

The New Orleans

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HOW DO WE REBUILD CIVILIZATION?

by Bill Warren

As I toured the art shows and installations of Prospect 1 in New Orleans, I was impressed by the implications of the site-specific installations. By using disaster as a medium, we as artists are confronted with the pain of disintegration and the hope of reconstruction. Often as I was walking through an installation or exhibit, I was asking myself "Where does art end and reality begin?"

Much like doctors trying to revive a critically injured patient, artists involved with the Post-Katrina New Orleans have to apply the medicine of practical function to their form. Art must point the way to a sustainable and more permanent future. We cannot afford to languish in morbid delusions of a romance with decadence. This is the time to unite to work on what has been spoiled. This will involve a fundamental shift in the artistic paradigm of the recent past. In order for art to be truly progressive, it needs to move away from narcissistic, egocentric absurdities. The "All About Me" era should resoundingly be declared *out* of fashion.

As artists, we must be a uniting force. New Orleans is probably the most significant breeding ground for progressive art alliances that could have international ramifications because of the global financial crisis. Cooperative art galleries are already forming in the 9th Ward and serving a well-needed social function.

So what do site-specific installations do to help rebuild New Orleans? The most obvious result is that they bring more attention to the ongoing plight of the city. Also the involvement of artists in flood-devastated areas has an uplifting effect on people's attitude towards neighborhood.



"Vault", New Orleans, LA. ©2005 Phyllis Parun. A wall of water collapsed this home in the Lower Ninth Ward and dragged it 6-10 blocks. Flowers and a traditional black burial wreath commemorate the death of a man and woman who died inside during the flooding aftermath of Katrina.

positive effects on rebuilding the culture and housing of New Orleans. Both the city and federal government could set up a homesteading program. If house purchase prices were kept at very affordable levels, then artist participation in such a project would have a fighting chance.

In addition, a city-federal homestead program could offer very low-interest loans. Homesteading would mean that the owner would be living in or on the property during and for a period of five to seven years after reconstruction. As I see it, the most positive outcome could be that artists would be able to buy dilapidated properties in the flood-ravaged areas and fix them up.

This type of program is not new. Other cities have successfully revitalized neighborhood ravaged by urban blight. For example, in the early 1980's in

Providence, Rhode Island, the city set up a homestead recovery program through which blighted property could be purchased from the city for as little as one dollar. I saw many properties revived because of this kind of program. This type of personal involvement in neighborhoods can only strengthen the fabric of communities.

Homesteading as Revitalization

Large-scale demolition of property for gentrified development would completely alter the character of devastated New Orleans neighborhoods. Corporate industrial development would also be alienating and destructive to the unique and vital cultural heritage of New Orleans.

At this point there are several crucial scenarios that would have

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THE MUSE IN THE ATTIC

by Lee Meitzen Grue

At first they didn't know where she was,
just missing in the crawl space a long time.
The water gone, old man Hebert
already building his house new.
Rolled up in a ball she stayed there.
Couldn't shape pain to words enough to stand it.
One of the lucky
ashamed.

Her nights were floating bodies, racing water,
a girl child torn away
the father able
to save one not the other.

A Lab and a cat left in a house
two bowls of food and water
the family
coming back in three days.

A man forced on a bus
left a note
on his mother
dead in her wheel chair.

Up in the attic, locked in,
the Muse couldn't hear voices.
Horns playing on the street
finally brought her down.

After Katrina, when the flood came, people were thrust into the moment: Save your children or die trying. For the Muse to know what happened, the happening needs to be done with. An artist must have reflective time to absorb an experience in order to evoke a future. Art is not uppermost in your mind when your life's at stake.

In our part of the world, hurricanes are natural occurrences that sweep the land with wind and water. We are not accustomed to leaving; those born here accept hurricanes as part of our home: a natural thing. The infrastructure, levees, canals, buildings erected by government are not natural. Under the force of water, they are as flimsy as the twigs and sticks in the nests that birds build. We have raised levees as beavers raise dams, overconfident that they will protect us.

If there are no buildings or people on the land, when a flood or fire comes, some wildlife is killed and the land is clean after the

water recedes, the wind dies down or the fire goes out. There is a period of time while the land is fallow, but soon there is new growth, and the animals that survive build nests and produce babies. People have always lived on the edges of volcanoes or on the banks of rivers. They also live in earthquake country and tornado alley.

After Katrina, we were as powerless as any other animal in the face of the incredible force of water. A devastated community waited on rooftops to be saved by a government that was slow to respond, unprepared and indifferent to suffering. There were heroes: the people next door; the Coast Guard and agents from the Wildlife and Fisheries. Some of the old timers, those close to the land accustomed to working with their hands, began to rebuild. A gentleman in his eighties, who lives in the Lower Ninth Ward, sent his wife to safety and immediately began to rebuild his house as did the people of Plaquemines Parish, an area most often hard hit. They got right to it. People without the skills or where-withal waited; four years after the hurricane some are still waiting.

