

REPORT FROM BEACON

Cinderella on the Hudson

Ninety minutes north of Manhattan, the town of Beacon blooms with public art, galleries and projects as a branch of the Dia Art Foundation opens there.

BY SUZAN BOETTGER

Once upon a time, when Hollywood scouts were seeking a grungy, run-down, postindustrial small town, they settled on Beacon, N.Y. "The trouble was," said mayor Clara Lou Gould recently, "the location scouts called on a Friday afternoon and we were about to begin a Main Street upgrade—new sidewalks, plantings and fixtures—on Monday morning." So the city reached the developer and put off the work for six months, while storefronts were further messed up and Paul Newman came to town to film *Nobody's Fool* (1994).

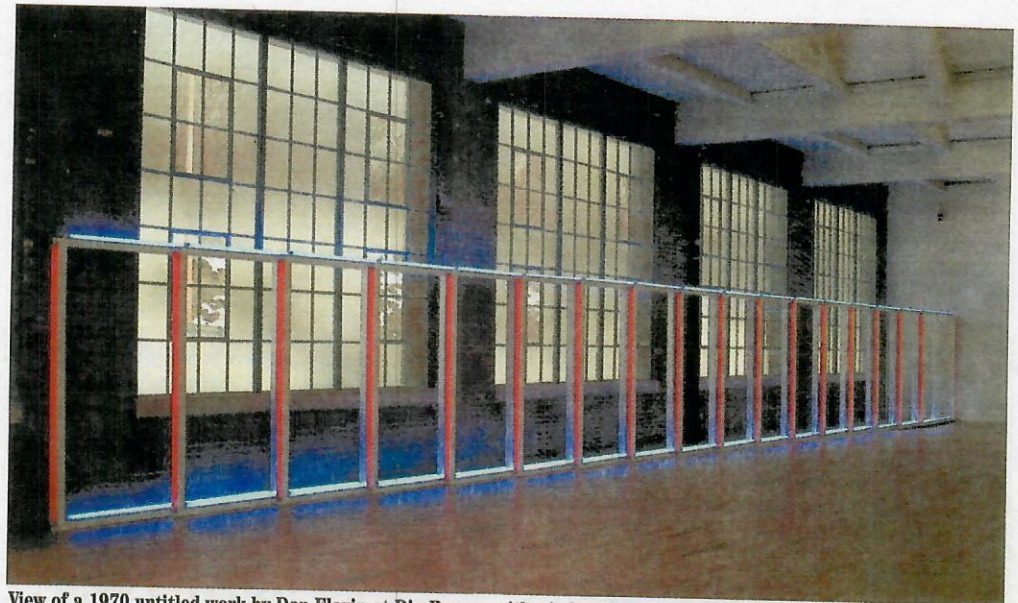
That title was prophetic, for of all the struggling towns in the Hudson River Valley with huge vacant factories to spare, it was Beacon that found a Prince Charming in the Dia Art Foundation. And after Dia selected a Nabisco box factory in Beacon for its branch site, an urban and cultural transformation got under way.¹

By now the story has been widely published of Dia's discovery of the capacious one-story 1929 structure with the unusual features of north-facing sawtooth skylights that provide crystalline natural illumination for Dia's big collection of big art. The grand opening of the 240,000-square-foot space was held on Sunday, May 18. [Dia's installation will be reviewed in a forthcoming issue.] Those contemplating a trip to Beacon might find it helpful to know what else besides Dia is there.

The "Watershed" Project

Beacon is situated in the lower quarter of what the federal government has designated as the Hudson Valley National Heritage Area. Dia:Beacon is a few blocks south of the train station; between the two is a degraded rectangular peninsula jutting into the Hudson, covered with eroding landfill and scattered dead trees, called Beacon Landing. It once carried train tracks down to a barge that crossed the river. By the end of the year, George Trakas's *Beacon Point Project* will transform the riverfront wasteland into

Beacon Landing, site of George Trakas's forthcoming *Beacon Point Project*; one of 10 works comprising "Watershed: The Hudson Valley Art Project."



