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Elevator for Grain, Reinvented for Art

By [RANDY KENNEDY](#)

WASSAIC, N.Y. — When Sally Zunino’s husband and his business partner decided five years ago to buy the old grain and feed elevator here, a crumbling cathedral of agriculture that was raining siding onto the Metro-North tracks and the tiny hamlet below, Ms. Zunino would not even agree to go see it.

“I was so mad at him for putting money into this,” she said. “I called it his folly.”

But many tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of repairs later, the rambling old elevator, known as Maxon Mills, has turned out to be a different kind of folly, closer to Merriam-Webster’s definition No. 5 of that word: “an often extravagant picturesque building” used in the service of “a fanciful taste.”

A rare survivor among the stately wood-crib elevators that once towered over rural America, this 105-foot-tall structure has been reincarnated as one of the strangest new homes for contemporary art in the Northeast, a place that feels like a Lower East Side gallery transplanted into a treehouse, redolent of damp pine and the animal feed that once filled the spaces.

Art galleries and museums have been created in all manner of buildings once used for something else, factories and Army bases and power stations. A handful of old grain elevators have also been reinvented; one in Wichita Falls, Tex., has been converted into a rock-climbing gym. But the melding of art gallery and grain elevator into what its creators call the Wassaic Project, about to begin its second year of exhibitions, may be a first in the United States. (A wooden grain elevator in rural northeastern British Columbia has served as an art gallery since 1983.)

The project’s founders, Eve Biddle, Elan Bogarin and Bowie Zunino (the daughter of Sally Zunino and Tony Zunino, an architect and developer who bought the elevator with Robert Berry, his longtime partner), are all 27-year-old artists and friends who were raised in the East Village and are familiar with the constraints, spatial, financial and otherwise, involved in making and showing art in New York City. So when Mr. Zunino and Mr. Berry, who still envision developing the 54-year-old elevator into a restaurant or brewery someday, offered the women the chance to turn it, along with a neighboring livestock-auction barn they had also bought, into a sprawling exhibition complex — temporarily, but perhaps for several years — they jumped.

Since last summer, after the bulk of the renovation was completed, the project has drawn dozens of visual and performance artists and musicians from around the country, most not long out of art school, to show work and to help with the upkeep. And, at least on occasion in the summer, to camp out and turn Wassaic — a sleepy town of 1,200 that is the end of the line on Metro-North’s Harlem branch (the town’s name is taken from an American Indian word sometimes translated to mean “land of difficult access”) — into a

well-mannered art happening.

The project's summer festival, from Aug. 13 through Aug. 16, will feature 75 artists, several film screenings and readings, and 25 bands, including one that plans to mount an open-air funk opera.

"We dream big — that's our thing," said Bowie Zunino, who was at work last week in the former auction barn, as rain plinked through parts of the roof, trying to make a working snack bar out of an old lunch counter.

In the nearby auction ring, where art films are now screened, hand-painted signs still announce the commissions for various livestock (cattle and calves, 5 percent; hogs, goats and sheep, 10 percent). Outside, the stillness of the town, nestled in a valley, is punctuated only by the occasional sound of the train, which pulls in and lays over for about 20 minutes before heading south again.

This summer's first exhibition in the elevator, "Outside In," which ended last week, was organized by Sally Zunino, a clothing designer, and her friends Liz Parks, a Manhattan art consultant, and Sally Morgan, a Chelsea dealer. It was an apt title, and not only because of the art it featured, including a large, colorful rubber house by the artist Colin Williams that was inflated inside the grain elevator, and silvery pictures of snowflakes by the art-world stars Doug and Mike Starn on the top floor.

The title is also reminiscent of the nature of the space itself, a place where — if you need a bathroom — you must trek outside to the port-a-potty because there is no working plumbing. And a bird recently installed a nest down inside one of the elevator's conveyor belt buckets, the same buckets used last year by an artist to create an eerie installation involving tiny toy soldiers.

The elevator, whose tower with its old grain bins has been divided into six floors, is still a work in progress and is still revealing secrets. At one point Mr. Zunino discovered a couple of sealed spaces, now used as galleries, only after workers sawed through planks to reach them.

"He came home one day and was so excited," Sally Zunino recalled. "He said, 'I've just found a new room!'"

David Luther, a lifelong Wassaic resident whose family owned the auction barn for decades, said most residents have welcomed the art invasion, except for a "grouch or two."

"What we have here in town is a general store that doesn't have much in it, a post office and a tavern that's a funny little tavern because the owner only keeps it open a few hours a day and closes it whenever he feels like it," said Mr. Luther, who still helps take care of the auction barn and keeps his goat, Pantyhose, there.

"These people are bringing excitement here, and they have some good plans in mind," continued Mr. Luther, now a corrections officer at Sing Sing prison in Ossining. "And if anybody has a problem with that, I think they're a damned fool."

Ms. Biddle, who commutes frequently from her apartment in Brooklyn to Wassaic in a Honda Civic decorated with a wrap-around decal of an octopus eating a steak, said she and the other co-founders of the project hope to keep the space, which is nonprofit, open for several years, to attract emerging and more established artists from around the world. They also hope to keep admission free (although they do ask for

donations).

While Wassaic is a long way from becoming the next Marfa or Dia:Beacon, it offers a retreat from commercial pressures and art-world politics that is rare anywhere near New York City, Ms. Biddle said, and a space that is a world of its own even by the standards of industrial art galleries.

“About the only thing we can’t offer,” she added, “is white walls.”

The Wassaic Project Summer Festival will be held Aug. 13 through 16, 35 Furnace Bank Road, Wassaic, N.Y.; wassaicproject.com .

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