Many things have been swept away -- traditions that were part of our cultural identity.

How do artists reflect this? Artists who remain here must evoke the power of art to transform -- provide a new vision for a very old city. Before art was sold it was tribal. It was an expression of the identity of a people, sometimes religious, but most always the way of gifted individuals to help the community bond through symbolic expression. The artist often had to withdraw to some private place to find the way to express a vision.

Poets, in spite of the desire to withdraw -- to crawl back upstairs, were in some ways first responders. They helped each other clean their houses, housed other artists, and tried to write poems about the horrors seen. Some, however, could not write: the Muse was still in the attic with the dead. They could not transform the events of the recent past while the pain was still evident. Some were able to document or represent the visible evidence of sorrow and the privations of the people to the rest of the country. However, none of us knew what happened beyond the event. What would become of us? How would our city change? One of the hardest things is to suffer the pain of a tragedy again in order to signify it.

Water had destroyed families and much of our way of living. There was a forced exodus from the city. Immediately after the flood, people were loaded on planes and sent anywhere. People who had never left New Orleans were uprooted and sent to places they'd never heard of. Some made new lives, others suffered a terrible homesickness. They had to come home, but where is home when it is so changed?

New Orleans art is tribal. Our music, our poetry, our pictures are for the community: "Always for pleasure" is a rallying cry. Much of what we do is for us -- for the people -- our families, our friends and neighbors -- for the joy of it and "Well, if somebody pays us that's good too," but many stay in New Orleans who might be better paid elsewhere: Witness our musicians.

Now is the time to foresee the future, evoke the transformative. Art is transformative -- a kind of alchemy. Our artists, composers and poets have come down from the attic. Horns play on the street, the calliope on the river; we're writing poems, sewing suits, dressing for Mardi Gras, painting, passing the bottle and telling the story. Always for Pleasure: Our beautiful New Orleans. ❖

r é d a c t i o n

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FEMME FEST 2009, WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

by Phyllis Parun

Femme Fest was born in 2006 when Don Marshall, President of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, met with sixty women at Ashé Cultural Arts Center. "This 2008 *Femme Fest*," Marshall comments, "is a rebuilding year focused on visual arts, anticipating that in 2010 we will be featuring all art forms: music, theatre, visual arts, dance and literature."

March is Women's History Month, and the Women's Caucus for Art of Louisiana is sponsoring several events in cooperation with Don Marshall and Mary Ann Marx, Head Librarian at Alvar Branch Library. ❖

The Femme Fest An Exhibit of Women's Visual Art

Sponsored by The Women's Caucus for Art of Louisiana

Reception: Saturday, March 14, 5-9 p.m.

Location: Jazz and Heritage Festival Gallery, 1205 North Rampart

"Women's Vision, Women's Voice"

Location: Panel Discussion, 1205 North Rampart

Date: Wednesday, March 18, 7-9 p.m.

Exhibit of New Orleans Women's Art

Alvar Branch Library, 913 Alvar Street, begins March 1

WOMEN'S CAUCUS FOR ART

by Phyllis Parun

In 1972 the Women's Caucus for Art (WCA) founded a national member organization to strengthen the role and address the status of women in the arts without regard to race, religion or gender. Since the early 1970's, the Women's Caucus for Art has been an activist organization, championing the contributions of women in the arts professions. Beginning in 1979, the **WCA Lifetime Achievement Awards** has become one of the highest national honors a woman in the arts can receive for her life-long contribution

to the arts. Over 30 local chapters keep members informed of current art events and opportunities. Locally and nationally, its members run the Women's Caucus for Art.

The New Orleans Chapter – 1980's

In 1980, the New Orleans Women's Caucus for Art (NOWCA) had over 100 members and hosted the WCA National Conference in New Orleans in January of 1980. Two women artists from Louisiana were recognized with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Conference for their outstanding achievements: Ida Kohlmeier and Carolyn Durieux. Around 1985, the local chapter ended and in 2006 was regenerated by the circumstances around Katrina. Here is how it happened.

Flood of 2005

When the levees broke, Phyllis Parun, the only current WCA member from New Orleans, evacuated to Monterey County, California, where she was contacted by the regional VP who was looking for member evacuees. At a meeting she attended, Phyllis met the President of the

National WCA, Dr. Jennifer Colby. Out of the kindness and kinship of the west coast artists' community and artists in New Orleans, two west coast exhibits and a national tour was conceptualized.

In the midst of clearing debris and house repairs, Phyllis and activist Bywater neighbors Pati D'Amico and Bill Warren gathered artists and formed two exhibits which opened on the first anniversary of the New Orleans flood, with 32 New Orleans artists exhibiting on the central coast of California: the WCA exhibit, "Katrina Diaries" at Dr. Colby's Tonantzin Galerie in San Juan Bautista; and "The Katrina Hurricane Blues" at the Pacific Grove Art Center, cosponsored by The Artists' Equity Assn. of Monterey.

