

The New Orleans AVANT-GARDE[©]

THE NEW ORLEANS CONTEMPORARY ART SCENE

by Phyllis Parun

In every country, certain cities exude a distinct mysterious culture, to which one is intuitively drawn. New Orleans is one of those cities. Everywhere I travel whenever I mention that I am from New Orleans the response is uniformly, "Oh, what a wonderful city. I just love New Orleans."

Such responses make me wonder what is it about New Orleans that visitors fall in love with beyond the superficial party town image. What is the importance of New Orleans for humanity?

Perhaps it is because New Orleans has its own rhythm with no agenda other than to express its soul. Bustling with counterculture artists, poets, dancers and musicians, music spills out of open doors of homes and churches. This city says "yes" to life on every corner. Coffeehouses, restaurants, bars are all brimming with art, music, theatre and comedy performances as both day and nightlife abounds! On a single weekend a plethora of cultural, artistic and sensual delights entertain. Any day of the week, you can soak up a little bit of New Orleans *culcha* just by stepping outside your front door.

Up to now, New Orleans has been a safe haven far from the art establishment and economic centers where repression and social conformity dominate daily life. Instead of a materialist economy, New Orleans existing solely for *joi d'être* resists any move to make her into a tool of corporate America. The spirit in New Orleans does not dance to a monetary tune. And those who gravitate to New Orleans, who value culture more than money, have been drawn by the promise of freedom to live and express themselves without interference and to follow their passions.

New Orleans, this city of artists, poets and writers where creative people can live an artistic life, offers visitors and new residents a comfortable landing pad laid by previous avant-garde generations who have made creative expression their life-style.



Bohemian Rhapsody, St. Claude Avenue, 1998.

The Creators, left to right:

William Warren (exhibit director), Lee Grue (poet), Phyllis Parun (founder)

New Orleans is an artist's Mecca. A new generation of American bohemians desiring to shed their bourgeois values, expatriate to New Orleans to escape a lifeless, materialistic culture. For them, New Orleans can offer the Rosetta Stone of a quality life in a spiritually confused time.

Populated with cultural preservationists, New Orleans is far ahead of other major cities in the USA. She has a sacred identity as a city of artists, where architecture speaks loudly of her people of color craftsmen, where living in hand-built houses, themselves works of art, inspires works of art. These experiences make the art of New Orleans artists unlike art from the East or the West coasts and also surprisingly different from all other Southern art. It is art born from this place, influenced in this place, and speaks of its

ancestry. Even a cursory viewing of New Orleans contemporary art makes the differences conspicuous.

Art is life! And New Orleans is a work of art, continuously expressing her own greatness.

Bywater, New Orleans' premier artists' village

Bywater is a bohemian rhapsody, filled with colorfully clad people walking to and from mom and pop restaurants and coffeehouses, streaming past on bicycles and sitting on stoops. Built by people of color, Creoles, Irish, German and Italian immigrants, this faubourg behind the Vieux Carré has become home to a new *intelligencia* and *litterati*.

In the 1950-60's, the Vieux Carré was the artists' village and quite different from the condo-laden mall that tourists see today. It was a Beatnik village where cheap rent supported colorful personalities and creative people who congregated around local hangouts.

Like the left bank of Paris in the 1920-30's, many of the American creative class have expatriated to Bywater, adopting it as their new bohemian quarter. In this economically and socially diverse, interracial, gay friendly and eclectic faubourg, where frugal and ecological lifestyles are fashionable, artists can still eat deliciously and attire daily in Mardi Gras chic or Euro-trash funk.

Far from the art establishment, this 18th century Creole faubourg is where the words of abstract expressionist painter Wassily Kandinsky have taken root: "Ideas are maturing unknown by the leaders of today's battles."

(continued, page 4)

ST. CLAUDE AVENUE SWEET

by Lee Meitzen Grue
(leegrue@earthlink.net)

