Barbara Bloom

*FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art*

Allen Memorial Art Museum

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

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

By Evan Moffitt
July 24, 2018

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 –
Barbara Bloom

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.)

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.

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Can the FRONT Triennial Redefine the Meaning of Cleveland? Yes, But Not in the Way You Think

by Tim Schneider
July 19, 2018

At the opening press conference for Cleveland’s inaugural FRONT International triennial, Michelle Grabner, the renowned artist and curator who spent much of the past two years shaping the new event, sounded a note of caution: “If you haven’t seen the entire exhibition, you haven’t seen the exhibition.” Even falling short of that challenge, though, any honest attempt will do more than just introduce viewers to an array of present-conscious and forward-looking artworks. It will also expose myriad nuances of a city and a region too long misunderstood.

Seeing the entire exhibition is no mean feat. Officially titled the FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art, the show presents 111 artists across 26 different sites, including about a dozen cultural institutions and galleries, two historic churches, one Frank Lloyd Wright house, and even a decommissioned steamship. (Some of the locations and artists are owed to Grabner’s former co-curator Jens Hoffman, who departed FRONT in November 2017 in advance of separate sexual harassment allegations.)

Within Cleveland proper, FRONT-activated sites stretch from Hingetown on the West Side to Glenville in East Cleveland. And despite the exhibition’s titular focus on Cleveland, various artist projects are also hosted in Akron (about 40 miles south) and Oberlin (about 35 miles southwest). That means you’ll need a car to experience everything, but, if it’s any consolation, it’s still vastly more convenient than the extra international flight that was required to take in all of documenta 14.
Besides, the drive time will give you a much-needed opportunity for some heavy thinking.

**Changing Dimensions**

Ironically, one of the last works I saw on a whirlwind two-day press tour of the exhibition provides the best entry point for my thoughts on FRONT. Commissioned by the triennial for the Ellen Johnson Gallery of Oberlin’s Allen Memorial Art Museum, Barbara Bloom’s *The Rendering (H x W x D =)* encapsulates both the predicament long faced by FRONT’s home city and the way the ambitious, multi-venue exhibition hopes to help solve it.

*The Rendering* comprises two main elements. The first is a salon-style hanging of 20 works Bloom selected from the Allen’s collection. The catch is that she outfits each individual piece with a custom box hiding everything except its images of architecture. These are revealed only by precisely cut rectilinear openings. According to Allen curator Andrea Gyorody, it is Bloom’s way of “narrowing in on the details that she wants you to pay attention to, and effacing everything else”—a technique she has used before, as well as a direct comment on the architect Robert Venturi, whose aggressive design for the Johnson gallery has effectively man-spread itself onto every artwork installed there since 1970.

Occupying the gallery’s floor are a number of sculptures by Bloom that “reverse-render” in three dimensions various two-dimensional structures depicted in a handful of prints and drawings also culled from the museum’s holdings. Expanded into our physical space, they reveal qualities we might not have noticed if we’d simply glanced at the page we were given. In this way, Bloom counterbalances her “framing wall” by mining her subjects’ unnoticed virtues and complications, then re-presenting them to us in fuller form than ever.

A similar push-pull dynamic animates FRONT and the region that birthed it—at least for someone like me who grew up in Northeast Ohio, or someone like FRONT Executive Director Fred Bidwell, who initiated the triennial in...
the city he adopted years ago.

“To just categorize Cleveland as ‘Rust Belt’ or ‘reviving Rust Belt’—those are simplistic stories that are really so incomplete and so stereotypical,” Bidwell said. “It really doesn’t represent the town.”

For a taste of what Bidwell means, consider this: The largest employer in Northeast Ohio has for years been the Cleveland Clinic, one of the most respected medical centers in the world. A June 2018 report by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics identified education and health services as Cleveland’s largest industry. Manufacturing ranked fifth by workforce size, with less than half as many jobs. Clevelanders today are much more likely to work in a hospital, school, or research facility than on an assembly line.