When Dr. Colby sent out the call for a national tour of Louisiana women artists to other chapters, chapters responded resulting in exhibits in St. Louis, Washington D.C. and Dallas. What was experienced as an exchange between vibrant communities of women artists from the south, west and east contributed to a nation rethinking its path.

In March 2008, the "Katrina Diaries" returned to New Orleans for a homecoming exhibit hosted by member Pati D'Amico and her husband William Warren at The Waiting Room Gallery. National WCA President, Dr. Jennifer Colby, attended in honor of our newly formed chapter for its contribution of an inspiring tour. ❖



New Orleans Waiting Room Gallery. Back row from left: Pat Jolly, Soco Ocampo. Middle row: Cindy Renteria, Cely Pedescleaux, Phyllis Parun, Jennifer Colby, Marsha Masterson, Sarah Newman. Front row from left: Pati D'Amico, Ruby Fayard

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Building Trades Design

Another program that has a lot to offer to redevelop cultural communities would be to establish neighborhood vocational training schools with a strong curriculum in Art Design and Methods. These vocational art training schools should be promoted especially for young people to learn an employable trade.

Students can be taught to work with materials such as concrete, plaster, wood and brick. These skills can be applied to the rebuilding of neighborhoods as well as making artistic creations. These schools should be "cost free" to join. Students would be working with master crafts persons. Much of this can be "on the job training," starting students out with an apprenticeship wage. The ultimate goal would be placement in a full-wage job upon completion of the schools' curriculum. This type of program would energize young people's pride and involvement with their own neighborhood. A few examples of possible projects are recreational, parks, sidewalk and street repair, community gardens for food, flowers and landscaping, housing rehabilitation and water management, especially for levee construction.

Underlying the application of these vocational learning projects would be a strong emphasis on aesthetics and design for harmonious appearances. Creative forces that are practically

applied will most certainly dovetail with a much larger social infrastructure program that the Obama Administration will be implementing.

It was a glaring and tragic mistake that a vocational training program of this sort was not expanded on after Katrina. A WPA-style neighborhood reconstruction project could have employed an *army* of people who actually had lived in New Orleans to reconstruct their own neighborhoods and get paid to do it. Now that the idiocy and greed of the Bush Administration are history, such a plan needs to be re-explored. It would be in harmony with Obama's infrastructure and recovery program. In fact, now is the perfect moment to pursue this goal. It would benefit the city, neighborhood residents, and artists. ❖

Bill Warren, born and raised in Princeton, N.J., graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design. In 1997, after 25 years of teaching and arts community development in Providence, RI, Bill moved to New Orleans where he and his wife, Pati D'Amico, ran The Waiting Room Gallery in Bywater from 1997-2007, exhibiting avant-garde artists in the spirit of fostering alternative venues for artistic expression. They now live in Water Valley, MS, where Bill has focused on ©The PAN NOLA Project, dedicated to the development of better towns and cities. Bill may be reached via email at Puppetcode2@gmail.com

BUTTERFLY: THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

Butterflies, which go through four distinct life phases, represent transformation from birth to rebirth. This design came from the tile work at the home of butterfly biologist and my long time friend, Dr. Gary Noel Ross: "The design is from an ancient Aztec clay stamp found in central Mexico. The stamps were used as stencils whenever duplicate and multiple designs were called for to decorate ceramics and deerskins ... probably in use up until the conquest of Mexico by H. Cortez in 1519. ...



"People around the world have taken inspiration from the metamorphosis of the earthbound caterpillar into the ethereal butterfly, seeing it in the promise that the body will be transformed into spirit after death, and enter an afterlife. In most traditional Mexican cultures, butterflies are still regarded as embodiments of human souls. ...

"In Mexico, *los días de los muertos* ("the days of the dead") take place on October 31 (All Hallows' Eve), November 1 (All Saints' Day), and November 2 (All Souls' Day) ... Holidays are a time of remembering and rejoicing, when, as many people believe, the dead return in spirit form - often as butterflies - to their earthly homes."

Dr. Gary Noel Ross, Emeritus Professor of Biology at Southern University and a celebrated natural history photographer, lecturer and an award-winning author since 1992, has devoted himself full-time to research and the popularization of butterfly biology. Dr. Ross, a native of New Orleans, resides in Baton Rouge and has been affiliated with the international "McGuire Center for Lepidoptera and Biodiversity" at the Florida Museum of Natural History, University of Florida in Gainesville, since 2004.

NOTABLE QUOTE

"Barriers are constantly being built up out of the new values which have overthrown the old. ... All of evolution, i.e. internal growth and external culture becomes a matter of breaking down barriers. Barriers destroy freedom and prevent new revelations of the spirit. Barriers are constantly being built out of the new values, which have overthrown the old.

"...the joy of life is the steady and inevitable victory of new values. It is a slow victory. A new value conquers only very gradually, but when it once becomes established beyond question, though it was absolutely necessary at the time, it becomes nothing less than a wall against the future."

Wassily Kandinsky, "The Problem of Form," from Der Blaue Reiter (1912)