

# South End News



Carolyn Lambert and Fereshte Toosi. The Tea Party, 2004, photo documentation of performance in the Boston Public Gardens.

## Conceptual Big Dig

BRI: AIR is emblematic of a changed and charged Boston art scene

BY D'LYNNE PLUMMER  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

I am firmly within the camp that believes Boston's art scene is undergoing a conceptual Big Dig. SoWa is no longer just a catch phrase. Theatre abounds. The "white cubes" are shrinking as artwork literally floats through the Fort Point Channel. And, joyously, artists are emboldened by a responding audience. The 'First Fridays' gallery openings on Harrison are starting to feel as energized as a half-time show. And, speaking of Super Bowls, just moments before kick-off on Feb. 6, the BCA's Mills Gallery was still packed with pairs of curious eyes. In fact, the gallery had to stay open late just to accommodate the traffic.

And yet "BRI: AIR—Projects from the Berwick Research Institute's Artist in Research

Programs" is no casual afternoon attraction. The show requires some significant patience on the part of viewers and is generally unfit for strolling with pugs and cappuccinos. "BRI: AIR," however, represents well Boston's new charge. This, along with another Pats win, is something to celebrate.

Entering its fifth year, The Berwick Research Institute is a non-profit, artists-run space located in Dudley Square. Providing alternative programming and exhibition space for artists who work outside the commercial world, the program supports emerging artists who need time, space, and a critical audience where an artist can perform research. The "research" focuses on the production of art as well as the dialogues and processes behind the art.

Berwick will inhabit the Mills Gallery through March with its own mobile studio, bringing its AIR community into the BCA. Curated by BRI Executive Director Meg Rotzel, The Studio:Lab will act as an ideological and physical platform for lectures, performances and three-day residencies throughout the exhibition.

Often resuscitating junked technology or materials and with the ability to spawn kinetic events from plastic, old machines or coat hangers, the artists in residence often bring to the table as much science acumen as artistic perspective. Ken Linehan takes this winning combination seriously, engaging ubiquitous magnetic data card (credit cards, T-passes etc.). Linehan's instrument on view at the Mills entitled "Studies in Total Information Awareness" (think dark political humor) allows card-carrying visitors to audibly hear and manipulate the secret orchestral data retained within the magnetic strips.

And yet despite their futurism, the artists' ancestors are immediately apparent. Working in a manner similar to the Fluxus group or Alan Kaprow's early WGBH crew, the Berwick artists appear subconsciously haunted by the legacies of Duchamp or Nam June Paik. And it is not simply their experimental, non-commercial, community approach that rings familiar. As Alan Kaprow once said of Duchamp, "he wanted art to be intelligent... Wit from the Duchampian perspective is the

condition and consequence of keen thought." The artists who for two or three months at a time work as resident artists at the former Woopie Pie factory are intelligently building on established legacies of process art.

Artist Christy Georg references a different sort of era gone by in her work, using contemporary processes to create tools reminiscent of 19th century medical devices.

Jessica Rylan's "natural" synthesizer also nods to the science of the past. "Nature Diorama" emotes the sounds of canary birds atop rustling branches from small speakers dangling in a tree installation. Her electronic birds are modified from an original circuit designed by John Simonton in 1967. Electrical circuits in real time generate the pleasing sounds, stripped of feathered accompaniment.

And then there are the less soothing sounds. "Bed O' Depression" by Heather Kaplow sits demurely near the back of the gallery. A continuum of her "Help Wanted" project, Kaplow explores identity, labor and creativity as they relate to both personal and societal definitions of mental health. The small bed invites you to curl up under the sheets and listen through a set of headphones to the sounds... of unemployment. A voice repeats such phrases as "your own actions condemn you"

*Continued on page 24*

## BRI

*Continued from page 17*

and "you've never given more than lip service to those who employ you." Iterating mantras of self-loathing, the foreboding berth is all too familiar to those who have spent time without work.

John Osorio-Buck's "Prototype (Utopia 5)" follows from his "Waste Structure Series: inside Space for Outside." Investigating protective shelters, his work is part pod, part three-ring binder—inside the waist-high shelter is a collection of articles and reports that relate this structure to grander schemes. Buck has made headlines himself with habitable rafts made from garbage seen meandering through our local waters. He quotes Marjetica Potic at the outset of his materials. "I am not an artist, I am not an architect. I just want to do something relevant."

The literal architectural designer of the group is Aliza Shapiro, who created "Pod:Lab, A Master Plan for the Berwick Research Institute." Matching her architectural skills with the diverse spatial and programmatic requirements of the Institute, her residency was literally about her residence. An extensive plan, as well as a model, set the tone for the exhibit by connecting ideas to place and advocating, subtly, the Berwick's *raison d'être*.

Adjacent to "Pod:Lab" is "The Reel President" by Amy Sharp and Morgan Schwartz. Completed in 2002, the single channel video explores the long-standing relationship between the White House and Hollywood through juxtapositions and press coverage. Still and moving images both play a part in the flavor of politics, and cinema can have an influential hand in creating a president's image. In the three years since the completion of the work, however, video art has been rapaciously political—conceptually and stylistically—and this reel is another iteration of something we've already



John Osorio-Buck pushes the Utopia 5, a prototype for a bubble shelter, from Fort Point to the Mills Gallery.

seen. Much more effective is Sharp's "National Flag of Mourning"—a dyed black American flag created in the wake of September 11 as a rebuttal to the so-called "end of national mourning." The work acknowledges that there is potential comfort in knowing a national still grieves.

Vaughn Bell's "Personal Landscape Exchange with Meg Rotzel" includes text, some painting, and a small garden complete with water mister. The text implores the viewer to recall and retain visceral and personal memories of landscapes. The piece falls short on its deliverables, sitting mutely in the shadows of her previous work. Her biosphere project of a previous year consisted of 3-dimensional immersions—miniature "biodomes"—hanging at eye-level and into which one could stand. Although the artist's portable landscapes currently on display are a realization of her own memories of Midwestern places, the

piece itself is likely to be forgotten.

Embracing the cutting edge and suggesting its mass appeal, The Devil Music Ensemble brings to light the death of the classical symphony. Founded by Brendan Wood with Jonah Rapiro (from the New Millennium String Ensemble) and Tim Nylander (former member of Say Zuzu), the "group" performs and explores all facets of music. They make a point to mention in their statement that their orchestra (assembled during their residency at BRI) draws double the crowds found at most symphony halls, appealing to a vast range of age groups. They are trying to inform that our ears are seeking something new. A fresher combination of sounds. Recordings of their orchestral performances play on headsets in the gallery.

Another piece relaying live events is "The Tea Party"—a video and small display documenting the efforts of The Tea Party's mock presidential candidates during the highly charged Democratic National Convention. Carolyn Lambert and Fereshte Toosi made up the skeletal staff and campaign crew as they prompted passers-by to discuss such issues as civil liberties and the Patriot act. "Vote Tea" was the resounding battle cry from under their three cornered hats. If the effort itself rings somewhat silly, the documentation that remains is a time capsule of the weeks surrounding the DNC—an event with already a very distant feel.

Whether they are destabilizing art and the artist's role or simply reminding us to heed process, the artists that enter and exit through the former Woopie Pie factory represent a generation of performance, public, installation, environmental, political and theoretical artists working today.

BRI: AIR runs to March 27 at the BCA's Mills Gallery. Go to [bcaonline.org](http://bcaonline.org) for current dates and times of all lectures and events. For further information on the Berwick, go to [www.berwickinstitute.org](http://www.berwickinstitute.org).