

Home, New Orleans?

Performing the Neighborhoods, Rebuilding Communities

January through May 2007



“Home, New Orleans?” is a multi-disciplinary, art-and-community-development project grounded in selected New Orleans neighborhoods, to be carried out by teams of local artists and arts students from universities, colleges, and to include to a lesser degree high and lower schools. The goal is to energize and/or memorialize several of the devastated neighborhoods, using traditional NOLA practices, including masking, parading, music and commemoration. The devastation and wounding go beyond the physical to encompass what happened, and is continuing to happen, emotionally, psychologically, and socially. All of New Orleans was wounded. Art is uniquely situated, in partnerships with people in the political and other community spheres, to respond to these different registers of human experience at once.

The Project begins with training that leads into research, and locating former residents of selected homes in devastated areas. Through a variety of means ranging from interviews—in person and via the Internet and telephone—to archival research and construct the life histories of selected homes themselves including as broad as possible a range of pre-Katrina events that took place in and around them.

The goal is to re-present something of pre-Katrina life in now-ravaged houses and communities as a way to gather public energy in the process of moving forward. Over time, more and more homes will be brought into the enactments/ installations. Each performance lasts no more than 15-20 minutes so that audience and participants can move from one to the other. Once a home is animated, or an installation installed, that performance is repeated on designated days. The overall feeling is of an ever-increasing number of performances/installations. More and more of New Orleans will participate in “Home, New Orleans?” as time goes on. Then on a designated date, all the homes are animated simultaneously, through a great parade or other performance bringing a range of New Orleanians together. We imagine people coming from as many neighborhoods as possible and joining together at various rendezvous points, forming a living river of people, puppets, maskers, rejuvenators. The parade would include residents of homes that have been enacted, performers and artists of many disciplines, as well as audience members.

We imagine spring-boarding from the energy generated around these house-history-based art works—in the form of theatrical performances, music, story-telling, oral histories, art installations, and more—to practical steps that help move forward local participation in reconceptualizing neighborhoods. We see an important role for neighborhood community centers, such as

In order to energize and/or memorialize selected devastated neighborhoods of New Orleans, artists and arts students will locate the residents of as many homes as possible in selected neighborhoods and develop with them performances and art installations based on what happened in those homes before Katrina: births, weddings, parties, holiday rituals, fights - across the vast range of human experience that was lived in these homes. Starting in March, these events will be staged in or in front of one or two devastated homes by the artists, arts students, and when possible, former residents. The homes will be brought back to life, briefly, one or two at a time. Then, late April, all the performances occur simultaneously. Next, artists/students/residents from each home join together in one culminating event. During this entire process, we will simultaneously be looking for sustainable ways to contribute to ongoing neighborhood life, such as reinforcing community arts centers through partnerships with Xavier, Dillard, Tulane and NOCCA students.



Willie Birch's 7th Ward organization, The Porch, as sites where artists/arts students can contribute to neighborhood renewal, activated through this process. The project seeks to celebrate and probe the joys and sorrows of community life pre-Katrina and participate in envisioning and providing creative tools to achieve a better future.

The original scenario of "Home, New Orleans?" was conceived by NYU Professor Richard Schechner, who lived in New Orleans in the 1960s working both at Tulane University and with the Free Southern Theater. He will remain involved as an artistic consultant. The project is structured in two conjoining parts: one directed by local visual artist Jan Gilbert, curator of *The VESTIGES Project: Think Tank* and working with the Contemporary Arts Center, involving local artists; the other team led by Ron Bechet, chair of the Art Department at Xavier University, and Jan Cohen-Cruz, professor from NYU Tisch School of the Arts. Cohen-Cruz will bring 10-15 Tisch students to New Orleans for the fourteen week spring semester to live in Xavier dorms, which are once again up and running but with far fewer students than desired. Along with New Orleans arts students from Xavier, Dillard, Tulane, and NOCCA (the arts magnet high school in New Orleans), the NYU students will participate in research and art making for the art-and-neighborhood remembering and renewal project. The teams will also be composed of local artists who participate both as mentors to the students and co-creators.

Trinidadian carnival master Peter Minshall, a project consultant, generated the idea of a "a living river of people: one river, one people" parade which is one potential culmination for the project. The final event, likewise involving local artists and neighborhood residents and audience members, will be developed in close and deep collaboration with participating community members.

