

A CONVERSATION WITH... City parks programmer Bob Rizzo
Providence Journal - Bulletin - Providence, R.I.

Author: JONATHAN SALTZMAN Journal-Bulletin Staff

Date: Jun 10, 1996

The sculptures began springing up all over the city late last month, works occasionally so peculiar and abstract that passers-by can be forgiven for wondering, Is that art?

They include leafless trees lashed to the railing along the Providence River to draw attention to a dead river in Colombia; cutouts of human figures in plywood attached to a chain-link fence on Fountain Street; a 14-foot cone made of fiberglass cloth and steel in the lobby of the Fleet Center building.

Welcome to Convergence IX, the city's annual sculpture festive. For the first seven years, the art work was displayed only in Roger Williams Park. Last year, organizers also began exhibiting the work downtown, in part to mark the opening of Waterplace Park. The man behind the festival - and the impresario of events ranging from the Providence Waterfront Festival to the Extreme Games - is Bob Rizzo, the director of the Division of Public Programming for the city Parks Department.

Rizzo, 45, a native of Smith Hill, has been a sculptor and performance artist for more than two decades, and he looks the part: He has a thick beard and white hair tied in a ponytail; he wears two silver bracelets and a ring of turquoise set in silver; he is dressed in a black T-shirt, blue jeans and work boots.

Rizzo's work for the city began years ago when he starting designing fireworks displays for the Fourth of July celebrations in Roger Williams Park. Since 1988, he has been involved in almost every public concert and art festival sponsored by the city. He spoke at the park's century-old Victorian Casino, which houses his office.

Q: Explain your job.

A: My job, as I understand it - because it changes constantly, which is one of the great parts about the job - is to program public spaces, to bring the arts to the public, get them out of the galleries and that kind of stuff. So Convergence, for instance, instead of people having to go into an art gallery or a museum to see the art, we put it where they play, and this gives them a wider experience of what's being produced.

The same with the concerts that we do: We've been doing those for 20 years here in the park and all over the city. We started using the arts as a way to bring the public back to the park. Twenty years ago, Roger Williams Park was in fairly bad disrepair. People didn't come out here very often. Families certainly didn't. So we used Sunday-in-the-Park concerts, Fourth of July celebrations, those kinds of things, to bring the public back to the park. Once we got them back here, they started to realize what they had and started, in a sense, demanding changes.

At that point Mayor Cianci started rehabbing all these buildings. So that's when the Casino got done, the boathouse, the greenhouses were repaired, all of the infrastructure was repaired and fixed up. All the pathways were repaved. During that same period, we increased the amount of events that we did. So we always had concerts either at the bandstand here or at the Temple to Music. We did very elaborate Fourth of Julys, which ended up bringing excess of 50,000 people a year up to the park, just for the Fourth of July celebration. They became so successful that we had to move them downtown, at which point we ran out of places to shoot fireworks, so we no longer do them.

But we use the arts as a way to develop all this stuff, to put the programs together. So we commissioned artists to design the fireworks. That's kind of how I got involved in this job, 'cause I was hired as an artist to do sculpture in the park, to help design with

another group of artists Fourth of July displays.

Q: How has your job changed the past few years?

A: Now what we've done is we've shifted the focus. So what we were doing out here to develop an audience for the park, we're now doing to develop an audience for downtown and for Waterplace (Park) and for the river walk. Last year, we brought the first piece of (Convergence VIII) sculpture into the city (downtown), to test it out, to see how well it endured. It was successful, which is that blue tilted house that sits on that triangular parcel across from Citizens Bank.

Q: Is that why some people seem to be aware of the Convergence festival this year for the first time - because it used to be only in the park?

A: Only in the park. This year we've moved it into the city. We've split it up. We've got about 50 pieces here and another 15 or so downtown. . . . Last year, we also did a collaborative performance at Perishable Theatre just to kind of get our feet wet. . . . At the same time we were just beginning programming of Waterplace, so we started doing lunchtime concerts, the Bon Jovi concert, the evening jazz series.

Q: Tell me what the concerts were last year.

A: We called the series the Clock Tower Concerts, which were a lunchtime thing (in Waterplace Park). We did eight of those. (Apart from Bon Jovi), it was a lot of local acts. We tried to really highlight all the local talent. We also moved the (Hear In Rhode Island) songwriters' festival down there, which is this weekend. We started here in the park and we've now moved that into Waterplace, and that's 50 performers over two days and everybody does about 20 minutes. We've added that as a piece of Convergence and also as a part of our programming downtown.

We're doing 50 acts over two days, and that just scratches the surface of the talent that's here.