Cars in blue shades, throbbing, shuddering
 Rap-tu-ous baboons down St. Claude beating
 smoky busses blazoned:
 St. Claude to Lizardi, St. Claude to Refinery,
 fuming over
 the corrupt, incorruptible – the strung out body of Saint Claude,
 who lies
 nodding in Tremé, past St. Augustine's, and
 Elie's courtyard where reclusive poets call from high skirted
 porches,
 chant litanies and conjure.
 The church swallows *loas*, all saints
 sweet.
 The big peasant rests at the crossroads:
 Esplanade near Polaris, the spinning North star.
 St. Claude's lone talkers stalk the littered *banquette*,
 ecstatic prophesiers
 sermonizing
 in raggedy clothes, breathy hair dreaming
 to better things in unlikely places:
 King Roger's:
 Pickled Tips, Hot Sausage, Cowan, and Coon.
 Beard's Auto Repair:
 No catting, no loitering, no crack, The Hi Ho, the Saturn Bar,
 St. Roch Market: Plate Lunches, Blue Crabs, Boil Crawfish.
 Friday in this sometime catholic city. Get Your GED.
 In the yard of the fan shop
 at St. Claude and Elysian Fields
 a woman offers BJ's for two dollars, goes
 down for a bag of potato chips: Crack, Crank,
 This too is life.
 At Press Street,
 children pass over and under boxcars, daring
 wheels to turn.
 People in cars
 wait for the train to pass,
 impatient
 circle dust off the gravel road,
 cut to beat the train.
 A long mournful whistle begs them: Don't cross. I'm Coming.
 Tell me, Babe Sang, "Don't you want to go?"
 St. Claude hangs out in the yellow pages – Texaco,
 Nome Credit Union, the Whitney Bank, and Mandich's:
 Got downtown pride and *corpus derelict ti*
 Caged grocers count out change, Hank's Po Boys
 in white paper, takeout Chinese in Styrofoam,
 Rainbow houses, boarded up houses, things
 falling down,

shot up and drive by: Frederick Douglas and
 Washington school, and won't things
 get better sometime soon. At Frederick Douglas
 the principal locks out the tardy.
 Medics pick up a body in a hallway on St. Claude
 On Mardi Gras Day
 Indians of the Yellow Pocahontas Tribe
 dance over the bridge, down the avenue.
 Make way for the Chief!
 Shaking his headdress
 he's come to sing for his mama,
 her name is Alma.
 Past Desire, Piety, Pauline,
 past my house on Lesseps to Poland Avenue
 where
 St. Claude's ancient knees lift over the levee.
 Bridge up
 drivers take a slow breath,
 a moment from the day to watch the boats pass,
 and far down there by Harry Sterling
 incorruptible toes stretch
 into the Lower Nine
 past
 the Louis Armstrong Elementary School
 where the fat man Antoine Domino lives in the pink,
 smack dab in the middle of his old neighborhood.
 Hooray! For the neighborhood, any neighborhood
 where people call each other by name,
 and they call the saint: They call him
 the St. Claude Pharmacy, the St. Claude Handy Hardware.
 They call him everyday,
 but there are not enough prayers
 to call him back.
 St. Claude Avenue is walled by the dispossessed,
 one pay check
 away from homeless
 as new residents sing out:
 Gentrify! Gentrify!
 We'll B & B ourselves Disney.
 St. Claude needs a miracle. Needs one bad.
 On this broad Avenue good people abide.
 To sustain glory in the name
 of the people we must all abide.

Published in *Bywater Newsletter* and *WORKS/6*

UNO ST. CLAUDE GALLERY at 2429 St. Claude Avenue
 opened with "Payoff," a UNO Art Dept. Faculty exhibit. The
 UNO Gallery is "dedicated to participating in the aesthetic and
 economic revival of one of New Orleans' most historic neighbor-
 hoods and aims to serve as an anchor in the burgeoning arts
 district," says Susan Krantz, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts.
 Thanks, UNO!

Did you know . . . that the founders of the CAC were Robert
 Tannen and Jeanne Nathan, Luba Glade, Bill Fagaly, Don
 Marshall, Dawn Dedeaux, and Elizabeth Shannon with many
 others? Notes from Artist-Sculptor, Elizabeth Shannon

r é d a c t i o n

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PRESS: Université d'Avant-Garde

PRINTER: Twomey Press

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THE QUORUM CLUB AND THE FIRST BACKYARD POETRY THEATER

by Lee Meitzen Grue

I had moved from the French Quarter in 1962 to what we called Hind Quarter. Hind Quarter was the neighborhood past Esplanade Avenue. Later there were new names: Faubourg Marigny, after a plantation, and Bywater after the post office of that name. Artists and writers, the young and old Bohemians, moved from the Quarter when the rents went up beyond our means. The artists of the sixties lived on odd jobs and a few sales to tourists on the Square. Poets, I for one, lived on odd jobs and air.

Just married, my husband Reggie, a seaman at the time, and I moved to the attic at 611 Esplanade Avenue above the Quorum Club. George Dureau's studio was on the second floor. The Quorum Club, a communal coffeehouse at ground level, had great shutters opening onto the street. Many put up a few dollars to open it. The Ryder Coffee House on North Rampart Street, run by Jack Frasier, had been condemned and replaced by a motel. To get the new place started, most of us donated no more than twenty-five dollars. A very old, blind artist whose name I do not recall gave a hundred dollars.