Two complementary courses co-designed by Bechet and Cohen-

Cruz will frame the experience for the students. One, a history and policy course, will feature experts in Gulf Coast social and architectural history, urban development, post-trauma psychology, et al., examining the crisis in its broadest context. A second, *Building Community Through the Arts*, will focus on the art project itself, under the guidance of Bechet, Cohen-Cruz, collaborators John Barnes of Dillard and Amy Koritz of Tulane, and local artists. That is, the first course looks at the deep background and subsequent policy issues that Katrina gives rise to, providing students with a sense of the dimensions of the crisis.

It informs the actual research, community engagement, and art making the students participate in through the second course. Through "Home, New Orleans?," arts magnet high school and university students will collaborate with local artists, experiencing the arts serving community renewal goals.

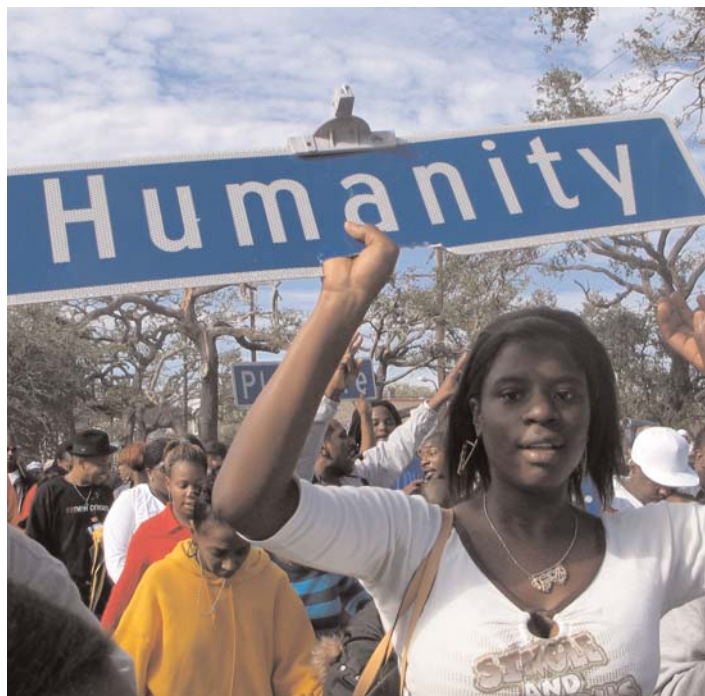
The significance of the work in New Orleans is multiple:

Given the magnitude of the problem, it is essential to involve everyone who may be able to help. This project has generated enormous enthusiasm among students and faculty at Xavier, Dillard, Tulane and NOCCA in New Orleans, from NYU Tisch School of the Arts, and from New Orleans-based artists and their respective collaborators such as Kathy Randels (ArtSpot Productions), John O'Neal (Junebug Productions), Willie Birch (The Porch), Bruce France (Mondo Bizarro), and Jan Gilbert, (The VESTIGES Project). Many others have already expressed their support and desire to participate ranging from former NOLA resident Dr. Jacques Arpin (cultural psychiatrist and doctor of anthropology who has dealt with displaced persons and victims of mass cultural traumas); Sharon Litwin, Senior Vice President for External Affairs of the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra; jazz legend Dr. Michael White; now NYC/former NOLA residents filmmaker/activist Maggie Hadleigh-West, artistic director Andrew Larimer (The NOLA Project) and musician Howard Fishman, and the Laramie Project's Jeff L'Hoste.



Transforma Projects, a national vehicle for supporting, nurturing, and celebrating creative practices that impact the social and physical environment, has adopted “Home, New Orleans?” as one of three prototype projects in New Orleans. The State of Louisiana Division of the Arts also joins in the recognition of the import and abundant potential impact of this collaboration. A model partnership of non-profits (A Studio in the Woods, East Coast Artists), members of the corporate community (Residence Inn by Marriott, Ridgway's Reprographics) and near and far community programs (NYC Grassroots Performance Project) and concerned individuals are joining together to be part of this cultural recovery effort.

