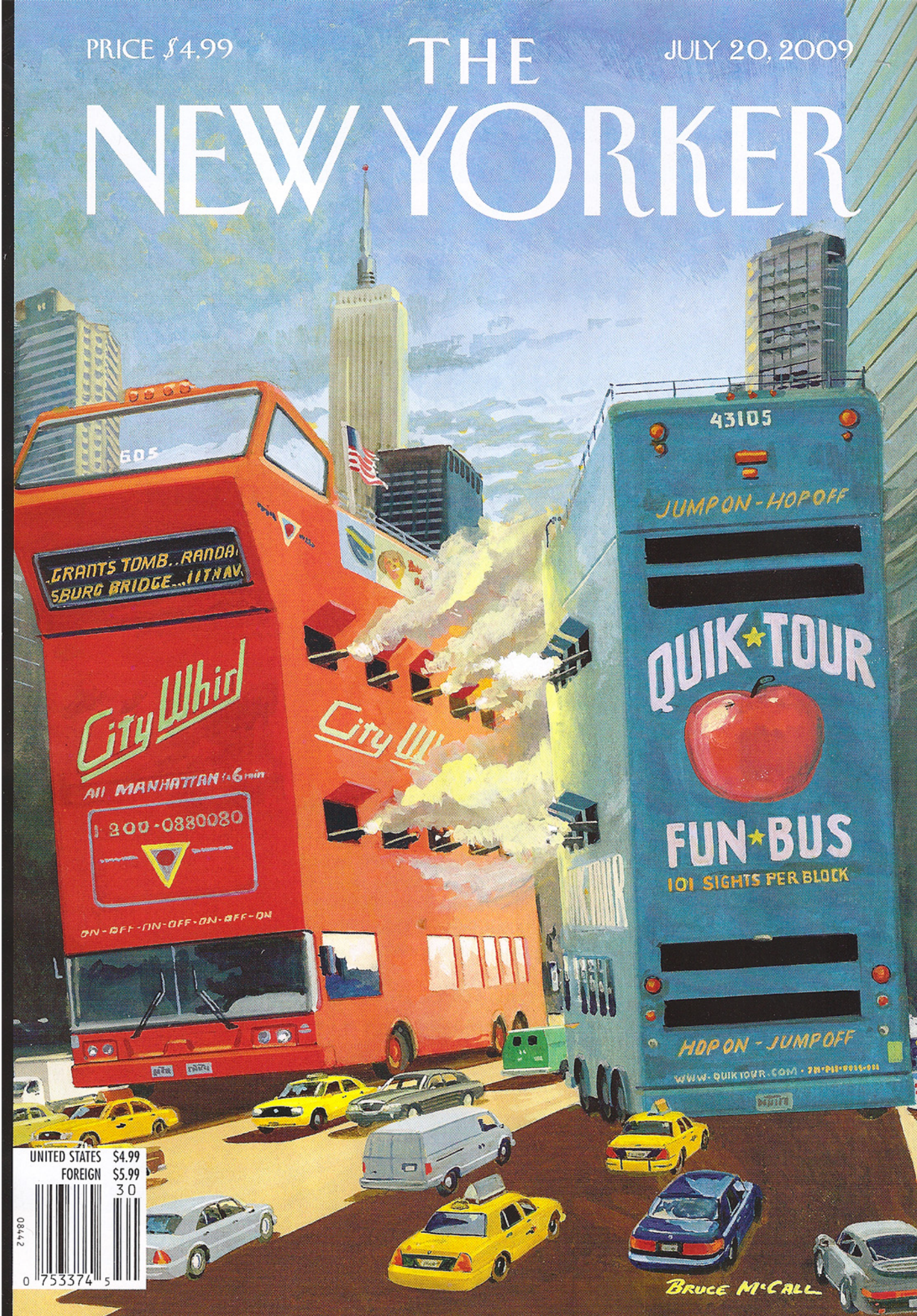


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# THE NEW YORKER



## ON THE STREET DIAL-A-TREE



Right now on the Grand Concourse, in the Bronx, there's this thing called the Tree Museum. This is a public work of conceptual art consisting of a hundred individual trees next to or near the Grand Concourse along its five-mile route through the heart of the Bronx. Beside each tree on the sidewalk is a small light-green marker with a telephone number. The Tree Museum-goer calls the number on a cell phone, punches in that particular tree's extension, and hears a recording about the tree, or the neighborhood, or the Concourse, or the Bronx, or some larger concept like global warming. A visual artist named Katie Holten came up with the idea of the Tree Museum and put it together as part of the Concourse's centennial. Going from marked tree to marked tree and calling their numbers is a strangely addictive experience, possibly related to primal hunting and gathering.

