

Lakeviews

A Bus Tour As a Vehicle for Regrowth in New Orleans

William Bowling and Rachel Carrico

Since the 2005 Katrina disaster in New Orleans, not many people frequent West End. A bustling row of seafood restaurants once lined the seawall on Lake Pontchartrain's south shore; now all that remains are a few scarred foundations and a clear view of the water. Although West End and its encompassing Lakeview neighborhood are not the only parts of New Orleans still struggling to jumpstart reconstruction, Lakeview's proximity to Lake Pontchartrain rendered it particularly devastated when the levees collapsed.

However, on 1–3 June 2007, West End showed peculiar signs of life. Two idling school buses and dozens of cars filled the weed-choked lot. A few people ordered plastic cups of wine and bottled beer from a makeshift bar. The rubble of a former dining room framed a simple scene: a single table flanked by two chairs, draped with a white tablecloth and topped with two place settings. Since it was wiped out by the aftermath of Katrina, this is all that's left of Bruning's Seafood Restaurant, family owned and operated since 1859. For a weekend its crumbling foundation was the starting point for *Lakeviews*, *A Sunset Bus Tour: Performance, Art, Music, and Food*. The tour also concluded here at sunset. For the two hours in between, the audience took part in a set of site-specific performances and installations at four other neighborhood locations, and afterward shared a meal with the artists at the former restaurant.

Lakeviews was produced in affiliation with the community-based arts network *HOME, New Orleans?*—a collective of multidisciplinary artists, students, local residents, universities, colleges, and neighborhood and cultural institutions. Unlike the numerous “disaster tours” that highlight post-Katrina devastation, *Lakeviews* was “intended as a rejuvenation ritual: to infuse the energy of art and audience into this decimated area” (*HOME, New Orleans?* 2007). Instead of merely mourning the ruin of Lakeview, the project worked to enliven the neighborhood by invoking its pre-Katrina life. While *HOME, New Orleans?* consists of diverse projects in three other neighborhoods—Central City, the Seventh Ward, and the Ninth Ward¹—the *Lakeview* team's bus tour/performance, with its focus on pre-Katrina life, most closely resembles the original *Home, New Orleans?* idea as devised by Richard Schechner, in dialogue with *The VESTIGES Project: Think Tank*: to remember and revitalize devastated neighborhoods by performing “the vast range of human experience” that was lived in these spaces (Schechner 2006).²

The very concept of a bus tour radically alters the normally sendentary artgoing experience by requiring viewers to be on the move. Spectators become passengers, visitors, pedestrians (daresay tourists?), and more. Not only are people bused between several sites; once in those spaces, they are invited to move

1. These projects include a visual arts project with elementary school students in the Ninth Ward, a mixed-media quilt installation in Central City, youth theatre workshops in the Seventh Ward, and a Bridging Group focused on photographic and video documentation of all projects. See <http://ny2no.net/homeneworleans> for more information.
2. Founded in 1984, The VESTIGES Project is a collective of New Orleans artists and writers. “THINK TANK is an UMBRELLA project—a conceptual BUCKET within which to brainSTORM ways to explore New Orleans’ future and to present multidisciplinary actions and installations in dialogue with the viewing audiences” (www.thevestigeproject.org 2006).

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through, in, and around them, to smell, touch, and taste them.

At 6:00 PM sharp, two packed school buses lurch out of the West End parking lot and lumber onto Robert E. Lee Boulevard. Passengers leaf through the program while enjoying wine or beer. Soon, however, the buzz of audience chatter dulls with four slow, swinging quarter notes and Fats Domino singing “Walking to New Orleans.” Eventually the song fades into the recorded voices of several Lakeview residents telling stories about life in the neighborhood. This mix of casual storytelling and relevant musical selections continues as the buses turn onto Canal Boulevard and roll past a string of homes and businesses in varying states of decay and/or reconstruction. Past, present, and future conflate as architectural rot and barely emerging futures scroll past the windows. Recorded recollections stream out of the speakers as the

passengers’ own memories mingle with it all—for many who attend *Lakeviews* are neighborhood residents. According to visual artist Jan Gilbert, one of *Lakeviews*’ key collaborators, “It found its way deeper into the community” (MacCash 2007).³