The World Is Flat

Yet for people who call the Cleveland area home, simplistic stories have defined the way the rest of the world looks at us for decades. Despite the presence of a world-renowned encyclopedic museum, one of the best orchestras on the planet, a top-flight medical establishment, and multiple universities, almost every time that I’ve told non-art people where I’m from since leaving the region in 2001, the best outcome has been that they reference either LeBron James or the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

More likely, however, people who hear the word “Cleveland” tend to associate it with a wilted bouquet of outdated misfortunes, ranging from gut-wrenching professional-sports blunders to various civic embarrassments that I won’t further shame the city by resurrecting here. (And since LeBron just left Cleveland again, this time to play in Los Angeles, snide outsiders have regained another tired plan of attack.)

This is why those of us with roots in the region tend to share an underdog pride. Fittingly, when I saw the first showing of LA Heavy, the artist Casey Jane Ellison’s FRONT-commissioned stand-up performance, the emcee who introduced her was wearing a local classic: a t-shirt reading, “Cleveland Against the World.” (If you live in Cleveland, you know that it has a t-shirt for everything, particularly its battle cries.)

This is what FRONT has to contend with. “There’s certainly a more positive story out there about Cleveland that I think people understand,” says Bidwell. “But currently it’s a bit too focused on rock and roll, sports, the food scene. FRONT is really here to polish that image, to include this narrative that Cleveland is a cultural and intellectual hub, as well. I think we really need that reputation in order to be a world-class city.”

As Bidwell’s comments imply, Cleveland has always been vastly more complicated than the straightforward narratives used to define it in the greater public imagination, even politically. Although Ohio played a key role in flipping the two most contentious national elections of my lifetime to Republican candidates with kindergarten-level attention spans, neither Cuyahoga County, which Cleveland anchors, nor Summit County, which Akron anchors, has gone red in more than two presidential races since 1960. (Hillary Clinton received 66 percent and 52 percent of the vote, respectively, in the two counties in 2016.) Completing the FRONT troika, Oberlin is so woke that it’s practically sci-fi.

And the triennial shows that the city and region have played more admirable political roles going much further back into history, too.

Black and White

For Night Coming Tenderly, Black (2017), a site-specific installation at St. John’s Episcopal Church, the acclaimed photo-based artist Dawoud Bey decided to engage Cleveland’s significance in the Underground Railroad.

Code named “Station Hope” at the time, the church functioned as the last stop on the line before many fugitive
Barbara Bloom

slaves’ journeyed across Lake Erie to Canada and freedom. It is also one of the last stations still standing today. The photos Bey made and installed there primarily depict the landscape between Hudson, Ohio, and Cleveland. They are shot from the imagined perspective of escaped slaves traveling that high-stakes path—which, by necessity, was never precisely known—and printed in deep, velvety blacks.

Bey says this choice was influenced partly by Langston Hughes’s “Dream Variations,” a poem that reminded him that “the blackness of night can be… a tender space, which led me to think about the tender embrace of night that these fugitive black bodies were moving through.” Nighttime as a shield and protector, not a menace, shepherding brave souls through Northeast Ohio to liberation: it is powerful poetry.

But there’s also a far less flattering side to the city’s history of race relations. It took until 1976 for a judge to order Cleveland’s public school system to end the de facto segregation it had been quietly practicing for decades (and, specifically, for more than 20 years after the Supreme Court struck down school segregation in its transformative Brown v. Board of Education decision). More recently, much of the city’s national news presence owed to the slaying of unarmed African American 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who was shot by a (white) policeman while playing with a toy gun in a park on Cleveland’s West Side in 2014.

