

At the Quarry, a groundbreaking festival

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 05, 2013

ACTON — Down Quarry Road here, past a flurry of new houses, a dirt road forks to the left and leads to an abandoned granite quarry that closed more than 60 years ago. Stone and metal sculptures sprout across the landscape. Then, a cherry-red building with bright yellow stairs running up the front appears like a giant Lego house amid the trees.

It's a gallery. It's a performance venue. It's a musical instrument. It's the site of this weekend's Festival of Sound Art and Performance Art, staged by Contemporary Arts International, at this 12-acre site dubbed the Quarry. Performers include some of the big names in the thriving Boston performance scene: performance artist Marilyn Arsem, composer and musician Evan Ziporyn, sound artist Jed Speare, and more.

The festival is the first big event mounted by Contemporary Arts International, a nonprofit center for art creation, performance-exhibition, and education opened officially to the public in 2010. Indeed, the Quarry has been a secret to many, although sculptors Yin Peet and Viktor Lois have been working for a decade to establish it as an artist residency program. Taiwanese video artist Shu-Jung Chao, the current artist in residence, will show her work at the festival.



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Viktor Lois, cofounder of Contemporary Arts International, with one of his kinetic, wind-powered sound sculptures at the Quarry.

Recently, Lois and Peet have sought to increase the Quarry’s visibility. They tapped board members to help. Sculptor Geoffrey Koetsch was among them. The timing was right: He had been a performance artist back in the 1980s, and wanted to get back into it.

“I saw this place and I couldn’t believe it existed,” Koetsch says. “I needed a theater of operations, and it was already built.”

Lois and Peet had put up the red building — the Red Box Performance Hall — in 2008. The yellow steps form a sculpture outfitted with loudspeakers, from which Lois creates sound works powered by wind. He’ll perform on the piece, which he calls “Soundman,” on Saturday afternoon. Inside, there are galleries and two stages.

Koetsch made a proposal: Why not mount a two-day festival?

“Performance art has a relatively low profile,” he says. “One way to boost it is to bring the leading players together at one event.” He envisions the festival as a biennial. He’s already dreaming up another program for alternate years — a monthlong festival of video, installation, and other multidisciplinary pieces.

When Koetsch invited Ziporyn to headline, the Grammy-winning clarinetist and composer signed on immediately. He lives in nearby Lexington, and says he likes the idea of having avant-garde performance practically in his backyard.

Then he visited the Quarry. “It was like arriving at a Disneyland for artists,” he says. “It’s beautiful and strange and inspiring, and I wanted to be a part of whatever was going on.”

A Festival of Sound Art and Performance Art

Contemporary Arts International, the Quarry, 68 Quarry Road, Acton 617-699-6401. <http://www.quarryfestivals.org>

Opening date: Sept. 7 and 8

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Video artist Shu-Jung Chao is the artist in residence.

Ziporyn, who'll perform on Saturday night, says he'll play new solo material with electronics, some of his own compositions, and some by his frequent partner Christine Southworth. "My pieces are a kind of pocket adaptation of the things I do with gamelan and opera," he says. The electronic component is derived from archival recordings of African and Asian music from the 1930s and 1950s.

Ziporyn has a more musical bent than many sound artists. Walter Wright and Andrea Pensado, who will appear Saturday evening, create less melodious work.

"One would possibly classify it as noise," says Wright, who stages XFest, an improvised music festival, every year at Gallery 119 in Lowell. "We do improvisation. Andrea uses her voice and devices to trigger laptop sounds. . . . It can be raw, emotional, or funny. It depends on the people, the place, and the mood we're in."

Following Koetsch's lead, Wright has planned a two-day music program in November at the Quarry built around another of Lois's sound and kinetic sculptures, "Container Man," a 14-foot shipping container with 14 mechanical instruments inside.



Ellen Wetmore's video "Seven in Bed."

This weekend's sound performances are scheduled discretely, while many of the performance art pieces will be ongoing, with short periods in the festival spotlight.

Arsem, known for her durational works, will perform from 1 p.m. to dusk on Saturday along an overlook above the water-filled quarry. Jeffu Warmouth and Ellen Wetmore will screen their comic performance videos in a Red Box gallery throughout the festival. They also intend to perform.

"I'm building a live performance in 'trialogue' with two video instances of myself," Warmouth says. Wetmore, who is his wife, will perform on a swing.

You can see Karen Dolmanisth all day Saturday on a little beach by the water-filled quarry, near one of Peet's monolithic stone statues. Her work is a contemplative, moment-to-moment response to the site.

“Each element opens like a word in a poem to something more than its limited identity,” she explains.

On Sunday afternoon, Koetsch will show up at the beach and hike to a granite portal along the shore, taking off his clothes as he goes. He will ritually pass through the portal, and disappear into the woods.

“This is a gateway piece to the final chapter of life,” says Koetsch, 72. “It’s about aging, and accepting that we’re mortal.”

The beach, though tiny, is pristine and white. Lois has cleaned it up — just as he and Peet have spruced up and built as needed throughout the area.

“There was shooting here, drinking here, vicious parties here,” he says. “The beach was filled with broken glass. Now we’ve developed this place for artists’ pleasure.”

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Jeffu Warmouth, who also makes performance videos.