View of a 1970 untitled work by Dan Flavin at Dia:Beacon with windows in background designed by Robert Irwin. Collection Dia Art Foundation. Photo Michael Govan.

an accessible sculptured environment consisting of wooden decks, granite stairways and dock areas. Its funding is a collaboration of the City of Beacon, Dia and Scenic Hudson, the last of which owns the land as part of a 23-acre waterfront parcel. Scenic Hudson is a nonprofit environmental advocacy group that at Beacon Landing is acting as a developer. After an elaborate process of public input, Scenic Hudson will erect a 90-room eco-friendly hotel, a conference center, spa, three dining facilities—from tablecloth to take-out—and a "green" harbor and boathouse. The community requested these amenities; for years there has not been a hotel in Beacon.

Trakas's permanent work is one of 10 by international visual and literary artists that will constitute "Watershed: The Hudson Valley Art Project." It is a program of the Manhattan-based nonprofit organization Minetta Brook, which was founded in 1995 by Diane Shamash, a former director of public-art programs in Seattle. The principal funder of "Watershed" is Lee Balter, a local developer who is converting into condominiums an immense Moorish-style hilltop residence dating to 1903 known as "Dick's Castle," which overlooks the hamlet of Garrison south of Beacon and was once owned by Dia and occupied by Dan Flavin.

Another work sponsored by "Watershed" that will be permanent is writer/performance artist Constance De Jong's *Speaking of the River* at another property owned by Scenic Hudson, Madame Brett Park.² At this southern end of Beacon is a rare example of bow-truss construction, the Tioranda Bridge over Fishkill Creek, and the former Tioranda Hat Works, one of

the many hat factories for which Beacon was known at the end of the 19th century. At the park, visitors resting on one of the benches installed by De Jong will trigger a sensor to begin playing material she recorded in interviews with former mill workers, longtime Beacon residents and new arrivals. There's no escaping educative stimulation!

Outside Beacon, the Swedish artist Matts Leiderstam has installed "Claude Lorrain glasses"—binoculars fitted with colored lenses—at places on both sides of the river from which one can view specific terrains depicted by the Hudson River School painters Thomas Cole, Frederic E. Church, Asher B. Durand and Jasper F. Cropsey. On the Bard College campus at Annandale-on-Hudson, Swiss artist Christian Philipp Müller has made a 100-foot ramp sectioned into different Hudson Valley soils and plantings that is akin to a graph showing the steady loss of agriculture in the valley. And at Bear Mountain State Park and Franklin D. Roosevelt State Park, picnickers can barbecue their burgers on stylized grills in the shape of frogs, snakes, owls, turtles and squirrels, courtesy of Los Angeles artist Pae White.

On Beacon's crosstown artery, Main Street, "Watershed" will exhibit film installations at two borrowed storefronts through September. At 197 Main, New York City artist Matthew Buckingham's *Muhheakantuck—Everything Has a Name* examines the Hudson River Valley in legend and history. Next door at 199 Main, Peter Hutton's *Two Rivers* was inspired both by Henry Hudson's voyage in search of a trade route to the Great China Sea and J.M.W. Turner's 1842 painting *Snowstorm—*

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soon after Dia acquired the Nabisco site in 1999, commercial properties in Beacon began to be bought by developers and small businesses. Galleries opened in anticipation of Dia's debut.

Steamboat Off Harbor's Mouth Making Signals in Hollow Water and Going by the Lead. It continues the Bard College professor's decade-long study of the Hudson River and incorporates his film footage of the Yangtze River in China.

A "Watershed" project that will go on view next February and March is James Welling's photographs and audio recordings of farmland, livestock, vineyards, tools and other elements of agriculture in the Hudson Valley. His work will be presented at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at UNY New Paltz and will also be published as a book. For the summer of 2004, writer Lynne Hillman will commission four writers to create new works of fiction responding to Washington Irving's story "Rip Van Winkle." They will read their works at sites in the Hudson Valley including the University Settlement, a 95-acre campsite in Beacon where a social-service agency of the same name based in Manhattan presents summer programs for inner-city youth.

