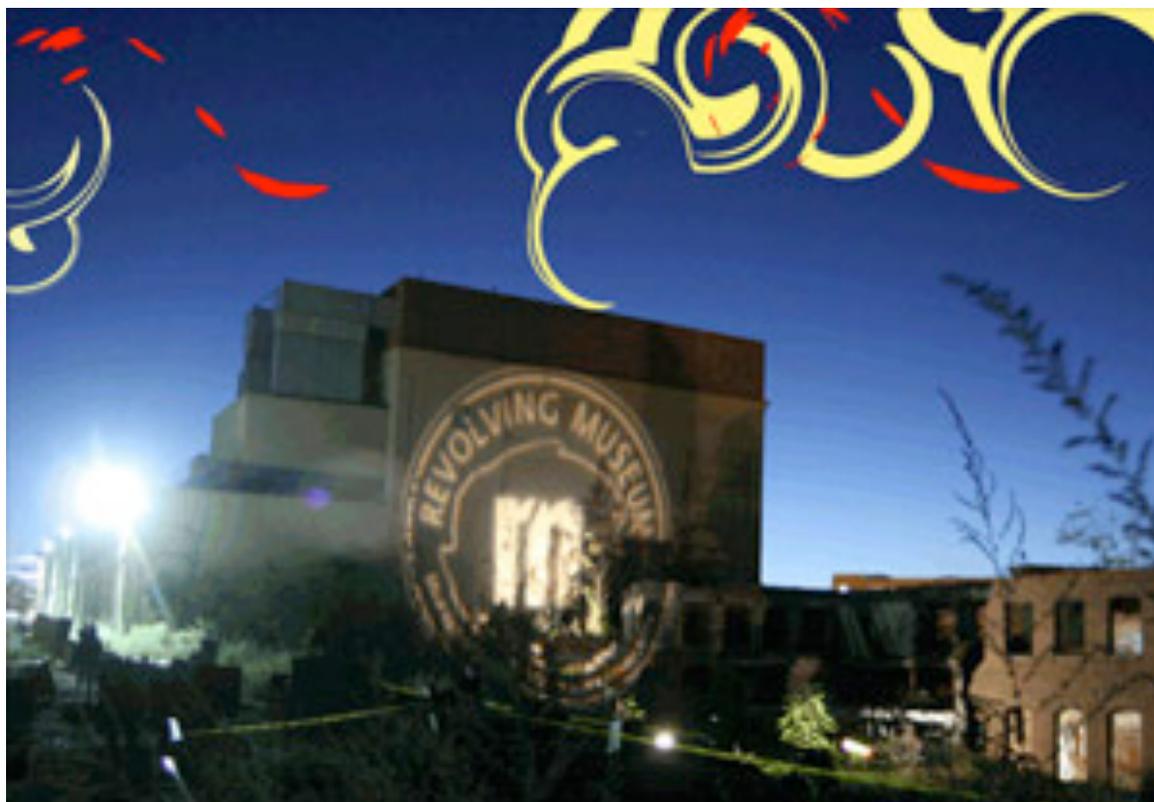




INITIATIVES

## A Revolving Door for Art and the Community

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Photographs: The Revolving Museum



Since 2002 the city of Lowell, Massachusetts, the birthplace of the nomad writer Jack Kerouac, has been the home of the Revolving Museum, a museum dedicated to community arts and steered by the steady leadership of the artist, teacher and cultural mediator Jerry Beck. In this context one must understand the adjective “revolving” as a call for transformation and the creative occupation of

abandoned places through the participation of the public and social collaborators who have been won over by the participative community art creation process.

In the beginning, in 1984, Jerry Beck's aim was to challenge the ordinary perception of the museum. Beck, who has little interest in an art system based on a culture of objects and the cult of the individual artist, wants to stimulate encounters, to turn art into a collective experience, and to occupy new places. The museum's nomadic character can be attributed to the fact that it has no permanent building.

Today the Revolving Museum, which it is at once a cultural and popular education centre, a living art museum and creation laboratory, produces a variety of public art projects. It is mainly geared towards a less privileged clientele, comprised of youth who have limited access to culture and the arts and for whom it desires to provide an empowering cultural experience.