Then we did a Jazz on the Half Shell series, which were mostly big bands. But we also brought in people like (Brazilian trumpeter) Claudio Roditi and Sara Krieger from the New York Voices. These were in the evenings in August, weeknights. We'll probably do the same thing this year. So then we moved in songwriters. Bon Jovi came to us as a gift. And the plan for this year is to continue that except what we've now done is gone into partnership with Providence Washington Insurance and we're going to start programming further down river (at Providence Washington Plaza), which is where Hemenway's restaurant) is, that green space. Because my feeling is that I've got to get people to understand that there's a river, that Waterplace is only one part of this project. So I've got to connect the dots, in a sense, to get people to go from one end to another. And the easiest way to do that is to put an event out there.

Q: When will the concerts down river start?

A: That starts June 25th with a kickoff event: Business AfterHours. And then it will run every Tuesday afternoon at lunchtime. . . . It will be the same thing that we were doing at Waterplace: local acts, mostly solo acts, trios, that kind of stuff.

Q: It sounds as though you're wearing a couple of hats here. You want to entertain, but you're also making people aware of changes in Providence.

A: Absolutely.

Q: Is that a direction you're getting from the mayor's office?

A: No. It's more just from being here 20 years and watching all this

stuff happen, and getting a sense that that's what needs to be done. The (river) project itself is wonderful, but if you don't animate, nothing happens. Sticking a few coffee carts out there isn't going to make this the exciting place that everyone's hoping it will be.

Q: Do you think the changes in the city - the moving of the river - is going to make this a more attractive place for the arts?

A: Oh, absolutely. We're seeing it just from the Convergence artists coming in. They just can't get over the City, just the scale of it, the beauty of it, the architecture, and the fact that we've built this river walk and that the arts are such a part of it. More times than not, the artists I'm dealing with say, "Gee, I should think about moving here. You've got more going on here than anywhere else in the country." I mean it's really exciting to be at the start of this. It's been a long road to get to this point, and now I can almost see the end of the road, where the arts really do play the role that they can.

Q: At this point, how do you think Providence is for the arts?

A: It's actually really a good city as a cultural city. I also teach in Boston at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. So I'm in touch with a lot of Boston artists. And they just can't get over what goes on here. I mean, on any given Thursday through Sunday there's usually so much going on, that you really have to think about what you're going to go and see. The thing with Convergence, a lot of what we've put together . . . is package what happens almost every weekend, other than, of course, all the sculptures coming in. The fact that there's theater going on in, like, five theater companies at all times. You've got exhibitions going on in 10 or 15 spaces at all times. . . . Yeah, this city has a lot to offer.

One of my biggest complaints is that Rhode Islanders have this thing about not really seeing what they have. The people even from ESPN just can't get over how fantastic the city is and the state is.

And I'm lucky enough to get to work with a lot of people who are from out of town. So I get all this positive feedback. I know how wonderful it is. Otherwise I would have left. When I get to deal with all these people, and they come in and say, "It's incredible, your people are so friendly, and people help us, and everyone wants to be a part of this," it makes you feel real good. And I don't think most Rhode Islanders get it. For some reason they focus on the negative parts of the state. And there's a lot of positive stuff going on all the time.

Q: It often seems difficult to attract people downtown from the suburbs. Do you feel that's a tough thing to overcome?

A: You know, I thought so initially but a few events have proven me wrong, which is really wonderful. And one was . . . our concerts at Waterplace this past summer. Most of the audience came from somewhere else. Even the lunchtime things: We had buses show up with kids from day-care centers and elderly folks showing up with their lawn chairs . . . from Cranston and Warwick. People will come downtown if there's a reason for it. They come down to go to PPAC. They come in town to go to Trinity (Repertory). They'll come in for a sporting event. The key is now to keep them in town after that, and I think we're just starting to build on that.

Q: Tell me about Convergence. What kind of reaction are you getting to some of these sculptures?

A: We're getting a really positive reaction. It's been really fun because I'm down there all the time installing the work, so as I install one there are people walking by and there are smiles on their faces and they'll come over and they'll say, "Oh, so what's going on?" And we say, "We're doing this festival. And they go, "This is really great! It's good to see stuff happening downtown." restaurateur, Bob Burke called me up: "Can you get me some

sculpture for my restaurant?" We just brought a piece in from Canada for him. It's in the Federal Reserve (Restaurant). As a matter of fact, I'm trying to find a pedestal for it as we speak because all the pedestals in the city are being used for sculpture shows, so I of course can't find one. I haven't had any luck; I may have to build one.

Q: Tell me very specifically: What are some of these sculptures? I've seen one in the Fleet Bank building, which looks like some sort of rocket.