At Denning's Point State Park, sculptor Lothar Baumgarten will complete and install *Seven Rings of Contemplation* by May 2004. Low concrete circles varying from 9 to 31 feet in diameter will be placed along the shoreline and throughout the 66-acre peninsula as focal points encircling vegetation—which will in turn grow over them—as well as for seating and social gatherings. They will

Woodland Cultural Center, 477 Main Street
former public library, built 1872).



remain in place for two years. The German artist has been collecting audio recordings of animal activities, river life and local weather, and will make an atmospheric seasonal soundscape to be distributed on compact disc.

A complimentary 23-page field guide to the "Watershed" sites can be obtained at the Beacon office of Minetta Brook, where visual materials and descriptions of the projects can be viewed daily (see listings box). The artists' preliminary plans have also been published, along with essays about the art, profiles, and stunning photographs of the Hudson River and valley, in *Watershed*, a book edited by the scholar Miwon Kwon; it is available from Minetta Brook for \$20.

An Instant Art Scene

"Watershed," which opened a week after Dia:Beacon's premiere, is the largest of many exhibitions and programs catalyzed by the prospect of large art audiences visiting Dia. Soon after Dia acquired the Nabisco site in 1999, commercial properties in Beacon began to be purchased by both developers and small businesses. Galleries opened in anticipation of Dia's announced 2001 debut, and when that was postponed, a few closed. Some new owners have just let their spaces sit. Local contractor Ron Sauer, on the other hand, renovated the east end of town into a quaint shopping district.

Last fall, businesspeople founded the Beacon Arts Community Association. Beginning last December, BACA instituted a "Second Saturday" event with galleries and shops open until 9 P.M. on the second Saturday of every month. The current "Second Saturday Beacon Gallery Guide & Points of Interest" brochure lists 14 galleries; 20 boutiques, antique stores, jewelry, gift and clothing shops; and 13 places to eat. Most of these establishments are along the lengthy Main Street,³ where a complimentary trolley makes several stops in the afternoon and evening.

Beacon Project Space, designed by New York/Beacon architect Aryeh Siegel, is the spiffiest storefront in town. Fine aluminum mesh screens form luminous gray dividers between a gallery space and offices. This is the headquarters of the Beacon Cultural Project [see "Artworld," June '02], founded in April 2002 by William S. Ehrlich, a collector, trained architect and principal in the real estate development firm of Milton L. Ehrlich, Inc., established in 1935 by his father. Ehrlich was one of the earliest Manhattanites to buy in Beacon after he learned of Dia's plans. At the time of the Project's announcement, he raved to the *New York Times* [Apr. 26, '02], "Once I knew Dia was a done deal, I ran around Beacon and bought everything I could. I'm now Beacon's largest taxpayer. David will be the impresario for culture." That is David A. Ross, director of the Beacon Cultural Project and president of its nonprofit sibling, the Beacon Cultural Foundation. Formerly the director of the San Francisco Museum



Beacon Project Space, 240 Main Street. Unless otherwise noted, all photos Suzaan Boettger, April 2003.

Collaborative Concepts, 348 Main Street.



of Modern Art and, before that, of New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, Ross is now engaged in collaborations between private, public and institutional sectors in a move to foster growth in Beacon. The Cultural Project's aim is to spur Beacon's revitalization through innovative cultural initiatives.

One potential project is to rehab a group of eight vacant industrial buildings near Fishkill Creek, a site called Beacon Terminals, into storage and informal exhibition spaces for a "Beacon Art Society" to be made up of major galleries and private collectors from elsewhere. Sonnabend Gallery director Antonio Homem confirms that Sonnabend is eager to take space there. Ehrlich and Ross also plan to transform Beacon's former Dibble Opera House into a nonprofit space for contemporary dance, music, theater and media arts.

The Beacon Cultural Foundation was incorporated in November 2002 with seed money from Ehrlich and his Beacon Terminal Associates. Sara J. Pasti, formerly director of curatorial affairs at the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle and previously associated with Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, Queens, is its executive director (and deputy director of the Beacon Project Space). One of its aims is to turn the former Beacon High School building into a Decorative Arts and Design Institute. Ross says, "We thought that would be a wonderful complement to the rigorous cutting-edge conceptual and minimal aesthetic of Dia." Objects for display would be borrowed from established museums, which customarily lack sufficient space to show their collections. Until funds can be raised for a substantial architect-

Beacon Cultural Project plans to encourage collaborations between private, public and institutional sectors to spur Beacon's revitalization through cultural initiatives.

