

## From Nick Cave to Janelle Monáe, Kansas City's New Biennial Mingles Art and Music for a Midwestern Extravaganza

Open Spaces Kansas City brings together blue-chip artists and A-list pop stars.

**Sarah Cascone**, August 9, 2018



Janelle Monáe. Photo by Cindy Ord/Getty Images.

Open Spaces Kansas City, the Midwestern art biennial announced in November, touches down in venues all over the city on August 25, kicking off a nine-week celebration of the country's self-proclaimed "Creative Crossroads." The city-wide exhibition encompasses parks, urban spaces, galleries, performance halls, and outdoor stages, with a dual focus on the visual and performing arts.

That’s because Open Spaces is the lovechild of two separate visions: that of local philanthropist Scott Francis, and of the Kansas City government, both of which were separately working to develop a signature cultural event for the city. It was curator Dan Cameron, also the founder of [Prospect New Orleans](#), who fortuitously connected the two projects, creating a public/private partnership.

“One side was approaching me to do a cultural festival, and the other side was approaching me to do a local version of Skulpture Project Munster,” Cameron, who also worked for 10 years as the visual arts curator for BAM’s Next Wave Festival in Brooklyn, told artnet News. “I said, ‘well, you could actually put those two things together to create something that doesn’t exist yet.’”

The result is equal billing for A-list visual artists like [Nick Cave](#) and chart-topping singers like Janelle Monáe. It’s all centered around a massive public art exhibition in Swope Park, with theatrical and musical performances, as well as poetry, dance, and visual art events—both free and ticketed—taking place over the biennial’s 62-day run. Open Spaces also includes events and exhibitions in the “Expanded Field,” separately organized by area cultural institutions, to ensure a well-rounded representation of the city’s arts scene.



Open Spaces Kansas City Art Experience. Image courtesy of Open Spaces.

The show in the park features 13 of the biennial’s 42 artists, who hail from 10 countries and nine US states, with locals such as Kansas City’s Shawn Bitters, Jill Downen, Jillian Youngbird, and Martin Cale balancing internationally known figures such as [Alexandre Arrechea](#), [Lee Quiñones](#), [Joyce J. Scott](#), and [Jennifer Steinkamp](#). (Cameron reviewed some 400 submissions to an open call in order to ensure local representation in the publicly funded event.)

The park’s Starlight Theater will also be the venue for the centerpiece of the biennial’s music component, a weekend-long concert dubbed “the Weekend,” taking place October 12–14. There will be 11 musical acts, headlined by Monáe, a Kansas

City native, and the Roots, in addition to 50-odd performances throughout the two-month event.

“We were very lucky to get Janelle Monáe to come back home and perform for Open Spaces,” Cameron added, admitting that putting together the concert line-ups “has been a little different than some of the curatorial work that I’ve done in the past!”

That’s not to say Cameron isn’t excited by Open Space’s dual focus, a concept he believes is long overdue in the art world. “The first curator I ever knew of was Bill Graham, the greatest concert promoter for his day,” Cameron said. “He was known for bringing all these different music types together: You’d have psychedelic music, sitar music, blues from Chicago, folk music from the South, and rock bands from Detroit... I was always looking for ways that that argument could be extended into a more conventional museum framework.”



DJ Rick Medina will perform in Sanford Bigger’s *Jump n Funk* at Kanas City Open Spaces.  
Courtesy of Rick Medina.

Blurring the lines between the two disciplines will be work like *Moon Medicine & Jump n Funk*, back-to-back performances by Sanford Biggers taking place on October 5. “He’s got an incredible program planned,” Cameron said, describing Biggers’s first piece, which features costumes and live musicians, as “an Afrofuturist space opera.” Part two features DJ Rick Medina.

Many of the more conventional artworks are inspired directly by Kansas City. “The artists,” Cameron said, “really want to go deep, and explore local resources, customs, and history. The people of Kansas City are going to notice: These artists did their homework!”

Touring Swope Park in preparation for the biennial, for instance, *Ebony G. Patterson* stumbled across a long-abandoned public pool, marked by a plaque noting it had been used for hydrotherapy for handicapped children.

“It’s a stark, bare, uneasy, and almost haunted site in the middle of a continually active park residents use to barbecue, meet friends, family, loved ones, and relax,” wrote the artist on *Kickstarter* for the project, *Called Up*, which ends today and has exceeded its \$15,000 fundraising goal. “I began to consider, how can my artwork help to reclaim this space for the park and the people who use it?”



Ebony G. Patterson, *Called Up* Rendering courtesy of the artist.

Patterson is tearing down the fence that surrounds the old pool, filling it with colorful objects, such as candy, toys, and flowers; and building four benches for visitors to sit and reflect on the site's history. The piece, her first major public work, seems like a natural extension of her vibrant, bedazzled mixed media canvases and installations.

Cameron also received an especially well-researched proposal from New York City artist Matthew Jensen, for a project about the Blue River. "It's one of those places that no one goes to," said Cameron of the waterway, which runs through Swope Park. Jensen has created a detailed, highly artistic annotated pocket map showing the Blue River and all of its access points, providing information about its history and use, bridging the divide between the natural and urban landscape.

Though the open call was designed to attract artists from the area, it was technically open to anyone who wished to apply—Brazilian duo Denis Rodriguez and Leonardo Remor, for instance, were encouraged to file a submission by the Kansas City Art Institute, where they had their first US show last year. Cameron was impressed by their idea to use a video projection to transform a public stairway into a raging waterfall and selected them to take part without knowing their history with the city.

But Cameron is also drawing on his own existing knowledge of the Kansas City art scene, including local artist Karen McCoy, whose work he's known since curating a community college art show here in the 1990s. McCoy will lead intimate guided *Sound and Sight Walks*, where visitors will each use an ear trumpet sculpture made by the artist to listen more closely to the world around them, increasing their sensory perception.

Other interactive works include Ted Riederer's ongoing project *Never Records*, in which visitors can record their own vinyl record, taking home one copy and leaving the other for the project's library; and Shinique Smith's *Breathing Room*, a monumental denim sculpture which will be built communally throughout the exhibition. "It's hard to say in advance what it's going to look like, and I'm perfectly fine with that," Cameron said.



Never Records. Courtesy of Never Records.

The city's art museums are getting in on the action as well. At the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, the current exhibition "Worlds Otherwise Hidden" (on view through September 3) serves as a prelude to Open Spaces with work from two of the biennial's artists, Nevin Aladag and Nari Ward, as well as Kimsooja. The museum will also host a sculpture, *Pollen Winging It et al*, by Kathy Butterly.

On display at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art will be a site-specific video work by Steinkamp, titled *Retinol*, visible after dark. And on October 9, musical ensemble ETHEL will perform *Documerica*, a series compositions inspired by and accompanied by a slideshow of a conservation-minded 1970s EPA photography project.

Ambitious in its scope and range, Open Spaces hopes to engage both visitors to and residents of Kansas City in a wide range of cultural arenas, Cameron said: "I've tried to create one comprehensive curatorial vision that brings together all those different languages and forms."

*Open Spaces Kansas City Arts Experience* will be on view in various venues in Kansas City, Missouri, August 25–October 28, 2018.