

Convergence, Providence, Rhode Island

by Nick Capasso

This autumn, Providence celebrates the 15th anniversary of Convergence, its annual international arts festival. The event began in 1988 as a weekend-long celebration and has expanded into a month-long smorgasbord of arts events across the state. Convergence brings together contemporary art, music in every imaginable genre, film and video, dance, theater, puppetry, art-car parades, bridge illuminations, art and craft demonstrations and workshops, and a street painting festival that engages multiple audiences in literally hundreds of venues. This massive undertaking was the brainchild of Bob Rizzo, Director of Cultural Affairs for the Providence Parks Department. For 10 years, Rizzo single-handedly ran Convergence, simultaneously wearing the hats of administrator, curator, programmer, fundraiser, and facilitator. Since 1998, he has been assisted by a single full-time staff member, Associate Director Lynne McCormack. He also benefits from the labors of part-time

staffers Tina Juul, Lindsey Hart, and Bob D'Maria, and a host of volunteers.

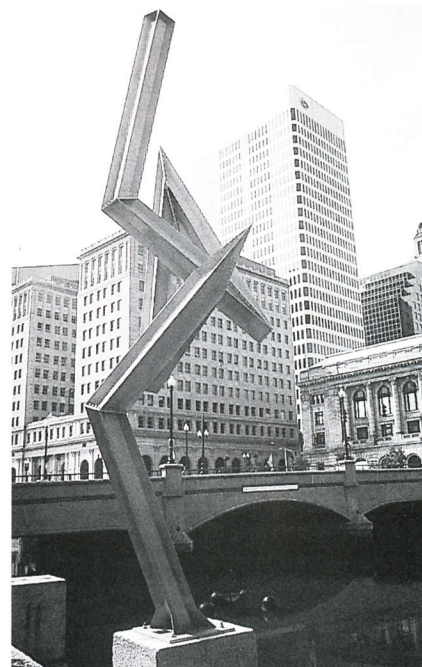
A sculptor himself, Rizzo has placed sculpture at the heart of Convergence. Each year, the festival features an ambitious exhibition of contemporary outdoor sculpture in public places. Rizzo decided to foreground sculpture for a number of reasons. By the mid-'80s, the state of public sculpture in Providence was dismal. Although it has a respectable inventory of figurative monuments by well-known 19th- and early 20th-century academic sculptors (including Randolph Rogers, Auguste Bartholdi, Henry Hudson Kitson, Theodora Alice Ruggles Kitson, Leo Friedlander, and C. Paul Jennewein), its modern and contemporary outdoor sculpture was scattered and poor in quality—despite a local art scene dominated by the Rhode Island School of Design and Brown University. Rizzo felt that the city needed a potent injection of forward-looking aesthetics to match the ambitions of Providence's



arts-friendly administration. He was also aware of the lack of regional public venues for emerging artists and determined that Convergence would be dedicated not to the well-known work of art stars, but to experimental work by up-and-coming sculptors.

Rizzo strategically used sculpture to reinvigorate spaces within the city. From 1988 through 1995 Convergence events were held in Roger Williams Park, a sprawling 430-acre green space on the south side of town. Sculptures

Clockwise from top right: Peter Lundberg, *Oogon*, 2000. Cast concrete and stainless steel, 23 x 12.5 x 5 ft. Bilhenry Walker, *Inuit's Bone*, 1998. Aluminum and bolts, 24 x 8 x 8 ft. Peter Stempel, *Russian Houses*, 1997. Plywood and paint, 12 units, 6.75 x 5.6 x 156.5 ft.



BOB RIZZO



Clockwise from top left: Mary Shaffer, *Containment Field*, 1996. Steel fence and live plants, 24 x 12 x 8 ft. John Hock, *Balzac's Odalisque*, 2000. Fabricated painted steel, 26.1 x 13.6 x 12.5 ft. Jay Coogan, *Deep Water*, 1991. Painted Styrofoam, dimensions variable.

were placed throughout the park, not only to increase attendance, but also to draw visitors to unfamiliar places within the landscape. In 1996, the festival moved to downtown Providence, in conjunction with the International Sculpture Conference and the dedication of a massive pedestrian-friendly redesign of the city's waterways. Convergence now participates in the successful arts-aided urban renewal of the center of Providence by placing sculpture in parks, plazas, and lobbies, along streets, rivers, and canals, and on buildings and trees throughout the downtown. Best of all, this cityscape reinvigorated by public art changes each year. The temporary approach allows for artistic and technical experimentation and slays the *bête noire* of public art: invisibility through overexposure. Providence now has a wonderful collection of public art that changes every year to keep pace with contemporary developments and that reflects the artistic vitality of the city.

Convergence has also been a boon to sculptors. Over 300 emerging artists have found a highly visible venue. For

many of them, the festival has been their first—and formative—experience with outdoor work in a public setting. Unlike most public art programs, Convergence encourages innovation and risk-taking. One of Rizzo's most frequent utterances is "Great, let's do it." This attitude has resulted in the creation of a host of new works, most notably Barnaby Evans's immensely successful *WaterFire*. The performance art piece, begun in 1996, continues to draw thousands of visitors each summer to Providence's Riverwalk to witness a ritualistic spectacle of boats, torches, and music. Works exhibited in Convergence have gone on to other venues such as the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park in Massachusetts, the Franconia Sculpture Park in Minnesota, the Connemara Conservancy in Texas, and Chicago's Pierwalk. Other works have been sold to private, corporate, and municipal collections. Many artists report that their exposure in Providence led directly to new public and private commissions.

This year, over 20 sculptors will exhibit work at Convergence: Robert

Barnstone, Claire Lieberman, Peter Diepenbrock, Harry Gordon, Pat McDonald, Drew Goerlitz, Kathleen Griffin, Mike Hansel, Rob Lorensen, Coral Lambert, Lars-Erik Fisk, Stanley Marcus, Roland Mayer, Alissa Neglia, Gregg Schlanger, Howie Sneider, Roy Mills, George Sherwood, Cheryl Springfels, Craig Watson, Ward Tietz, David Cole, Tash Taskale, and Remo Campopiano. Many other sculptors will be included in outdoor shows across Rhode Island—in 1999 Convergence expanded into a state-wide arts festival, the only one of its kind in the country. This once-modest event has become an important and eagerly awaited showcase of contemporary outdoor sculpture, a major engine for tourism and economic development, and a national model for arts festivals and public art programs. When asked why he continues to work so hard for Convergence, Rizzo replies: "I get to change people's lives, every day. I get to make people think differently, every day."

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