A: Yeah.

Q: There's one across the street from the Providence Journal-Bulletin of some figures (the cutouts of human figures in plywood).

A: Yeah, that one's been hugely successful. Just watching people's reactions as we were setting it up. People go by and say, "There you are! That's you! That's you! No, that's you!" And just really getting the whole idea of what it is, and just having fun with it. So some of the art we're doing is very serious, but some if it is just really fun and playful. That piece for me represents convergence: It's all the different types of art and all the different types of people that you could possibly put together creating one event.

Q: Two other things I noticed seemed pretty unusual. One were pieces of plastic floating in the Providence River near the Point Street Bridge. They looked like plastic bottles.

A: Oh ,yeah, that's Kenny Speiser's stuff. It's made completely of recycled materials. Kenny's really good at taking recycled stuff and making these wild sculptures out of them. They're water lillies. And the bottles are actually designed to spin like little flowers.

Q: The other thing I saw - I'm not sure if these are actually sculptures or not - but when I crossed the river this morning (near Washington Street) I noticed that there are bare trees.

A: Yes.

Q: Those are sculptures?

A: Those are part of a sculpture that's being done with one local artist and three artists from Colombia. It's a piece about rivers and the fact that there's a river in Colombia that's a dying river similar to the Providence River. And what they're trying to do with this piece is to bring attention to the death of a river and the rebirth of another one - so that you can save rivers; it's not a lost cause.

Q: So the bare trees represent death?

A: Death, and the death along the river.

Q: Is it possible that that's going to elude a lot of people? I walked by it once or twice and I thought, oh, those trees need to bloom.

A: Yeah, exactly, exactly. My guess is it might. What she has done, though, is she has a companion piece in a gallery at RISD, which is right around the corner, which will have a more detailed explanation as to what the piece is about. Some of these pieces just work that way. What really makes me smile is having you say, "I think I saw something that might be sculpture." "There are some pilings in the river, further down river, where Baer's River Workshop is. . . . I've had more calls from people asking me when that piece is going to be finished, and it's like, "No, that really is a dock. It's going to be finished and it will be a dock." And what's really so wonderful is to be able to take people and just change the way they look at things. And that's what Convergence does - not only putting pieces of sculpture in there, but we're making you

look at your environment. You're looking at things and going, Gee, that just might be sculpture. Now it may not be (laughs), but you've looked at something differently. So we're successful as far as I'm concerned.

Q: What exactly does Convergence mean?

A: The idea for me when I came up with it was that it was literally a convergence of all the art forms in one central location, being the city of Providence. . . . We have dance performances, we have music with the songwriters, we have video projection, there's neon art, there's actually a poet doing street signs, which go up today, which no one has seen yet. They are identical to the no-parking signs except they have various words on them like "Forgiveness."

Q: How long will the Convergence festival last?

A: It lasts all summer. Some will stay up for a year.

Q: Last year was the first year you were involved in a sporting event - the Extreme Games. How successful was that and how will it be different this year?

A: I think it went way beyond anyone's expectations, including ESPN's, otherwise they wouldn't be back. They've actually changed the focus from Newport to Providence. So their central location is now Providence. All of the host shots are being done from Waterplace. So they've completely moved the focus to Providence. There's still activities in Newport, but they've brought in BMX bicycles that they're doing in the parcel of land next to Waterplace. They have trick bicycles with all the jumping and all that stuff. It's been phenomenally successful. The sporting stuff is really starting to take off.

Q: What Extreme Games event did you like most last year?

A: Street luge. It's just so crazy. I mean, just the idea of someone laying on this stick with wheels zipping down the road at 70 miles per hour just boggles my mind.

Q: Did you try any of the contraptions?

A: No-o-o-o! I enjoy walking. I'm not that crazy. Although I think if I had the opportunity I might try the street luge. I figure I just wouldn't go that fast, and you could always fall off, and you're at least close to the ground.

Q: What's the biggest challenge the city faces when making Providence even more of a cultural mecca for the arts?

A: We need more support. One of my complaints is that business still doesn't support us in the way they should. Everyone's kind of waiting for things to happen . . . and we're going out begging for money and not being terribly successful. People say, "Yeah, it's a great event, but. . ." And we're kind of at the point of saying, "Well, unless people step up to the plate and help us, the great events won't happen." Someone's got to pay for it. The city's taken the lead . . . but business has to get behind it if they want more of this to happen.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission. Because my feeling is that I've got to get people to understand that there's a river, that Waterplace is only one part of this project. So I've got to connect the dots, in a sense, to get people to go from one end to another. And the easiest way to do that is to put an event out there.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.