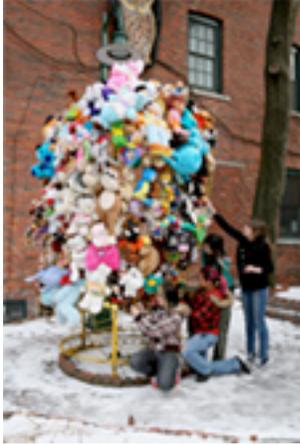


### **An evolving engagement through community arts programs**

The museum's educational and artistic program consists of traditional learning workshops, but above all of a variety of public art programs. Its youth program seeks both to develop competencies and to create a place for reflection and expression. Since 2004, in close collaboration with the community and neighborhood schools, the museum notably offers the Teen Arts Group (TAG) and Visionary School programs. Groups are trained based on the school calendar. The youth identify the theme of a public art project or an event which they will then have to create. Professional artists, educators and various community leaders guide them through each step from idea development to organization and to the holding and promotion of the event, thus enabling the youth to develop their respective talents within a team and to witness the impact of their initiative as a positive engine of social engagement.

For 2009-2010 the Museum is preparing Artbotics, a more specialized program to introduce youth to new media arts. Over the span of one year, fifteen college-level youth will visit the exhibitions, university laboratories, participate in conferences, engage in workshops and discussions, and organize a community-based new media art project. In order to promote accessibility the participants will receive financial compensation at the end of the program. Youth of this age often have to work after school and this contribution will compensate their loss of income.

It must be kept in mind here that the Museum's is primarily interested in under-served communities who have little or no access to the arts, and who are often economically disadvantaged and to a large part made up of immigrants. Lowell's population represents a strong proportion of new immigrants, many of which come from South-East Asia. Jerry Beck, the Museum director, teaches in Lowell High School and his students hail from Cambodia, India, Africa, Brazil, Portugal, Greece, Ireland etc. Since the founding of the museum Jerry Beck has always sought to provoke encounters, foster dialogue between artists and the public, promote mutual understanding, and mobilize people to contribute to a project.



### **A Little Train that Went Far**

The Revolving Museum's first project *The Little Train That Could... Show*, was an installation in 12 abandoned railroad cars. The Museum subsequently occupied a legendary American civil war site on an island in Boston harbor; an old rum factory; a building at a landfill site in Queens, NY; a theatre installation in the back of a truck that took the public on a ride to see performances in various locations; neglected spaces surrounding Boston City Hall.

Through these public art activities the Revolving Museum began to receive recognition and growing support from community organizations. In the following years, it organized a series of events involving an increasing number of youth groups from disadvantaged communities, thus exposing them to new ideas about creative problem-solving. In 1992 it put together the Wonders of the World (WOW) event, a biennial summer festival based on the theme of diversity, and which, among other things, included a community carnival. Over the years, several thousand youths have worked with artists to create interactive installations that combine the playful with the educational.



In 1996 the Revolving Museum, which had been nomadic up to that point, received the donation of a 30,000 square feet of museum space from the Boston Wharf Company, a company which manages the Boston Harbour. This enabled the Museum to reinforce its administrative structure and to develop over 50 affordable artist studios, two art galleries, a performance space, a darkroom, an office and a youth workshop area, thus becoming an important creation and dissemination laboratory. Barely six years later, in January 2002, the Boston Wharf Company evicted the Revolving Museum to make the space available for dot-com companies. Despite their efforts to relocate in the district, many artists and

socio-cultural organizations affected by this redevelopment plan were forced out of Boston. "Boston, they let that go." Jerry Beck retorts dryly. The Museum's eclipse was not to last for long.

At the same time city of Lowell was in the process of developing an arts district and invited the Revolving Museum to occupy one of its historic buildings—the Lowell Gas and Light Building. Four months after leaving Boston the event *Home-Made: Pioneers & Public Art* inaugurated the Museum's new space. With help from the city of Lowell, private contributors

### **The Exhibits, a Process-based Work**



The current exhibit *Toys and Games: More than Amusement*, running from February 14 to December 31, 2008, explores the universe of games. Most of the shown works are by young artists between 12 and 22 years of age who have participated in Revolving Museum programs, or those of neighboring schools. The public is invited to play, interact and participate. The works were created in close correspondence with the youth's school curriculum in English, Science, Math, Gym and Arts, etc. More than 200 persons contributed to the event.

In all cases the very process of creation is an integral part of the result. Jerry Beck explains: "you can't separate the process from the results. The process is not going to lie. The best art is based on the quality of the artists and the process. I try not to be a judge regarding the result of a project." The projects are now selected based on the Museum's mission statement in regards to public arts: the educational aspect; the pertinence of the project in accordance with its context; the degree of contribution to the community; the diversity of the participants; the variety of practices; the long-term impact.

The museum has a reduced staff of 3 employees and calls on specialized resources for the development of its activities. Its budget is \$650,000, half of which comes from public funds and the rest from the private sector, "who are particularly sensitive to our work especially when dealing with kids," concludes Jerry Beck. In 2007, the Revolving Museum was the Massachusetts Cultural Council, Commonwealth Award winner in the "Community" category.