

ART & DESIGN

When Making Art Becomes a Night at the Beach

By RANDY KENNEDY JUNE 26, 2006

One of the great things about installation art is that it can be made of almost anything — a snow shovel, empty space, even a few tons of dirt — and it can be found almost anywhere.

To find some late on Saturday night, it was necessary to meet a wary, tattooed man named Duke Riley in the parking lot of a lobster restaurant in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. From there you continued on foot, crossing a bridge over the Belt Parkway, cutting through the trees and onto the beach that runs along the bay.

After walking half a mile, over the shells of dead horseshoe crabs and Bic lighters, past a foundered shopping cart and a fisherman with two rods stuck in the sand, you reached a place that was once known as Plum Island, today called Plum Beach and connected to the mainland. On one side was Rockaway Inlet and on the other Dead Horse Bay, so named because horse-rendering plants once dumped their boiled bones into the waters.

It didn't feel like a place where you might run into art, and even when you finally found the art, it didn't look much like art. It looked exactly like a bar.

"Do you have wine?" one woman asked.

"Would you like red or white?" asked the bartender.

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The questions sounded funny given that the "bar" was constructed entirely from found objects in a graffiti-covered cavelike opening in the concrete pilings that supported the humming Belt Parkway above. A handsome liquor shelf had been built into an opening in the pilings. Smooth driftwood planks formed the bar itself. Banquettes ringed the space. A fire crackled. Blondie blared from the sound system. Lanterns cast a sophisticated glow. And a well-dressed crowd of about 50 people that would not have been out of place at an opening in Chelsea or Dumbo sat around sipping wine, beer and martinis purchased for a nickel.

As Mr. Riley, the bar's designer, builder, chief supplier and guiding light, explained, he decided to charge for the drinks so that — in addition to trespassing on federal park property — he would also be breaking the law by selling liquor without a license.

You might think of Mr. Riley, 34, as the descendant of urban outlaw artists like Gordon Matta-Clark, who used a chainsaw to carve shapes into decrepit buildings along the rotting Hudson River piers in the early 1970's. Mr. Riley's work, however, tends to employ a lot more alcohol.

"I just wanted to do a project that was fun, somewhere between art and an excuse just to get a bunch of people together to get drunk out in the middle of nowhere," he explained.

After graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design and moving to New York several years ago to be an artist, Mr. Riley said, he became fascinated with the increasingly few forgotten parts of the city, ones that development has still not claimed, many of them along, or in the middle of, the water.

In 2004, during the Republican National Convention, he rowed under cover of night to a tiny island in the East River near the United Nations and hoisted a homemade glow-in-the-dark flag to declare the island a sovereign nation. (He was intercepted by the Coast Guard on his way back to shore.) Earlier, while trying to reach an uninhabited island near the Hell Gate Bridge, he was arrested for trespassing through a train yard.

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He became obsessed with Plum Island and its history after visiting it last November while scavenging beach detritus for what he described as a "nautical waste" party being given by his girlfriend. He discovered that in the early 1900's the island, owned by the federal government, had become a kind of beachfront Dodge City because it lay outside the jurisdiction of the New York police.

A former judge, William S. Ovington, leased the land and used it to stage illegal prizefights and run saloons until federal troops invaded in May of 1909 and ejected him and a colony of fun-loving squatters living in makeshift cottages with names like the Tuxedo, the Gaiety, the Lobster and the Neptune. (The islanders had also established their own golf club and yacht club.)

According to an article in The New York Times, the invasion was apparently carried out because of "rumors that reached the ears of the Government officials most concerned that a highball, or even a mint julep, might be had on Plum Island by going about it in the right way." An earlier article described how the police had been powerless to stop a pair of prizefights on the island that drew 800 spectators, none of whom were charged admission but were instead encouraged to contribute to something called the Mother's Rest Fund. "It was not explained what this fund was," the article added dryly.

By about 10 o'clock on Saturday night, Mr. Riley's art installation had fully transfigured itself from conceptual art to crowded bar. But only a few minutes later, the island's history of armed incursion repeated itself, much as Mr. Riley feared it would. Two National Park Service policemen with flashlights and a growling black German shepherd swept up the beach and scattered the crowd in a matter of minutes, threatening arrest. Most of the crowd clambered up a sandy hill and onto a narrow shoulder of the Belt Parkway, wondering where to go. "Do you know where I can catch the bus back to Williamsburg?" one man asked.

Mr. Riley, reached by cellphone yesterday morning, said that after waiting a couple of hours at the lobster restaurant for the heat to blow over, he managed to reconstitute the party, deplete the beer, serve some crabs and even stage a prizefight

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Nelson Enrique, a 27-year-old construction worker from Brazil who likes to fish along the bay and who pitched in last week to help Mr. Riley build the bar, said he was not sure if it was art, but he liked it. "Any art that involves beer," he said, "is O.K. by me."

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