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ART AND ACTIVISM

Arts of Renewal for Troubled Times

Jay Critchley's 40th 'post-consumption' Re-Rooters Day ceremony is this weekend

BY JANIS BERGMAN-CARTON · JAN 4, 2023

Amidst the conflagration of World War II, William Carlos Williams — the 20th-century heir to Walt Whitman's democratic American poetics — wrote a poem about destruction, creation, and the hope for renewal. Titled "Burning the Christmas Greens," it begins with a ritual ("Their time past, pulled down/ cracked and flung to the fire ... burnt clean/ clean in the flame...") and ends with a transformation ("And we ... breathless to be witnesses,/ as if we stood/ ourselves refreshed among/ the shining fauna of that fire.")

Forty years later, in another troubled season, Provincetown artist and provocateur Jay Critchley created two ceremonial and participatory artworks that manifested Williams's imagery. In 1983, early in a terrifying epidemic and in a laissez-faire global economy that would generate unprecedented levels of consumerist consumption, wealth inequality, and environmental damage, Critchley produced one of the nation's first public performance pieces in response to the HIV-AIDS crisis. In "Immunity Mandala: A Community Ritual," he recalls how he created a sand painting on the edge of Provincetown Harbor and offered a prayer for "health and wholeness ... on this fragile, spiral spit of sand."



For decades, Jay Critchley's Re-Rooters Day ritual has culminated with a burning Christmas tree set adrift in Provincetown Harbor. (Photo by Nancy Bloom)

The second of these works, which would become an annual ceremony, was prompted by a chance visit to the Provincetown dump a few days after Christmas. Stunned by the piles of dying trees he found there, Critchley "re-rooted" a dozen or so of them back into the ground. "I stood up the Christmas trees amidst the turkey bones and broken and discarded toys," he says. He then invited some friends to join him in a ceremony in honor of this re-constituted sacrificial "forest." A year later, the first "Re-Rooters Day" anniversary saw the installation of a single tree in front of Patti Cozzi's health food store on Commercial Street. In 1985, when the event moved to Provincetown Harbor, Critchley introduced the ritual that has taken place every year since: the burning of a discarded Christmas tree on a makeshift boat set adrift in the harbor at sunset. The 2023 iteration will take place on Saturday, Jan. 7 in the East End of Provincetown Harbor at 4 p.m.

Over the years, the Re-Rooters Day ceremony has drawn anywhere from 10 to 100 participants. Attendees at the "post-Christmas, post-consumption" ritual, as Critchley's website describes it, are encouraged to "re-root" themselves in the Earth by relinquishing not only surplus objects but also the experiences, attitudes, and obsessions that impede their connection to nature. Critchley says that "gallstones, the names of the people met online who never returned calls, porn magazines, paid off mortgage documents, a painting commemorating Castle Hill's purchase of Edgewood Farm, and numerous personal addictions and political rants" have literally and metaphorically been consigned to the flames over the years.

Though each year's ritual still concludes with the floating, burning tree, the themes of individual ceremonies vary with the times: past events have included "Sport Futility Vehicles" in 1999; "Mad Kowtow Disease" in 2004; and "Mobil Warming" in 2016. While Critchley had not divulged the theme of this year's event by press time, he promised there would be a procession on the mud flats, which he would lead in one of his signature tunics and headdresses, typically composed of remnants of crustaceans and assorted rubbish collected on the beach.

A Provincetown resident since 1975, Critchley finds the themes — and often the material components of his art — at his feet.

"I've always loved to collect things," he said in a 2015 memoir recalling an early project in which he gathered discarded popsicle sticks ("the junk food of the 1950s") and assembled them into "fantasy dwellings" that presaged the environmental and transformative themes of his mature work. "My self-assigned job," he wrote, "was to gather this consumer detritus as raw material for my creations."



As "Miss Tampon Liberty" in a 1986 performance, wearing a costume made from thousands of pieces of plastic that washed up on the Outer Cape, Critchley made an artistic statement about the hazards of nonbiodegradable waste. (Photo courtesy the artist)

One year Critchley gathered 3,000 plastic tampon applicators that had washed up on Cape Cod beaches as a result of Boston sewage outfall into the bay and sewed them into a dress in which he performed as Miss Tampon Liberty, giving a new meaning to the line "the wretched refuse of your teeming shore."

Critchley's performance pieces exemplify the principles of "new genre public art": a term coined by artist Suzanne Lacy in 1991 to designate art that is activist in nature and intended not to achieve material permanence or enduring recognition but to facilitate altered vision, difficult conversation, and healing. One of the genre's earliest practitioners, Critchley credits Provincetown as a uniquely nurturing medium for its practice.

Critchley's work can also be understood in the context of other artistic traditions. He brings Whitman's and Williams's earthy, common-man aesthetics into the realm of contemporary multimedia and performance art. And he also continues a lineage of visual artists like Wassily Kandinsky and Joseph Beuys who assume a priestly

or shamanistic function of redeeming a fallen world through creative re-imagining. Critchley brings a dose of self-mockery, playfulness, and humor to this persona that his forebears have generally lacked.

A particular sense of place is central to his practice. "If a place can exist both in dream time and waking time, it is Provincetown," he said. Over nearly half a century, his locally sourced art has rooted and re-rooted itself in both our harshest waking realities and craziest utopian dreams, inviting others to join and stand refreshed in the creative fire, and — since it's Provincetown, after all — to look beyond the unconventional for something new.

Destruction and Renewal

The event:

Jay Critchley's 40th annual Re-Rooters Day Ceremony

The time:

Saturday, Jan. 7, 4 p.m.

The place:

East End of Provincetown Harbor

The cost:

Free

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