Cleveland’s racial struggles find resonant outlets at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) and SPACES Gallery. In the museum’s top floor, Cyprien Gaillard’s mesmerizing 3D video Night Life (2015) connects Cleveland, Los Angeles, and Berlin through various overlooked yet loosely connecting historical threads. The piece begins with a slowly revolving view of the Cleveland Museum of Art’s edition of The Thinker, partially mangled by a 1970 bomb from the Weather Underground, the rogue network notorious for trying to use explosives to pressure American society into hastening racial equality. Night Life then transitions through swaying vegetation in Los Angeles to the two-day Pyronale fireworks extravaganza at Berlin’s Olympiastadion—the arena where Cleveland-raised Jesse Owens blew up Hitler’s “master race” pipe dream by winning four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics.

MOCA’s second floor features An Evening With Queen White (2017), a mixed-media installation by Martine Syms that interrogates the construction of black identity in the US. The two main walls in the museum’s Lewis Gallery primarily display what read as unaffected snapshots of African American men, women, and children living their everyday lives, interspersed with decorum instructions in white block text, such as “Say ‘Los Angeles,’ not ‘LA’” and “Avoid metaphor and analogy. Be clear.” A four-channel video piece captures actor Fay Victor portraying a character inspired by various matriarchal figures in Syms’s family and the Motown Records etiquette coach Maxine Powell, doling out pointed guidance on expected behavior in white spaces.

Safety in Numbers

A few miles away from MOCA, SPACES Gallery hosts Michael Rakowitz’s collaborative project A Color Removed, which invites Cleveland residents to help the artist take on the impossible task of collecting every orange object in the city. The project’s genesis is the orange “safety” tip missing from Tamir Rice’s toy gun—an absence that, according to police reports, spurred the offending officer to open fire on the pre-teen seconds after arriving on the scene.

With help from FRONT and the city, Rakowitz scattered dozens of collection bins across the city this spring, and SPACES now contains a room-wide assemblage of orange items culled from those containers. During an impromptu press preview, the artist said that he “wanted the installation to look like it wasn’t finished, because it never will be.” However, it does include an artwork by Tamir’s mother, Samaria, with whom Rakowitz worked closely throughout the project, and with whom he will hold a series of dinners at SPACES during FRONT’s run—each based on Tamir’s favorite foods and held at a date-shaped table that the artist will donate to the Tamir Rice Foundation after the triennial closes. (Rakowitz discovered during his research that “Tamir” means “date” in Arabic.)

Nor was Samaria Rice’s the only significant local contribution at SPACES. Leading to Rakowitz’s installation is
a visceral group exhibition by Cleveland-based artists Amber Ford, Amanda King (in collaboration with youth photography group Shooting Without Bullets), M. Carmen Lane, and R.A. Washington. Their works all invoke various aspects of structural discrimination and its antidote in community action.

Birth in Reverse

After experiencing them in the context of FRONT, the themes surfaced by these works at MOCA and SPACES translate as both intimately connected to Cleveland and applicable to much of the US. Andria Hickey, senior curator at MOCA (and now soon to be senior director and curator at Pace Gallery), acknowledged at the museum’s preview event that “anytime you do a site-specific work, it reveals things about a place.” Yet these revelations have helped her understand Cleveland as “a microcosm of the whole country”—a portrayal that speaks to the double meaning of FRONT’s subtitle, “An American City.”

This duality is appropriate. As a landmark city in a state whose motto is “The Heart of It All,” Cleveland is both singular and universal. It offers enough resources, opportunities, and contradictions to tell almost any story—about economics, politics, race, culture, or anything else you’d like. And in the 21st century media environment, weaving a complex tale of any kind, about any place or any thing, feels at once increasingly daunting and increasingly necessary.

“I’m not naïve enough to think that an art exhibition is going to completely change the brand of Cleveland,” says Bidwell. But he does hope that FRONT establishes “a different story about the revitalization of Cleveland”—one that teases out its intricacies and pluralities. One that, in some sense, follows Barbara Bloom’s lead by reverse-rendering a flat image of the city into a rich, fully formed environment worth exploring again and again.

