

Kathleen Bitetti

*Crossings: Walt Whitman Was Here (New Orleans)**

October 2023

A Mapping / Performative Public Art Project (*In Memory of David Medalla*)⁽¹⁾

Bitetti will post on her facebook page when she plans to leave a piece behind for *Crossings: Walt Whitman Was Here (New Orleans)*.

During the dates of October 24-31, 2023, Massachusetts-based artist Kathleen Bitetti will leave an artwork for a member of the public to find at a site in New Orleans where Walt Whitman lived, worked, visited, and/or frequented. Bitetti's main source for this project is the 2022 book, *Walt Whitman's New Orleans- Sidewalk Sketches & Newspaper Rambles*, edited, with an introduction by Stefan Schöberlein (LSU Press).

Whitman (b. 5.31.1819 - d. 3.26.1892) was an American writer, poet, essayist, journalist, and a newspaper editor. Before his literary career, he was a teacher, a governmental clerk, an apprentice and he also worked for several printing companies. He was born on Long Island NY, left school at the age of 11, and lived most of his life in Brooklyn, NY. Massachusetts-based acclaimed transcendentalist, writer, poet, lecturer and philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, "*published his first book of essays in 1841....and it's known that in 1842 he gave an address titled "The Poet" in New York City. One of the audience members was a young newspaper reporter, Walt Whitman. The future poet was greatly inspired by Emerson's words.*"^{(2) (3)}

Like many writers and artists, Whitman often had to self-fund his creative work and he also had to have "day jobs" to support himself. In 1855, "*Whitman paid for the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* himself and had it printed at a local print shop during their breaks from commercial jobs...The book received its strongest praise from Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote a flattering five-page letter to Whitman and spoke highly of the book to friends. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was widely distributed and stirred up significant interest, in part due to Emerson's approval, but was occasionally criticized for the seemingly "obscene" nature of the poetry.*"⁽⁴⁾

At the age of 29, Whitman arrived in New Orleans around 10pm on Friday, February 25th 1848 to take a job at the Daily Crescent newspaper, "*having just been fired from a Brooklyn newspaper for his anti-slavery views.*"⁽⁵⁾⁽⁶⁾ Whitman's New Orleans stay was for three months and he left the city on the afternoon of Saturday, May 27th 1848.⁽⁶⁾ However, "*his three-month stint at a start-up paper known as the Daily Crescent yielded dozens of short sketches, reviews, and commentaries, many of them very funny.*" His 14 year old brother, Thomas Jefferson "Jeff" Whitman, accompanied him to New Orleans and also worked at the Daily Crescent.⁽⁷⁾

It is said that "*Something happened to Walt Whitman during his short stay in New Orleans. The details are sparse—it probably happened in March or April of 1848, maybe May, and probably not far from the foot of Canal Street. What happened could only have happened here, and it changed him forever. A breakthrough, an awakening, an epiphany, whatever it was, it laid the groundwork for the most innovative and influential body of work in all of U.S. literature.*"⁽⁵⁾

Each artwork Bitetti leaves behind for *Crossings: Walt Whitman Was Here (New Orleans)*, consists of a large clear plastic bag and large white envelope which contains information about the project, the site Bitetti chose, a recollection of New Orleans by Whitman, and two poems by Walt Whitman: *OUT FROM BEHIND THIS MASK. (To Confront a Portrait.)* and *I Saw in Louisiana A Live-Oak Growing*. There is also visual image of a mask included in each work that not only references, *OUT FROM BEHIND THIS MASK. (To Confront a Portrait.)*, one of Whitman's poems that was added to the 1876 publication of his *Leaves of Grass*, but additionally references New Orleans' Mardi Gras annual celebration.

Inside the white envelope is a green colored envelope that contains maps and historical photographs/images. In the gold envelope, that is placed inside the green envelope, is an image of Whitman (age 28), Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Bitetti's signature guardian angel image.

The purple mesh bag included in each piece left behind contains an oyster shell that is from the oldest public park in the U.S., the Boston Common, which is located in Boston, Massachusetts. This park was “established” in 1634. Whitman visited the City of Boston three times in his lifetime and he always spent time in this historic green space when he was in this capital city. The oyster shell is well over 390 years old. Before the multiple landfill projects that increased the size of the City of Boston, the Atlantic Ocean’s shore line was at the end of the Boston Common (the boarder facing Charles St./the Public Garden). Native Americans harvested and shucked the oysters on what is now called the Boston Common. The inclusion of the oyster shell is reference to both New Orleans’ and Boston’s acclaimed seafood industries and it is also an acknowledgment of the Indigenous and Native American peoples who lived in and still live in these two cities. The green and gold envelopes, along with the purple mesh bag, are a direct reference to the Mardi Gras colors of New Orleans.

Footnotes

(1) David Cortez Medalla (23 March 1942 – 28 December 2020) was a Filipino international artist and political activist. He was the founder and director of the [London Biennale](#) in 1998, a “do-it-yourself” free arts festival. The London Biennale was not restricted to London and artists around the globe participated.

In July of 2019, David Medalla and Adam Nankervis sat and spoke through the theme of the 2020 London Biennale. Its theme, its installations, locations, global pollinations. Using the mask as theme, the mirage, the morphic mirror, they were obviously unaware of the coming of the COVID-19 pandemic. Medalla pointed to a poem of Walt Whitman, from *The Leaves of Grass*, to be the theme, that would mark the proposal for that year’s untimely and absurdly prophetic concurrence with the global pandemic, *OUT FROM BEHIND THIS MASK. (To Confront a Portrait.)* by Walt Whitman. The poem was first published in the 1876 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. (This poem is also included each work Bitetti leaves behind in New Orleans.)

In May 2020, as part of the 2020 *London Biennale-Masks, Mirages, and the Morphic Mirror*, Bitetti completed her Mapping / Performative Public Art Project, *Crossings-Walt Whitman Was Here (Boston)*. She left an artwork at a place in Boston where Walt Whitman lectured, worked, visited, and/or frequented. He visited the Boston/Massachusetts three times: once in 1860 and twice in 1881. For this project, Bitetti chose sites that were clustered in Boston’s downtown area or were in very close walking distance from that part of the capital city. She posted on her facebook page when she planned to leave a piece behind. This project was also part of Bitetti’s ongoing *Crossings* series.

(2) Biography of Walt Whitman, American Poet by Robert McNamara, Updated on January 30, 2020; <https://www.thoughtco.com/walt-whitman-1773691>

(3) Ralph Waldo Emerson: American Transcendentalist Writer and Speaker by Robert McNamara, updated October 31, 2018; <https://www.thoughtco.com/ralph-waldo-emerson-1773667>

(4) Walt Whitman, Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Whitman

(5) What Happened to Walt Whitman in New Orleans? By [T.R. Johnson](#), Professor of English and Weiss Presidential Fellow For Publication in the *School of Liberal Arts Magazine, Spring 2020* Wednesday, May 20, 2020 <https://liberalarts.tulane.edu/magazine/spring-2020/walt-whitman-nola>

(6) Page 104; *Walt Whitman’s New Orleans- Sidewalk Sketches & Newspaper Rambles*, edited, with an introduction by Stefan Schöberlein (LSU Press) 2022.

(7) French Quarter Journal, Lit Life, Poet on the Levee: Walt Whitman’s New Orleans by John S. Sledge 2022 <https://www.frenchquarterjournal.com/archives/poet-on-the-levee>

**This project is part of Bitetti’s ongoing Crossing Series.
For more information about the Crossing Series and Kathleen Bitetti: www.kathleenbitetti.com*