...ral redesign, the high school building may be used for a Creative Community Center that will provide affordable workspace for visual and literary artists. If this goes forward, studio spaces could be available by Labor Day.

Regular exhibitions at the Beacon Project Space are also under the aegis of the foundation. The inaugural show last October was work by Carrie Mae Weems. In April Weems became the foundation's first artist-in-residence. Over the next year, she will document the historical and contemporary cultural life of Beacon and the Hudson Valley region, recording her subjects and taking oral histories on video and audio. She will work out of the Record Shop, a storefront a couple of doors down from the Project Space. "The Record Shop—A Social Studies Project" will be exhibited at the Project Space in the fall.

On view at the space this spring was "Robininters: Trial by Fire (Works From the Melting Ground): A Selection of Works in Glass, Ceramic and Bronze." This summer it will screen videos by Chicago artist Siebren Versteeg and the duo Ruben Ortiz Torres and Eduardo Abaroa, who live and work in Mexico City and Los Angeles [May 10-July 6]. Parisian Huang Yong Ping's room-size installation *The Pharmacy* will follow [July 12-Aug. 31]. The foundation—or is it the Cultural Project? One can't easily tell with these entwined entities—is reaching out to local artists by hosting, twice so far this year, public conversations called "10 x 10," which give the floor, in turn, to the first 10 artists who arrive with presentation materials. The next is at the Project Space on June 10. A slide registry of local artists' work is also planned.

More on Main Street

Anchoring the opposite end of town from Dia, at the east end of Main Street, is the Howland Cultural Center. This intricate brick and wood Victorian structure is the former town library, erected in 1872 by Civil War general and shipping magnate Joseph Howland and nine other benefactors.⁴ It was designed by Howland's brother-in-law, Richard Morris Hunt, who a couple of years later built the first part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Now it serves as a community meeting place, gallery and performance space.

Through June 8, the Howland's dramatically vaulted former reading room will display Dutchess County artist Anne Huibregtse's sculpture and witty sculptural bronze bowls on the theme of cows. From June 14-Aug. 3, the Howland will present its fourth annual sculpture exhibition of "Foundry Artisans," open to artists who work at Tallix, the noted foundry located in Beacon, and two progeny, Argos, in Brewster, and (Polich Art Works) in Newburgh; the pieces

will be selected by David Ross. Sculpture will be displayed both indoors and on the grounds.

Nearby is Tallix (its name derived from "metallics"), which was established in 1970 and has been located in Beacon since 1986. There is no program of tours of the 80,000-square-foot interior where molds are made and metals cast and finished, but huge sculptures are often visible on the grounds waiting to be shipped. Chelsea dealer Max Protetch recently purchased three buildings on Tallix property and by September plans to use a tall boxy structure for storage and display of large works and to place even larger works outside [see "Front Page," Mar. '03].

Another event proposed for this summer along Main Street is a sculpture program and, in storefronts, video screenings. Called "Main (s)TREE(t) Project," it addresses the theme of trees and their products, lumber and paper, and is cocurated by Amy Lipton of Ecoartspace in Beacon and Sara Pasti. From 1986 to 1995, Lipton had an eponymous gallery in SoHo; after closing it, she moved up to the mid-Hudson area and now works as a freelance curator and educator, generally under the auspices of Ecoartspace. Founded in 1997 in Los Angeles by Patricia Watts, it is a nonprofit organization supporting artists whose works raise environmental awareness and inspire visions of a sustainable relationship between humans and the natural world. Neither Lipton nor Watts maintains a gallery. They prefer to find places for ecological art elsewhere. One of those proposed for the "Main (s)TREE(t) Project" is a medicinal-herb sculpture garden at the stately brick Beacon Community Health Center, formerly a church, at 249 Main. Artist and gardener Joan Bankemper will work with the center's staff, volunteers and students to plant and maintain the greens. Lipton is determined that this project will go forward, but at this writing, she and Pasti have yet to secure sufficient funding.