Tree No. 1 is a London plane by an off-ramp of the Major Deegan Expressway at East 138th Street, where the Grand Concourse begins. Dial the number on the marker, then "1" and the pound sign, and a poet named E. J. McAdams recites a haiku he has written about a grove of pines near the London plane tree. Tree No. 2 is a pin oak beside a nearby entrance to the 4 and 5 trains. The pin oak's recording does not mention the polite and well-spoken drug dealer standing under the tree; like the Tree Museum-goer, he is on the phone. Tree No. 3 is an ancient, lofty ailanthus growing out of the base of an apartment building. The Chinese used the bark and the seeds of the ailanthus to treat baldness and mental illness, the recording says. A man in the house next to the ailanthus comes out to say how wonderful the tree's shade is on hot summer days, when he and his friends

sit in folding chairs on the sidewalk.

Tree No. 17, near 150th Street, is the stump of an elm that was at least seventy-five when it was cut down, last year. Its recording is of Jon Pywell, a forester with the Department of Parks and Recreation, who says that the tree's outer rings show damage, perhaps from careless snow removal or sidewalk construction twenty-five years ago. (The Bronx itself, one recalls, was not doing too well twenty-five years ago.) Tree No. 21 is a Kwanzan cherry in, aptly, Joyce Kilmer Park. Dialing the number and the extension produced a recording: "I'm sorry. That command is not valid." Nearby on a bench a woman is going through a girl's long dark hair, strand by strand, as the girl lies with her head in the woman's lap.

Tree No. 23 is a Callery pear (perhaps misidentified; it looks more like a honey locust) at 162nd Street, across the Concourse from a large, two-towered brick building. The recording says that it used to be the Concourse Plaza Hotel, where Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig and Whitey Ford lived sometimes. Now it's a residence for senior citizens. Just down the hill to the west, you can see the tops of both Yankee Stadiums. Tree No. 42, at 170th Street, is a little-leaf linden that, according to the local beekeeper on the recording, attracts many bees at this time of year. The beekeeper extolls the clarity and the flavor of linden-blossom honey. Tree No. 55, a honey locust, is across from a flatiron building, formerly called the Medical Arts Building, that was here before the construction of the Grand Concourse, says the voice of the official Bronx historian, Lloyd Ultan. As the museumgoer crosses 178th Street, rain begins to pour. Protected under the hoardings on the front of an apartment building, three young men are listening to rap music and drinking beer and playing dominoes. They are sitting in old-fashioned wooden office chairs, the kind that swivel and tilt back on springs.

Caterpillars of the Question Mark butterfly like to feed on the leaves of the hackberry, Tree No. 67, that tree's recording says. A man eating a West Indian meat pie comes up to the museumgoer at 188th Street and asks, "Hey, papi, can you help me out? I just got out of jail." At a London plane—Tree No. 92—an M.I.T.-trained architect talks about making edible houses from living trees. At

No. 95, a Norway maple, the recording is of a geologist who draws the museumgoer's attention to an outcropping of 1.1-billion-year-old gneiss protruding between two residential buildings nearby. Just up the Concourse, partyers are dancing on a patio sheltered by a blue tarp, from whose edge merengue music and clouds of barbecue smoke spill out. And at Tree No. 100, a cottonwood beside Mosholu Parkway, at the Concourse's northern end, the recording tells how neighborhood activists saved this tree from destruction and created the little park around it. The cottonwood is a majestic four-trunk specimen, something you might find in Montana on the banks of the Missouri River. In the breeze its leaves shiver silvery-green against the Bronx sky.

—Ian Frazier

## FISH TALES CLUPEOPHILIA



Anyone on the sixteenth floor of the Roger Smith Hotel, in midtown, at five-forty-five on a recent June afternoon would have seen a puzzling assemblage of people in the corridor: a construction worker from Brooklyn, a mathematics professor from Princeton, a couple from Aruba, a father with an infant strapped to his chest, and an artist from the Lower East Side. It wasn't immediately apparent what had brought this seemingly random slice of humanity together. Had one come up in the service elevator, though, an unmistakable aroma would have given a vital clue. By five-fifty-nine, almost sixty people had gathered in the hallway.

At six, the doors to an event room opened and the crowd rushed in. There, in the middle of the room, lighted, draped, surmounted by a huge glittering block of ice, was an altar: an altar covered with hundreds of fresh herring, the first of the season, just flown in from Holland. This was an altar consecrated to Clupeus, the god of herring, whose annual festival is celebrated in late spring by herring-lovers the world over.

Entire books have been published about cod, about eel, about tuna, but relatively little has been written about herring.

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