Meanwhile, a mysterious copilot crouches near the bus driver. Conspicuously silent and draped in black, local performance artist Kathy Randels’s recurring presence weaves a narrative thread between most tour stops. Randels plays the Black Lady, a character that, according to the program notes, she discovered while performing in Serbia shortly before the 1999 NATO bombings. Because Randels is a white performer, the character’s name causes a few eyebrows to raise. But it is black humor and a dark mood, not race consciousness, that Randels brings to *Lakeviews*.

After 15 minutes, the buses park at their first stop, Holt Cemetery. Here the Black Lady joins

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3. Passenger Sharon Jacques commented that riding on the school bus resonated with “so many shared experiences and histories in New Orleans, from personal to political,” which kept her “going in and out of time—the past became the present, the present the past” (Jacques 2007).

Figure 1. Maritza Mercado-Narcisse (left) as *The Suited Man* and Kathy Randels as *The Black Lady* at Holt Cemetery (2007). In *Lakeviews*, A Sunset Bus Tour: Performance, Art, Music, and Food, New Orleans, LA, 1–3 June 2007. (Photo by Judy Cooper)



the Suited Man, played by dancer/performer Maritza Mercado-Narcisse, a dark-skinned woman in a gray suit, with a chalky white cross drawn from her forehead to chin and across her eyes. Choosing not to overtly problematize the overwhelmingly white population of Lakeview—and its relationship to blacker and poorer neighborhoods also ravaged by Katrina—*Lakeviews* instead reveals Holt Cemetery, a black space in a white suburb unknown to many of its residents.

The Suited Man stands in the cemetery's gravel path and awaits the mostly white audience, escorted into the macabre performance site by the Black Lady. In a short monologue, the Suited Man speaks to his visitors about the trials of fatherhood in three earthly manifestations—a “toothless and strung out” Vietnam vet, an “excellent father [...] given the gift of youth,” and finally, in the present, a witness to his descendents' inevitable mortality (Mercado-Narcisse 2007).

While most crowd around the Suited Man, attempting to hear his unamplified delivery over the din of the traffic, others wander the gravesites. Founded in 1879 and long known as Potter's Field, Holt Cemetery, the designated burial site for unclaimed, mostly black bodies from Charity Hospital since the mid-1900s, is a jumbled array of handcrafted headstones. Plots are still available from the city for the cost of burial, and many who cannot afford otherwise lay their dead to rest here.⁴ Mercado-Narcisse, the only African American artist in the collective, warmly and gently welcomes her audience to the other side, the other side of the tracks, literally, and the other side of Lakeview. Her performance at Holt, *What Would My Father Have Said?*, echoes *Lakeviews*' play between themes of generations and renewal while acknowledging the ever-present question of race made manifest by kicking off the tour at Holt. Joseph Roach identifies a binary of timelessness and timeliness as a hallmark of New Orleanian culture. Of Mardi Gras floats he notes, “[t]hen as now the imagery oscillates between timelessness, the supposedly innocent realm of fantasy and fairy story, and timeliness,

direct interventions in local and national politics, including the denigration of African Americans and their claims for equal protection under the law” (1996:265). Like the floats, the *Lakeviews* performance at Holt addresses timely sociopolitical concerns with a timeless trope of ghostly omniscience, yet it also points out how timeless—that is, perpetual—the political relevance of “timely” race concerns really is.