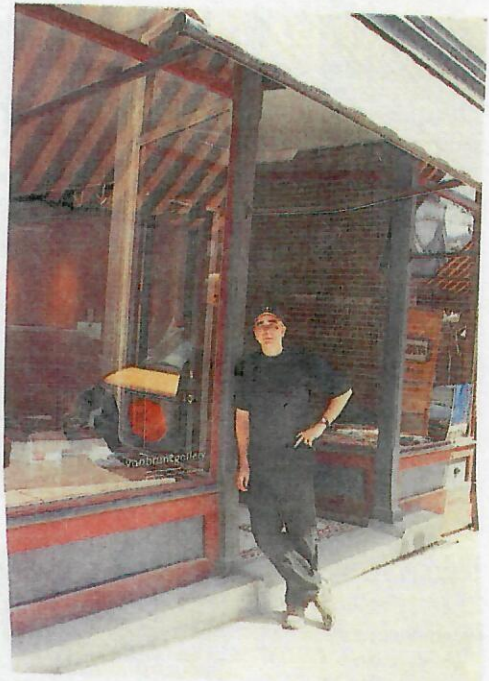
The Galleries

Across from the Howland Center is Van Brunt Gallery, housed in an attractive storefront space of exposed brick walls and wood floors. Opened last September by Carl Van Brunt, a former New Yorker with a fine-art and advertising background, the gallery features emerging artists, both New York City-based and local. Van Brunt notes that his elaborate Web site with video profiles of exhibiting artists is as important to him as an educative tool for building an audience as his physical space is. Through June 15 he is showing Stephen Spaccarelli's abstract paintings with found objects on wood and steel panels. Only 21 years old, Spaccarelli is a native of nearby Hopewell Junction. On view June 21-July 13 will be Thomas Huber's abstract paintings and prints based on natural forms, personal notes and doodles. James Dustin's paintings and drawings integrating architecture and landscape and Colin Barclay's Hudson Valley landscape paintings will be seen from July 19 to Aug. 10. From Aug. 16 to Sept. 7, the group show "Analog and Digital Painting" will explore relationships between abstract painting and digital art.

A former auction gallery on Main Street now houses Collaborative Concepts, Beacon's artist-run nonprofit gallery. Richard Bruce, who for 13 years was with Robert Miller Gallery in Manhattan, was one of the founders in 2001 and is its current director. The

3,000-square-foot space, homely and cavernous, includes a gallery and, in the rear, two studios for six-month residencies. On view through July 6 are works in diverse mediums made by Grace Knowlton over the past decade and Bruce's own atmospheric abstractions of landscapes. From July 12 to Sept. 7, "Sticks & Stones II—The Women" will counterpoint last summer's show of five male artists (a gender uniformity for which Collaborative Concepts was criticized) who displayed completed pieces made of those natural materials and worked on installations publicly, amid gallery visitors.

In 2001, Hudson Beach Glass, a purveyor of functional sculptural objects, purchased a tall brick 1890



Carl Van Brunt in front of his gallery at 460 Main Street.

firehouse (closed since 1980) and installed the controlled flames of a "hot shop." This working studio offers glassblowing demonstrations. In adjoining rooms, the results of the owner-artists' work in blown and cast glass are for sale. The four glass artists, couples Michael Benzer and Jennifer Smith, and John and Wendy Gilvey, have produced glass in Beacon for 18 years at a casting studio on Maple Street. They will have changing exhibitions of work by others as well—this summer, glass by Sidney Cash. Up the carved wood staircase, son Luke Gilvey and Roger Ricco of Ricco/Maresca Gallery in Chelsea are planning a gallery of photography, sculpture and outsider art.

The owners of the Gallery@Highland Studio are also an artist couple, and their gallery likewise frequently displays what is produced on the premises. Highland Studio is a printmaking atelier founded in 1997 by Joe and Lisa Diebboll, who moved up from Brooklyn. Experienced in working with artists in traditional fine-art printing, they now focus on digital techniques. On view through June 10 will be works that use new approaches to transforming imagery in large-scale prints by Knowlton, Simon Draper, Germaine Keller and Alex Uribe. From June 14 to Aug. 14, the gallery will show photographs and draw-

and detailed city information at
www.cityofbeacon.org

Beacon Project Space, 240 Main St.; 845-831-1277;
rough September, Wed-Sun from 12-5 P.M.;
www.beaconprojectspace.org.

