World On A Wire: Mary Ellen Carroll Creates New Connections in New Orleans

by Aimee Walleston

In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Marlowe marvels, while positioned on a boat at the mouth of the Thames, that his current locale was once “one of the dark places of the earth.” Our dark places—our instances of unmapped wilderness—take on a different form in 2013. Exchange the Thames for Lake Pontchartrain and the dark places for “TV white space” (the telecom industry’s term for unused broadcast television channels), and one can begin to grasp the nature of Illinois-born, Texas- and New York-based artist Mary Ellen Carroll’s latest endeavor—bringing Super Wi-Fi (a service that travels further and penetrates walls better than traditional 2.4 gigahertz Wi-Fi) to underserviced areas of Greater New Orleans.

Commissioned for Prospect.3 New Orleans (Oct. 25, 2014-Jan. 25, 2015) by artistic director Franklin Sirmans, a curator of contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the project—under the working title *Public Utility 2.0*—is still in its planning stages. Its genesis began with a recent visit to New Orleans, where Carroll was struck by the I-10, an elevated highway that travels over the city, like New York City’s Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, and splits areas like Tremé, a Créole and African American community known for its music culture, from other vital areas in the city.

“I began to think about the city’s urban planning, and how can you shift things from conventional wisdom, finding other ways in which to view...
the city,” says Carroll, speaking to A.i.A. recently in her Midtown Manhattan office. When the I-10 was built, the historically and culturally significant Seventh Ward’s business district was destroyed by the highway’s construction. “I started thinking about an elevation plan, shifting things into the air. Because of the way the I-10 divided and ruptured the city, people think of it as a blight,” says Carroll. “But it’s also an informal amphitheater that is used quite extensively, and I wanted to think about elevating things over the I-10 itself.”

Carroll soon identified Tremé as an area under-resourced for Wi-Fi connectivity. “There are areas, for example Tremé, that are so difficult to get to that no one’s going to service them. Operators aren’t going to provide broadband connectivity because it’s not financially worthwhile for them.” Because Wi-Fi is something that falls out of the sky, it is quite easy for it to remain mystical. But, as Carroll’s working title suggests, Wi-Fi has also quickly become as integral to daily existence as any other public utility. And while it appears to be controlled predominantly by major wireless carriers, newer technologies offer the potential for a less hegemonic structure. “TV white space” is UHF bandwidth, increasingly abandoned as television has migrated almost entirely to digital transmission. Its potential use is to provide long-range, powerful Wi-Fi service. “Economists refer to it as beachfront property, just sitting there,” says Carroll.

Working with professor Edward Knightly at Houston’s Rice University, Carroll is adapting a model first developed by the university’s Wireless Network Group in 2008 for a project in northeast Houston, called Technology for All. “At first, this initiative was a computer literacy program, where they provided computers to people,” says Carroll. “But what good are computers without Wi-Fi? So they put in a mesh network with Wi-Fi, with very limited service. A grandmother said to them, ‘Get rid of this equipment—I can’t do anything with it.’ [Her complaints encouraged them to develop a program using] Super Wi-Fi, the first high-speed, broadband device that utilized TV white space. It still is in use.”

Carroll is known for creating architectural works that interrogate the legislative strata of specific locales. “We live in a political epoch: everything is about politics and policy,” she says. “So I’m literally using policy as a material, in sort of the same way a painter uses paint.” One of her best-known forays into the use of policy to create a work of art occurred amid Houston’s urban sprawl: Prototype 180 (2010), a project for which the artist physically rotated a single-family home 180 degrees, creating what could be seen as a monument to the city’s unorthodox zoning laws. “Houston happened because there’s no land use policy,” says Carroll. “Which is neither good or bad. It just is. [So my questions are] what does that mean? What are the ramifications? The work makes architecture perform as a work of art.”

For Public Utility 2.0, Carroll cites her “little heroine,” urban planner Jane Jacobs, as a point of inspiration. “The local is very important,” says Carroll. “Any kind of social media uses immediacy to be in contact with someone. You could posit that this access eliminates a physical distance.” Ergo, the same feeling of connectivity created by shouting out the window to your next-door neighbor can be replicated, in Carroll’s view, by the use of Super Wi-Fi. With a plan to erect two service towers under the I-10, and connect these to service nodes distributed throughout the community, Carroll posits a wireless system that will exist in perpetuity, connecting the community to itself and to the world at large. “It will be a permanent part of the infrastructure,”
“The creative class in New Orleans is so relevant to the city, on all socioeconomic levels. And New Orleans is so important to our culture. We need it much more than it needs us.”

PHOTO: Mary Ellen Carroll presenting her proposal for Public Utility 2.0, June 24, 2013.

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