Back on the buses, the passengers are swiftly transported to Lakeview Baptist Church. Kathy Randels, who coordinated the performance and installations here, knows this space well. Her father, Reverend Dick Randels, was the pastor from 1954 to 1989, and returned after Katrina. Once inside, the audience wanders about the half-rehabilitated, modernist structure. Very few chairs are provided. The Black Lady plays loud dissonant chords on the piano. Tea lights dot the gutted front wall on a vast grid of two-by-fours spanning the width and height of the



Figure 2. Tea lights dot the gutted wall of the sanctuary and the histories of church members are written on the concrete floor at Lakeview Baptist Church, a stop on the *Lakeviews* bus tour (2007). (Photo by Jan Gilbert)

4. The gravesites at Holt are primarily underground, whereas most New Orleans cemeteries are above ground due to the high water table. In periods of elevated groundwater, bodies are prone to “floating up.”

sanctuary. Randels had collected oral histories from church members, which she then wrote on the concrete subfloor in permanent marker prior to the performance. An installation called *Heroes: Ages 1–91* hangs on fresh drywall and from the new dropped ceiling—portraits of church and local AARP members photographed and sketched by student artists from the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts and Metairie Park Country Day School.⁵

As spectators explore the space, *Coming Forward* begins in the sanctuary's center. This performance of personal narratives, conceived and directed by Randels, features eight congregants. Each walks toward the pulpit, holding a personal possession and telling the audience about a formative experience as a Lakeview Baptist. One woman carries a tray of coffee and doughnuts and speaks of hosting services in her home for months after Katrina. Another explains how she became Reverend Randels's secretary and carries the plaque commemorating her 22 years of service. Meanwhile, the Suited Man reappears, crouching below, leaning against, or encircling the speakers at the pulpit.

The pieces at Lakeview Baptist embody the fundamental tenets of community-based art: to sponsor a creative process that is educative and inclusive; to include oral history as the primary material of the creation; and to take practical steps toward community growth or regrowth.

The stop at Lakeview Baptist enjoys a positive reception, which is hugely aided by the presence of the Black Lady and the Suited Man, who gracefully usher the event away from the evangelism of Reverend Randels's brief sermon. As the two figures circle each speaker at the pulpit, and later join hands in the prayer circle, they endorse the ritual-like qualities of the event even as they lead the audience away from religiosity, assuring all that they are not expected to become congregants or converts. The Suited Man affirms this when he invites saints and sinners alike to look at “all they’ve left behind”: the gallery of portraits, the floor

full of stories, the personal objects placed in the gutted wall.

By the time the passengers board again, the sun has nearly set. As the buses roll down Canal Boulevard, Rosemary Clooney's “Come on-a My House” is the anthem of the next two residential destinations, only a block apart. One bus stops at the childhood home of Jan Gilbert, the other at the pastorium of Lakeview Baptist Church where Randels spent her formative years. Here, the Black Lady is waiting.

Randels begins her performance, *Spaces in Between*, in the backyard, telling her visitors about a little girl who would run into the dark yard when she sensed a summer storm coming, who would tear off her shirt and dance in the rain though she was perhaps a “little too old to be doing such things” (Randels 2007). Randels then leads the audience through a busted



Figure 3. Kathy Randels as the Black Lady enters the former pastorium in *Spaces In Between*, from *Lakeviews* (2007). (Photo by Judy Cooper)

5. The student art installation was coordinated by Jan Villarrubia. Participating student artists included those from Michel Varisco's New Orleans Center for Creative Arts/Riverfront and Pam Eveline's students at Metairie Park Country Day School.

sliding door into what was once the living room. The house is a gutted skeleton of wall studs and rot, bits of falling insulation, and rusted chandeliers, smelling faintly of mold. Some refuse to enter because the mold smell warns them of a health risk; some because the odor reminds them too painfully of their own loss. The wrecked rooms have been dressed to display a trace of what life was like here without erasing what it has become: a pristine white roll of toilet paper in a filthy bathroom, a bowl of fruit on the decaying remnant of a counter top, a brightly polished rectangle of linoleum once occupied by a couch.

The Black Lady leads from rotten room to rotten room, explaining that the Green Room is so named because of boogers wiped on the wall, or how the girl, when older, hid cigarettes behind the bed in the Blue Room and snuck out its window at night. With a story of a rare New Orleans snowstorm, the Black Lady runs dancing and singing from the house and vanishes. Through a big picture window the Suited Man is seen walking slowly down the sidewalk, paying no attention at all to the 50 out-of-place audience members inside the destroyed pastorium. The impulse to follow the Black Lady is immediate, yet when the visitors round the corner, she is gone. Instead, the group from the other bus ambles toward them, directing them down the block toward another house and another story.