There was an ad hoc Board of Directors. Monty Scherzer was elected president. I was on the Board. This was 1963, and we decided not to be segregated. The Quorum, where jazz poets read to the music of Marty Most's band and Eluard Burt's flute, was the first non-segregated coffeehouse in the state of Louisiana. The decision not to segregate caused us some grief and many adventures before the advent of Civil Rights. However, The Quorum did not set out to be controversial, although we also were big on peace during an unpopular war. Most of us just wanted to gather, play chess, show art and talk about it, or have poetry readings with music. Jim Sohr was one of the many artists who exhibited at The Quorum.

When things got hot for dissenters in New Orleans, my family moved deeper into the neighborhood close to Elysian Fields. I stayed with my baby Celeste through Hurricane Betsy as plaster ceiling medallions fell around us. The political climate worsened. We moved our family to Puerto Rico; after a year there, we moved to a little town in East Texas, but the truth was we longed for our old life in New Orleans.

We came back as a family of five in the early seventies. We were called "urban pioneers" when we bought an old house on Lesseps Street for seventeen thousand dollars in what was not yet called Bywater. It was and is part of the Ninth

ward. I became Director of the New Orleans Poetry Forum, a non-profit, which conducted free workshops and readings for which we charged one dollar. The Quorum was now long closed. Our poetry readings were in various temporary venues around town: the downtown Library, The People's Playhouse and a few clubs. Since many people used some of the venues, we often had to clean before we could perform. After one of these marathon cleaning sessions, Ronald Grue, by then a Mississippi River pilot, said, "I've never worked as hard in my life as I have for poetry." It was his idea to build the theater in our backyard on Lesseps Street.



Backyard Poetry Theater

The first Backyard Poetry Theater, a West Indies-style building with a pitched roof, had inside theater space, a high ceilinged room for readings. My office was a small room downstairs. There was a dressing room up a ladder. The back wall of the theater space was made from weather-gray bargeboards, which had been part of the stable built there before. There is a lovely side patio with a goldfish pond, and the theater itself is set back down a garden walk.

The theater is now an apartment, but it operated as a poetry theater for ten years from 1980 to 1990 with readings by famous visiting poets: Al Young, Sharon Olds, David Huddle, Joan Aleshire, William Stafford, Gerald Stern, William Hathaway, Tony Cade Bambara, Stanley Plumly, Gwen Head, and Sandra Alcosser. Some of the poets gave their

time, but after a few years The First Backyard Poetry Theater received grants from The National Endowment for the Arts to bring in poets and pay them generously. Some local poets were members of The New Orleans Poetry Forum Workshop, and many went on to become well known: Katharine Soniat, Grace Bauer, Martha McFerren, Yusef Komunyakaa, Gail Peck, Andrea Gereighty, George Koschel, and Ken Fontenot. Poets from all the universities of New Orleans read there: Tom Dent, John Biguenet, Peter Cooley, Phillippe Smith, Rudolph Lewis, John Gery, David Franks.

Nancy Harris, Everette Maddox and Helen Toye from the Maple Leaf Bar Poetry Series were frequent visitors. The legendary Danny Barker and Michael White played jazz on the patio. When poet Alice Moser Claudel died, her wake was held in the theater and her body, clothed in an Alice Blue Gown, stayed overnight with only a stone rolled against the door. Michael White played "A Closer Walk with Thee" on his clarinet. Her death was a great loss to the poetry community.

The theater also sponsored art shows by artists: Jim Sohr, Photographer Keith Calhoun, Sculptor Nathan Thomas, and sculptor Diane Deruisse. Robert Borsodi of Borsodi's Coffeehouse and Arthur Essex of Act I, put on plays. In 1990 the theater closed, but was reborn as The Front Room, a double Parlor in the house. Pati D'Amico and William Warren had their first New Orleans art exhibit there. John Sinclair and Brenda Marie Osbey read. Eluard Burt's band played for every event; my home cooking paid the band.

One of the great successes of the theater was the reputation it gained for Bywater as a neighborhood that welcomed artists, which was promoted by Robyn Halvorsen, an art lover, who sold houses with the gentle reminder: "There is a poetry theater in Bywater." Even if the newcomers were not poetry lovers, they seemed to be comforted by the fact that there was a poetry theater.

FACTOID: Bohemian Rhapsody

In 1998, Phyllis Parun and William Warren organized a group exhibition of Bywater artists, at the Bywater Resource Center on 3224 St. Claude Avenue, where Lee Grue first read "St. Claude Avenue Sweet" with poet Dan Harris.

(continued from page 1)

The Waiting Room Gallery

In 1997, William Warren and Pati D'Amico, arrived in Bywater, having been drawn to New Orleans by the "spirits of the dark and light sides." They jumped right in making culture happen.

"Art comes out of this neighborhood, out of the swamp not from the top but from the grassroots level - so we should not be so awed by institutional elements."