Collaborative Concepts, 348 Main St.; 845-838-1516;
en Wed-Sun from 12-5 P.M. and by appt.

The Gallery@Highland Studio, 176 Main St.;
5-838-3700; Mon-Fri 9 A.M.-5 P.M., Sat 12-5 P.M.;
www.thehighlandstudio.com.

The Howland Cultural Center, 477 Main St.;
5-838-4988; Thu-Sun 1-5 P.M. and by appt;
www.howlandculturalcenter.org.

Hudson Beach Glass, 162 Main St.; 845-440-0068;
u-Mon 9A.M.-5 P.M.; www.hudsonbeachglass.com.

Mount Gullian Historic Site, 145 Sterling St.;
5-831-8172; Wed-Fri and Sun 1-5 P.M.;
www.pojonews.com/enjoy/stories/0715971.htm.

The Record Shop, 244 Main St.; 845-831-1277;
-5 P.M. every Saturday through August,
days from 12-5 P.M. in July and August;
www.beaconprojectspace.org/therecordshop.

Van Brunt Gallery, 460 Main St.; 845-838-2995;
d-Sun 10 A.M.-5 P.M. or by appt.;
www.vanbruntgallery.com.

"Watershed: The Hudson Valley Art Project,"
7 and 199 Main St., various sites and Minetta Brook,
S. Chestnut St.; 845-831-4129 and 212-431-7165;
acon sites 12-6 P.M. every day; www.minettabrook.org.

ings that play with the idea of musical notation by Keller, who owns a gallery in her name in Garrison's Landing.

Underlying all this new cultural activity is the question of how it integrates into a town where most residents are not culturally attuned and many have low incomes. Will developers put real money into programs nurturing and exhibiting local artists as well as supporting the stimulation that artists from elsewhere bring? Will the area become a new Hamptons of expensive houses and high-toned restaurants? What sort of cultural environment is appropriate to the extraordinary natural environment of the Hudson River Valley? These are issues to consider in the fusion of real estate and cultural development. □

1. Beacon was recently selected by the state as the site of a "Rivers and Estuaries Study Center" to be erected at Denning's Point in the shell of a former paper clip factory. If sufficient funds accrue from state, local agencies and private foundations, it will open in 2006 and produce both research and public displays about the ecology of rivers. Florence Northcutt, director of the Howland Cultural Center in Beacon, believes that the river institute could affect Beacon as much as Dia.

2. Roger and Catheryna Brett were the first permanent white settlers in the area. Catheryna had inherited from her father "85,000 acres granted by charter from the Royal governor and negotiated from the Wappinger Native Americans in 1683. Widowed with three young sons by 1716, Madame Brett courageously remained in the 'wilderness,' and unlike patroons to the north, encouraged permanent settlement through the sale of her lands to families from New York and Long Island." Robert J. Murphy and Denise Doring VanBuren,

Underlying all this new creative activity is the question of how it integrates into the town and what sort of cultural environment fits the extraordinary natural environment.

Historic Beacon, Charleston, S.C., Arcadia, 1998, p. 8.

3. That Main Street is a mile long in a town of only 4.74 square miles (population 13,000) is explained by the town's origin in two villages, each with its own Main Street. In May, Beacon celebrated the 90th anniversary of its incorporation, when the villages of Fishkill Landing and Matteawan were combined. The name Beacon commemorates the fires that blazed from the summit of the easterly Fishkill Mountains, warning the Revolutionary armies of the movements upriver of British troops.

4. A town of Beacon's 18th-century vintage of course has historic houses, and American history aficionados will not want to miss the Mount Gullian Historic Site a couple of miles north of Dia. Mount Gullian is a reconstructed 18th-century Dutch Colonial home, barns and gardens with an array of programs including, on June 14, a period meal with actors playing George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette. From Aug. 17 through Sept. 14, an exhibition called "The Art and Science of Bridges" will be on view.

Author: *Suzaan Boettger is the author of Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties, recently published by the University of California Press.*