Here Gilbert has installed *Biography of a House* along the outside of her childhood home. Gilbert began her installation with hundreds of old photographs, then added many heavy coats of polymer, giving the images a third dimension that she could mold. The 300 feet of photographic panels, attached to the brick at the lowest point of the flood line, wrap the entire outside of the house. Thus, *Biography of a House* requires a viewer's negotiation of space to experience its full effect. Each panel, individually between 8 and 12 feet long and about 12 inches high, tightly hugs the brick and is seamed to the following panel, creating the impression that the structure has been adorned with a single, shining ribbon, a sculptural history of the Gilberts's 50-year relationship with their home. The photos are from the Gilbert family archive: baby pictures, family portraits, birthdays, holidays, and such. Connected one after the other, the images form a continuous narrative. From the open windows behind the panels the viewers hear a young man being awakened by his father, little girls playing in the kitchen, and television and telephone chatter. Gilbert's nephew, composer William Gilbert, pulled this audio from home recordings made by his late grandfather. The sounds bring the home to life, animating the images of the four Gilbert generations who once inhabited it. More so than earlier stops, Randels's and Gilbert's homes require visitors to move in, around, through, and between, smelling the mold and rot and feeling the sandy ground underfoot.

The tour ends with a return to Bruning's restaurant, where the site has been transformed in the meantime. The previously lone dining table is now surrounded by many others, all lined with chairs and topped with white tablecloths. The final performance is already in progress: at the original table sits a middle-aged couple, gnawing on crawfish. As a backdrop to the scene, the



Figure 4. Photo panels attached to the brick at the lowest point of the flood line wrap the outside of the artist's childhood home. *Biography of a House* from Lakeviews (2007). (Photo by George Hero IV)

orange Louisiana sun slowly sinks into Lake Pontchartrain. When the passengers disembark for the last time, perhaps physically and emotionally weary, they are encircled by seven musicians playing a composition by Chris Trapani, the cousin of the final piece's writer and director, Andrew Larimer. His short play, *Generations*, underlines *Lakeviews*' overall theme of rejuvenation. Larimer, the youngest member of the *HOME, New Orleans?* collective, is one of a wave of young people either moving back to the city or arriving as pioneers.

Generations samples three slices of life, all set during an evening at Bruning's. Outside the dining room, a young couple quarrels about their future while an older couple eats and bickers with the absent figures of their daughter and grandchildren. Larimer and actor James Bartelle appear over the seawall costumed as a crawfish and a crab. The two chart their new destiny in the great Crescent City, driven onshore by the glorious descriptions they've read in soggy, discarded tour books. Meanwhile, the ghostly silhouettes of the Black Lady

and the Suited Man gaze from their lakeside perch. At the play's conclusion, Larimer thanks everyone for coming and Randels invites all to the *Finale Feast*. Seated in the twilight, gazing across the now placid lake, everyone—visitors, residents, and performers—share a meal of gumbo.

Sitting at the feast with friends, family, and colleagues, Ron Bechet, Xavier art professor and coordinator of the Ninth Ward *HOME, New Orleans?* project, reflects on the organization's impact and its ability to take sustainable steps toward rebuilding the city. He says that *Lakeviews* and other artistic endeavors contribute to New Orleans' regrowth no less substantially than do structural efforts. Art is fundamental to healing a wounded community: "What art forms do is that they communicate." Of course, some of the social ills that have long plagued New Orleans—pre- and post-Katrina—may never be healed, "but if we're not talking about them, we can't make improvement" (Bechet 2007).

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Figure 5. James Bartalle (left) and Andrew Larimer as Crawfish and Crab in *Generations* from *Lakeviews* (2007). (Photo by Jan Gilbert)

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