catalogue – forgetting that 'human terms' are usually obscured by such gestures.

On a drive to one of the triennial's venues, I pass Progressive Stadium, named not for Cleveland's transformational liberal mayor, Newton Baker (1912–15), but for the auto insurance company that bought its rights. Next door, Quicken Loans Arena was underwritten by one of the country's most notorious subprime mortgage lenders, a principal culprit in the 2008 housing crisis. 'We sell out here in Cleveland,' my Uber driver drily remarks. Her comment underscores what makes Cleveland 'An American City', a neoliberal exemplar – and the structural problems beneath FRONT's many admirable artist projects. With the exception of *A Color Removed*, local voices are almost nowhere to be found here, sold out for international star power. While its founders hope the triennial will attract new cultural investment, the city's street level problems remain: not abstract, but as raw and real as ever.