Bidwell is right. A single triennial can’t achieve this on its own. But the inaugural FRONT gives Cleveland what it has deserved for so long: another chance to be seen for what it truly is. What more could “An American City” ask for?

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New Triennial Offers Artists the Canvas of Ohio

by Hilarie M. Sheets
July 11, 2017

The art world loves to flock to exotic locales for shows and fairs. Will it come to Cleveland?

Fred Bidwell, a collector and philanthropist here, is betting it will, to the tune of $5 million — his money and that of other donors. “We’re at the front line of a lot of the changes, conflict and currents in the air today,” he said. “Cleveland is a blue city surrounded by an ocean of red. Artists have really been interested in creating new art within this context.”

On July 14, “Front International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art” opens with work by more than 110 artists at 28 venues across Cleveland and in nearby Akron and Oberlin. Mr. Bidwell, who conceived and orchestrated the event, graduated from Oberlin College and ran an advertising agency in Akron before opening a museum for his photography collection in a renovated transformer station here in 2013.

The museum, Transformer Station, has been a catalyst for dynamic change in a once-seedy neighborhood on the West Side of Cleveland, and was one inspiration for the triennial. Mr. Bidwell was also motivated by his stint as interim director of the Cleveland Museum of Art in 2014. There he discovered firsthand the world-class collections of an institution that doesn’t bring in nearly as many visitors as its coastal counterparts.

For Front, Mr. Bidwell has brought these two museums together with six other institutions — the Akron Art Museum, Allen Memorial Art Museum in Oberlin, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland Institute of Art, MOCA Cleveland and SPACES, also in Cleveland. Each has renovated in the last several years, a total investment of almost $500 million that helps counter the image of Cleveland from the 1970s and 1980s as a city in the depths of recession.

Getting local audiences to buy into the triennial may be more important than luring the globe-trotters, some suggest. “The perception that this would become part of the city’s future and regrowth I think is going to be a key to its success,” said Timothy Rub, director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and a former director of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Michelle Grabner, Front’s artistic director, said some artists needed a little convincing. “I know Cleveland’s charms and I had to lay that out there,” said Ms. Grabner, an artist, curator and native Midwesterner. She took artists on tours of the museums and less conventional sites for staging work, including the Cleveland Clinic. (She had collaborated on the list of artists with Jens Hoffmann, who stepped down in November as the other artistic director of the show, and then was terminated from the Jewish Museum in New York City after allegations of sexual harassment.)

The lavish lobby of the Federal Reserve Bank enticed Philip Vanderhyden, a New York City–based artist, to create a 24-channel video animation expressing his financial anxieties.

Investing in the underserved neighborhood of Glenville, Front leased and renovated two abandoned buildings as a public programming space and housing for visiting artists. Juan Capistrán, an artist based in Los Angeles, made...
a word installation on the window of the residence’s storefront, which now houses a cafe run by local African-American entrepreneurs.

“I don’t want to do an elitist international art fair that has no impact on the community,” Mr. Bidwell said. “Front is really about redefining the city to the world and to itself.”

Here is an overview of six Front artists, and where to find their projects.

Barbara Bloom
At Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College

Ms. Bloom, who was born in Los Angeles and works in New York City, often designs conceptual installations within museum collections that draw attention to relationships between objects. After her first visit to the museum at Oberlin she was struck by both its treasures and the wing designed by Robert Venturi. “It is one of those enormously difficult gallery spaces that screams ‘architecture’ with a capital A,” Ms. Bloom said. To highlight the weird angles, curves and windows of the room, she’s installed on its walls about 30 prints and paintings that depict architecture in some form. From five of these two-dimensional works, including an overhead perspective of an Indian courtyard garden, she has built three-dimensional projections of their bridges, teahouses and walkways coming off the walls and out into the gallery at exaggerated scale and painted an austere gray. On another wall she’s covered the paintings with gray boxes with cutouts that reveal just the architectural feature in the works. “The whole thing is about the strangeness of the architecture,” she said.