"There is a vibrant art scene here where artists can have an positive influence and a culturally unifying effect. The function of art", he reminds us, "is to nurture creativity and fill the emptiness" in the lives of people who have abandoned their own self-expression in pursuit of material wealth and in doing so lost a sense of who they are. And by focusing on "making culture" rather than "making money," Pati and Bill enjoyed preserving those cultural elements that nurture creativity. For 10 years they were the leading exponents of an art style they called "New Orleans expressionism."

"Money is nice," Bill says, " but it is not why we work."

"What's most important," Pati reflects, "is living your life the way you want to live it, with a sense of having enough, of being comfortable and having creative freedom." And like so many who make creativity their lifestyle, Pati enjoys a self-imposed isolation and worries that "being discovered" might supplant the joys of creativity with making what sells.

"What I liked about New Orleans was its inclusiveness and now it is on the verge of becoming more competitive. I don't want to see New Orleans with a kind of

unhealthy competition that pits artist against artist. The real question is what is its popularity going to do to the coherent New Orleans artists' community? So if artists are going to bring in tourist dollars, then artists should get monetary bonuses, e.g. tax credits, affordable rents."

In spring of 2008, Bill Warren and Pati D'Amico moved to Watervalley, MS. For over 10 years, they fanned the flames for an entire community, exhibiting artists new to the city who had nowhere else to show. In doing so, Pati and Bill were instrumental in developing Bywater as New Orleans' premiere arts neighborhood. Many of the artists who first exhibited at The Waiting Room are now emerging onto the New Orleans art scene in other venues.

FACTOID: New Orleans Art Movement

On July 28, 2006, not wanting to leave the naming of a local art movement to chance for art historians to name inappropriately, innovative local artists Phyllis Parun, William and Pati D'Amico coined the emerging contemporary art movement, **KATACLYSM™**, which was catapulted onto the global stage from New Orleans, LA., as a result of the water's devastation of this city and the Gulf Coast.

(Documented in [Art Lit](#), Fall, 2006)

Prospecting in New Orleans

New Orleans will accept any excuse for a party, and art tourism is as good as any. Prospect.1 is a boast for some and a "Throw me something, Mistah!" experience for others.

Artists active in community building 30 years ago remember how we began in the mid-1970's as a younger, passionate generation of idealistic, visionary artists who built a cooperative artists community by organizing ourselves, learning to run art businesses and self-financed exhibits with a pittance and borrowed resources in this city that sported only three galleries.

As Founder-President of the Louisiana Chapter of Artists' Equity Association, I voiced our vision at Gallier Hall that "by the year 2000 New Orleans would be the center of the art world." This was before the CAC, before our chapter introduced the Percentage for Art to the city council, before the Arts Council and the Downtown Development District existed. Our vision was ahead of its time. It has been our dream and our passion over the years as an arts community working together to promote our arts community as economically viable. It is now Post-K, and local artists created a new art out of our disaster experience, noticed by others around the globe who want a piece of the inspiring New Orleans spirit.

When New Orleans staged the international arts biennial, it launched the new drama of Arts Tourism! Yes, tourism brings money into New Orleans for our neighbors and relatives working in hotels, restaurants and shops, but will it help independent artists' businesses, which are always on the edge? When most of the attention (and funding) went to non-local artists, many locals who have worked so hard for so long to build up this New Orleans arts community felt like extras on the set and downright left out of the central drama. To be included, local artists organized into collectives, self-financed and built their own exhibits to bring attention to a vibrant, grassroots New Orleans community of artists. And they made it onto the official map as "unsanctioned venues" and got some press.

Have we finally arrived? We're just getting warmed up.

New Orleans is a great city, and it seems like everyone wants what New Orleanians have. To quote Charmaine Neville, "it's about the people." So when others come to catch the New Orleans spirit of *joie d'vivre*, they are welcome to join our party because we know well the road less traveled! Relax, we're already home!

To be continued...

ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IS FREEDOM OF SPEECH

by Phyllis Parun

In 1976, as Visual Arts Coordinator for the Artists Information Bureau (N.O. Public Library Main Branch), several performing artists sought my advice after being arrested multiple times for performing in Jackson Square. I referred them to ACLU attorney Bill Rittenberg, who defended them in U.S. District Court, Eastern Division, Louisiana, under the First Amendment (Freedom of Speech) and achieved a favorable court opinion by suggesting to the judge that to rule against the performers would set a negative precedent for Jazz Funerals. When in 2007 the New Orleans police halted a jazz funeral in Treme, I called funeral director Jim Charbonnet, telling him the Rittenberg story. Current ACLU attorneys then used the 1976 case in defense of Jazz Funerals. And that's the story of how New Orleans continues as a vanguard city, protecting artistic expression as a First Amendment right.