

# HIGH PERFORMANCE

## The Long Road Home

### Jay Critchley and Jerry Beck Making Art at the Heart of a Community

by Ann Wilson Lloyd



Shaasha Shoats (foreground) and Beaky Gonzalez making their edible art-piece as part of Jerry Beck's *Pin to the Sky Company*, 1982, at Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, MA. (See story on page 28)

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The cavernous Cyclorama building, a 19th Century architectural landmark in Boston's culturally diverse South End neighborhood, can swallow up all but the most ambitious events. Recently, though, it pulsed with a magical, one-night-only *Kid's Carnival*, the space alive with droves of children and their brilliantly-colored, found object artworks. Produced by Jerry Beck and his core group of inner-city students, underwritten by Very Special Arts, Massachusetts, and hosted by the Boston Center for the Arts, which administers the Cyclorama, the event was the culmination of months of workshops conducted by Beck as visiting artist to several inner-city schools and city parks. In the course of those workshops, more than a thousand students made the artworks that transformed the Cyclorama into a psychedelic carnival, festooned with hanging decorations, imaginative sculpture and functioning games like ring toss and bowling. The art was primarily constructed with miles of neon-colored plastic tape wrapped around all sorts of donated and found material (Beck calls it "mummy art") that contained various kid-generated messages about such subjects as drugs, child abuse and self-esteem. Beck, decked out in carny barker garb, was surrounded all evening by knots of children.

*Kids' Carnival* contained the essence of Beck's urban artmaking: his generous, high-energy spirit, his special gift for finding and recycling cast-off materials; his life-long fascination with the richness and diversity of popular American culture, and the conviction that art is transformational and should be made directly from the community and injected back into it.

That conviction also frames his ongoing conceptual construct, the Revolving

Museum, which he describes as an artist-run organization formed to transform unused or abandoned public spaces with visual and performance art. Its official mission is a commitment to "experimental and collaborative installations and events that encourage public education and participation." Literally, Beck says, the Revolving Museum is the world.

These ideas began with Beck's desire to create a "nomadic institution that could show up anywhere." Its aim was to find places in the city "normally not seen and make them visible by articulating them, to take the forgotten landscape and bring it to life." Beck feels that the heart of his work is somehow linked with this act of "finding things, hunting for things, letting things hunt you down." He continues, "...there's a psychic connection that ties into the mysteries, which is where the pool of artmaking comes from."

Besides materials and sites, this search includes collaborators and audiences. Beck, who served a brief stint as a guard in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, felt there were other, unserved audiences for art that traditional museums were not reaching. Museums, he says, tend to be border sites, a-sensual places about death, with no breath of life. "I never saw anyone cry or laugh when I was a guard, and that to me means that we are missing something."

Beck's Revolving Museum was a novel idea in the early '80s, but particularly so in tradition-bound Boston. Arriving here from his native Florida in 1983, Beck almost immediately adopted a counter-establishment strategy for making, exhibiting and performing his art. He staked artistic claim on an abandoned lot near the Boston waterfront, which he christened Little Bluff Desert. It was a wild and desolate place, with bulldozed "miniature canyons," seagulls and a resident homeless man. This "desert" became the site of his early constructions of found materials, inspired nocturnal ramblings and investigations into the tenaciousness of urban nature and the magical sickness of society's trash. In this scrubby bit of junk-filled landscape, he tapped into "power of the land, the power of the objects, the history of the object."

"Once I had this thought in the middle of the night that I had to go out there. I did, and sure enough there was this incredible pile of stuff that someone had dumped...antique frames and beautiful pieces of wood, [the makings for] a dozen works! So I went through the whole pile and at the very bottom—I still get chills thinking about this—was a calendar map of all the

Native American tribes of America."

Beck was also a graduate student at Boston's School of the Museum of Fine Arts at this time, and for one of his review board shows he installed his urban desert works in an abandoned downtown building. It included "a whole table of found objects from the desert that you could play with and feel and taste." But complaints arose that the show was inconveniently located away from the school, indicating, Beck feels, a lack of support for his alternative ideas. He dropped out of the program and didn't finish until last year.

In the seven-year interim, his Revolving Museum began attracting Boston media



Old Glory Condom ad by Jay Critchley

attention with its innovative, collaborative projects, initially held out at Little Bluff Desert. The *Little Train That Could...Show*, in 1984, was an installation, performance and collaboration with 20 other Boston artists held in twelve abandoned railroad cars at the edge of the site. "In a great community spirit," Beck says, "we cleaned them and pitched in money for posters and generators. We basically lived there for two weeks."

This show was directly inspired by Beck's pivotal meeting with the Nevada monument-building visionary Rolling Thunder. Beck had struck up a correspondence with the 80-year-old Rolling Thunder after reading a news account about him, and eventually made a pilgrimage to see him and his "cultur-

al center in the middle of nowhere." Beck describes Rolling Thunder as brilliant, "the most inspiring person I ever met. With no art, architectural or engineering experience he had built the most mind-boggling environment with towers 80-feet high. When I asked him how he did it he just said, 'Balance.'"

Rolling Thunder's efforts were being sabotaged by locals, though, and the man himself was in a state of distress. When Beck returned to Boston, he wrote a NEA grant on Rolling Thunder's behalf, which was awarded. Meanwhile, back at his own urban desert site, Beck received a bolt of inspiration he attributes to Rolling Thunder. Suddenly, he says, the potential of those abandoned train cars—which had been there all along—just seemed to dawn.

This genuine sense of wonder, imagination and community involvement penetrates Beck's projects. The Revolving Museum's *Flying Wing Series*, which included *A Night on George's Island*, an installation/performance/walk-through at the Boston Harbor island, Civil-War era Fort Warren and a winged moving van that traveled around the city broadcasting music and projecting films onto buildings, further staked out the community as both source and arena.

Now, in this age of museum outreach and education, Beck is recognized as a pioneer of sorts and is increasingly in demand. Last Spring's *Pie in the Sky*, in collaboration with Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), was a NEA-funded, six-month-long series of workshops, in which Beck, using the all-American metaphor of apple pie, directed inner-city youth in explorations of the ingredients of their contemporary ethnic identity. At culmination, the students held an exhibition, pie supper and cookbook publishing party at the ICA.

It is Beck's subtle sense of an urban parallel reality—a fugitive culture existing in the abandoned lots and buildings, marginalized neighborhoods and wealth of free materials in the urban environment—that he is most adept at realizing and with which, ultimately, he will have the biggest impact on community. ■

*Note: All quotes from Jay Critchley are from conversations with the author; quotes from Jerry Beck are from conversations with the author and "Jerry Beck," an interview conducted by Amy Fusselman in the Fall 1991 issue of Museum School News, Boston.*

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