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The Wassaic Project: Free Ticket to Ride the Art Train

1:39 pm Wednesday Aug 12, 2009

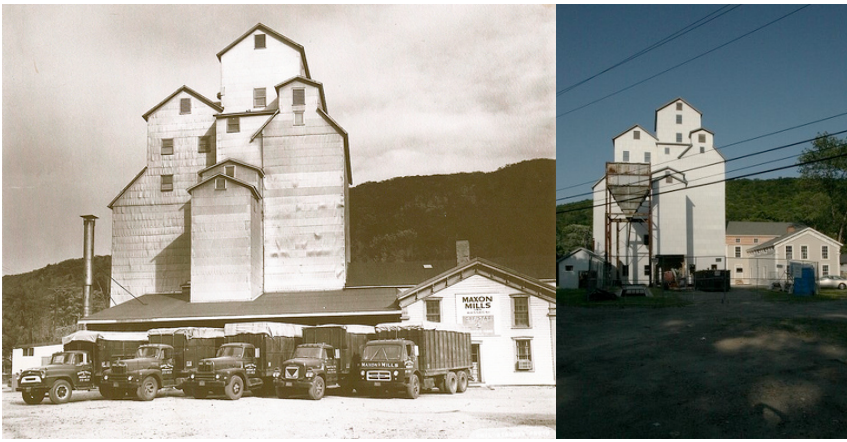
by [Kelsey Keith](#)



[The Wassaic Project](#) is a four day contemporary arts festival set in the pastoral environs of Dutchess County, New York. Curated by a three-person team of artists, the event is a mashup of music, dance, and visual, installation, and performance art. It's not your highfalutin ' arts festival, either: admission is free (though donations are encouraged) and an on-site camping permit is only \$25 for the entire weekend. Details on what you'll see, plus an interview with founders Elan Bogarin, Eve Biddle, and Bowie Zunino after the jump.

Over 75 emerging and mid-career artists will join 25 live bands for cutting-edge programming that manages to be predominately family-friendly. Housed in and around historic buildings in Wassaic, NY — a former ironworks town and home to Eagle Condensed Milk — The Wassaic Project aims to “escape the white walls of traditional art spaces and focus on site-sensitive installations and performances.”

[Jesse Avina](#)'s photography and video work create a dialogue between the reality and fantasy of war via spooky landscapes of minefields; while synthetic wood, grass, and foam sculptures by [Kelly Goff](#) represent the marginal and unique aspects of society and their will to exist. [Michele Brody](#) has made a career exhibiting her mixed-media, site-specific installations across the world and in the New York metro area; recent public art pieces include an MTA installation in the Bronx and a memorial on Wall Street.



*Archival image of Maxon Mills in the 1950s; today the building has been renovated for cultural use with fiscal support from the Solo foundation (photo by Shirin Adhami).*

We spoke with artists and curators [Elan](#), [Eve](#), and [Bowie](#) who founded The Wassaic Project in 2008.

**Flavorpill:** Okay, so let's start with the obvious. Why Wassaic?

**The Wassaic Project:** We are based in Wassaic because of a serendipitous and extremely fortunate situation: The owners of both Maxon Mills and The Luther Auction Barn purchased the buildings out of passion for the architecture and were looking to convert them into a cultural institution. When we approached them about starting The Wassaic Project they were, and have continued to be, incredibly generous and supportive. We have found that we love our home in Wassaic, and are incredibly grateful for the hamlet and surrounding area's beauty, rich history, and hospitality .

**FP:** How do the three of you know each other and what was the catalyst for starting the festival last year?

**TWP:** All three of us grew up in downtown Manhattan within a 1/2 mile radius of one another, however, our paths did not seem to cross till we all became artists. Eve and Bowie met at Williams College in 2000, where they were in of a public art performance group together, and Elan and Eve crossed paths in Chicago in 2005 where they were curated into a group show together. The festival developed out of the idea that we, as artists, were interested in building a community of creative minds, creating opportunities for emerging artists of all mediums to come together and experiment within a safe and supportive environment . Also, we were so inspired by the space ourselves that we wanted to share our excitement and get other artists up to Wassaic to see the many possibilities the site offers.

**FP:** Besides each others' work , what are some examples of other visual arts organizations and non-profits whose business model(s) you admire?

**TWP:** There are many artists and organizations who have greatly influenced The Wassaic Project. In an effort to not begin a huge list and then leave folks out, we will name just a few institutions that have really inspired us: [The Torpedo Factory](#) in Alexandria, VA, [Project Row Houses](#) in Houston, TX, [Creative Time](#), in New York, NY, [KK Projects](#) in New Orleans, LA, the artist [Theaster Gates](#) in Chicago, IL, and the [Black Maria Film and Video Festival](#) in Jersey City , New Jersey.

**FP:** Can you point out any frustrations with how traditional NPOs work in terms of promoting artists and new work, and how the Wassaic Project presents a different point of entry?

**TWP:** We approach the Wassaic Project as artists and as peers of the artists and musicians that we work with and show, so we approach the process of running our space the only way we know how: openly, flexibly, and with a sense of humor!

**FP:** How many people do you expect to join you this week? Who are your dream visitors? Any special guests planned?

**TWP:** Oh wow... we have no way to know, but we are expecting around 1,000+ participants will attend over the course of the weekend. We are thrilled that the majority of our artist will join us and participate in our weekend's festivities and all of our guests add something unique to our week-end long community. Every participant brings the space more to life. Eve's dream visitor is a martian robot who makes pancakes. Elan adds on that it would be fun if the martian also liked to hang art and clean for free.



*The Luther Barn is another renovated building on the property; the rustic interiors create a natural backdrop for artwork.*

**FP:** What are some of the highlights of this year's event? Say we can only come up for one day; what can we absolutely not miss?

**TWP:** The visual art component of the festival will be open to view everyday and there is a huge variety of events and performances taking place throughout the weekend. We encourage visitors to check the schedule and decide for themselves. That said, music and performances are concentrated on Friday and Saturday.

**FP:** Can you tell us a bit about the guest curators: Nick Cohn, Jess Wilcox, Emily Schroeder. Did you develop the themes together or grant them autonomy from one another?

**TWP:** The process of finding and working with the guest curators was fairly organic. We worked with each guest curator in developing their concepts and facilitating their installations in the Mill. And they each have complete autonomy from one another.

**FP:** We would love to see the short program of award-winning short films, curated by [Liliana Greenfield-Sanders](#). How did that come to fruition and what theme is Liliana exploring in regards to her selections?

**TWP:** Liliana is an incredibly talented film maker and a dear friend, and when she approached us about curating a program of short films that she admires, we were thrilled. Liliana has been on the festival circuit with her own films, Gluten Free Films, and we are pumped to have her award-winning film *Adelaide* at The Wassaic Project.

**FP:** What other collaborations were involved with this project? Working as a team of three, how do you make committee decisions while supporting each other's independent curatorial strengths?

**TWP:** One amazing thing about this project is the pure amount of collaboration that goes in to making our events happen. All of our artist and festival participants chip to make the event function and fun, and we are extremely grateful for that. Our emphasis on installations and experimentation also seems to breed collaboration, so we have a large number of collaborative

teams in the visual art component of our festival. There are also organizations in the area that have been remarkably supportive including the Kent Film Festival and Eastern Provinces Photographic Society.

And as for our collaboration, we try not to micro manage each other — we each have responsibilities and we take care of them. We share work with each other all the time via email and artist’s websites. Usually we agree on work, but if one of us feels strongly about an artist or a piece we respect that.

*The Wassaic Project summer arts festival runs August 13-16; detailed directions and visitor info [here](#).*

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