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AMENIA

Upcoming Wassaic Project focuses on community

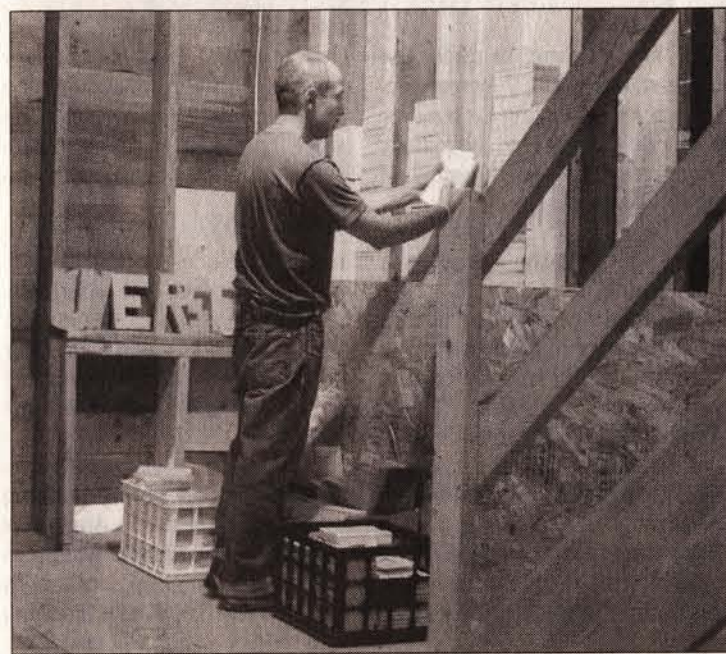


PHOTO BY CORY ALLYN

Wassaic Project resident artist Hector Canonge was just starting the week-long process of installing his art piece inside the Maxon Mills building, which revolves around stacks of Harlequin paperbacks he found waiting to be discarded in the Luther Barn, just in time for this weekend's summer festival.

By CORY ALLYN
Staff Reporter

WASSAIC — This weekend will see thousands of visitors descend on the normally quiet hamlet of Wassaic for the third year of the Wassaic Project, a conglomerate of art, music, performance and, perhaps most importantly, community.

The free three-day event will run

from Aug. 13 to Aug. 15, located in and around the Maxon Mills building, a former grain house that's impossible to miss in Wassaic. It's a towering metal structure that has been transformed into a truly unique showcase for local, regional and national artists.

This is the third year of the event, and to say the attention that's been drawn to the festival has grown exponentially would be an under-

statement. From humble beginnings to a coveted New York Times article last year, things couldn't seem to be going better for the event's founders, Bowie Zunino, Eve Biddle and Elan Bogarin (who were later joined by Jeff Barnett-Winsby).

The directors opened the space for a press preview last weekend, amidst the last two weeks that will complete the transformation of the antique building. There were artists busy setting up their pieces in the nooks and crannies of the mill house and still lots to do in the final days before the event's opening. But as Zunino stressed, the Wassaic Project's growth this year was rooted in a sense of community rather than simply adopting a "bigger is better" mentality.

"Actually, we really tried to lower the number of artists featured," she said, resting for a moment on the bottom floor of Maxon Mills. "We were trying to focus on larger works. We had about 100 artists featured last year, and we were shooting for about 80 this year."

That didn't happen. There are more than 80 artists, 25 bands, poets, dancers, film makers and more scheduled for this weekend and an enormous lineup. Bowie shrugged and said it "just happened."

There are two major additions to the project this year. The first is that for the first time internships were offered and four students took on the management of the project for the duration of the summer, providing invaluable help to the directors and artists.

The second is a strong signal of

the direction that the organization is moving in. For the first time, artist residencies were offered, with studio space available in the nearby Luther Auction Barn and housing in nearby residential buildings that were purchased after last year's festival by Tony Zunino. Zunino is Bowie's father, who in a partnership also owns the Luther Barn and the Maxon Mills building.

Twenty-two artists have come and gone in the last four months through the residency program, which will become a permanent addition to the Wassaic Project.

New York City resident Hector Canonge was one of the more recent artist residents, and last Saturday he was busy setting up his art installation. It involved library bar code scanners, computers, large projection screens and hundreds of Harlequin paperback novels he'd found in bags in the Luther Barn, ready to be discarded.

"This is an incredibly unique space and it was very challenging," he acknowledged while stuffing paperbacks into the open walls of his room.

Zunino said the residency project was a resounding success.

"It was a bit of a surprise," she acknowledged. "We're new in this town, and we've been building fast, but we've been lucky to be so welcomed by the community."

"What's been so exciting is to see us here all summer and not just parachuting into a community," she said. "In some ways I take issue with that approach. To understand and learn what the commitment to the project is brings the experience to life. We've been living in the town and getting to know our neighbors. We really do love it here."

The group has become a staple at the local Wassaic firehouse monthly breakfasts ("The best pancakes!" an excited intern said.), and has reached out with several projects including replacing the fire company's sign. And the gratitude has been reciprocal in different ways, as Canonge mentioned that he had befriended a local resident who had loaned him a bicycle to use during his stay.

In an extended gesture to the surrounding community, the Wassaic Project's summer festival will open early with a special preview event. Thursday, Aug. 12, from 5 to 7 p.m., the entirety of Maxon Mills will be open to residents of Wassaic and the surrounding communities. The evening will showcase Dutchess County and Litchfield County artists participating in the show. There will be a local bluegrass group, No Brakes, and a 50/50 raffle to benefit the Wassaic Volunteer Fire Department. Also, "NASCAR Dave" MacMillan and the Sunday in the Country gang will be serving up food.

The schedule for the Wassaic Project is as follows:

Friday, Aug. 13, the art exhibit at Maxon Mills will be open to the public from noon to 7 p.m. Live music will be featured on the Maxon Mills porch from 4 to 6 p.m., and then will move to the Luther Barn stage for more performances from 6 p.m. to midnight. Performances and film in the auction ring at the Luther Barn will be held

from 7 to 11 p.m.

Saturday, Aug. 14, the art exhibit at Maxon Mills will be open from noon to 7 p.m. An exhibition opening reception at Maxon Mills will be held from 5 to 7 p.m. Live music will run from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. on the Maxon Mills porch, from 8 p.m. to midnight at Luther Barn stage and from midnight to 2 a.m. in the Luther Barn auction ring. Performances and film in the auction ring will be held from 2 to 8 p.m.

Sunday, Aug. 15, the art exhibit at Maxon Mills will be open from noon to 7 p.m. and live music and perfor-

mances will be featured on the Maxon Mills porch from noon to 4 p.m. There will also be an open studio tour at the Luther Barn, showcasing the current artist residents, from 1 to 4 p.m.

"My biggest goal for the weekend is that people are interacting with the community," Zunino concluded. "All the artists who are showing pieces are required to show up for the festival [a fairly uncommon policy among large art shows]. This is an experience and a community that you participate in. And because of the interaction we've already had, in some ways, I know it's already a success."