What participants learn about the potential of art through this project could impact what they go on to create in their careers. It will also further institutionalization of community-based art at their respective schools and organizations. A platform will be provided from which former residents continue to contribute ideas to reconceptualize neighborhoods, not just in terms of rebuilding houses but also vis-a-vis other human needs such as childcare, activities for all ages, and safety, in essence asking what makes a neighborhood function optimally. Emotional and spiritual impacts on former residents of the houses are anticipated as well as the healing that results as their losses are honored through this series of commemorations. We also will try to pro-



vide practical support, such as expanding the availability of free projects available in neighborhoods through community centers, thanks to sustainable university/student involvement.

Resources necessary:

First: Human resources. People who want to undertake this as a specific set of performances and art installations. New Orleans-based artists would collaborate with Xavier and other New Orleans teaching institutions, NYU students and faculty members, with each participating institution contributing their artistic, community-based skills, and research expertise. The Project will also engage artists of many disciplines and collectives as well as staff and volunteers from New Orleans' Contemporary Arts Center and the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts and the Vestiges Project. It is intended to engage New Orleans urban planners/ architects/and officials at all levels of government.

Second: Research, travel, and internet resources in order to find the persons who will be interviewed.

Third: Gathering of "first hand" materials—pieces of furniture, mementos, photographs, etc. What is eerie about the devastated homes is that so much was abandoned in a great rush. There is an enormous amount of valuable personal material concerning life histories still in the homes. As much of this as possible needs to be recovered and honored. Many oral history efforts are already underway. These may be used as resources both through house stories already obtained as well as our requesting that questions pertaining to pre-Katrina lives of the homes be added to these groups' lists of questions. Each home site will have a team of artists, designers, musicians, technicians. NOLA theatre companies, artists groups, etc, will choose site(s) and work both individually and in tandem with the larger effort to realize this project.

Fourth: Technical resources for performing on the spot in the Lower Ninth, Lakeview and other areas. If the performances are during the day, sunlight and daylight should suffice. If there are performances indoors, powerful flashlights or candles can serve as illumination.

Fifth: Funding and in kind services from a wide network of supporters.

Intended goals:

1. Former residents will have the opportunity to truly mourn what they have lost as well as to celebrate it, through the art based on people's home histories.
2. Students and faculty from the participating schools as well as local artists will further their knowledge of how to use art in



response to a crisis. The opportunity to collaborate, each institution and individual bringing particular strengths, is an advantage to us all.

3. Local people, including artists of varied disciplines, students, and teachers, will have a way to respond to what they have experienced post-Katrina.
4. We will experiment with using the occasion of bringing former residents together to springboard to participatory neighborhood development.

Measurable outcomes:

1. Former residents will develop relationships with high school and university students as well as New Orleans artists that lead to art work about their former homes.
2. Students, faculty, and artists will learn better ways to conduct research with victims of a crisis.
3. Local artists will collaborate with local schools and universities in the creation of works of art.
4. Two courses will be offered at Xavier University for Xavier, Dillard, and NYU students (as well as NOCCA and Tulane students, possibly): one providing hands-on guidance in carrying out research, artmaking, and public performance/ exhibitions emanating from community members' experience; the other putting the post-Katrina crisis in a larger context.

Expected tangible products:

1. Public performances/exhibition of "Home, New Orleans?" to take place 5 weeks during Spring '07 and concomitant scripts.
2. Jan Cohen-Cruz will provide workshops for arts educators sharing her extensive experience in arts and community practices, which may be videotaped for future uses, and will write about the social use of traditional art practices like the second-line in jazz funerals as evidenced in this project.
3. Two new syllabi.
4. The establishment of a model network which facilitates the sharing of infrastructure, and a variety of resources and skills; which may be replicated in many fields.
5. Economic development: gaining more students and professors to work here bringing their outside resources; grants and corporate and individual donations being dedicated to businesses and creative industry in NOLA; sponsorships of return "HOME" for displaced persons to participate in Project events, which may facilitate more permanent returns for some.
6. An archive of home histories providing a "slice of life" of loss by Katrina-related flood.

Long term potential aims:

1. Neighborhood cultural centers with active programs and participation.
2. Permanent and temporary public artworks resulting from neighborhood memorials with neighborhood input and participation
3. Active community arts practices at all education levels in all neighborhoods.
4. Continued growth of this project which may evolve into an annual event, creating a new tradition.
5. Charting and serving as a rebuilding catalyst for all NOLA neighborhoods.

