

# MICHAEL BEITZ: *general assembly*

April 4 - May 22, 2009

Michael Beitz is a Buffalo-based interdisciplinary artist whose indoor and outdoor works “use architecture, design, and sculpture in a playful manner to blur the boundaries of functionality and to engage the viewer with objects that relate back to everyday life.” Recognizing that our mental states of being are directly influenced by our environment, his work is both a reflection and subversion of the homogeneity that exists as a result of modern technology and mass production.

The saturated, earthy tones of Beitz’s terra cotta sculptures recall the natural landscape of the American West and the long-standing traditions of pottery and building construction, as evidenced by architect Louis Sullivan’s terra cotta ornamentation adorning Buffalo’s own Guaranty Building from 1896. *crossing*, Beitz’s installation of terra cotta feet cast from residents of Roswell, New Mexico, was created using multiple molds with the slip-casting process to shrink the casts from life-size to one-quarter inch. Through the intimate procedure of capturing the lines and curves of their feet, Beitz was afforded the opportunity to communicate with strangers on a personal level. This interaction is represented by the placement of the sculptures in a spiral form, evoking a rich sense of community and symbolizing different generations moving together with the passage of time toward a common goal. One of the most universally recognized symbols, Beitz’s incorporation of the spiral motif invites a multitude of interpretations, including the concept of infinity and the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

If *crossing* implies a utopia in which citizens’ shared perspective unites them, then *casting*, at least upon first glance, represents their discarded pile of bad ideas, the rubbish of society tossed out by the side of the road. Horrific allusions to genocide and mass graves are brought to mind as we realize that perhaps it is not evolution, but devolution, that is suggested by the adjacent faceless crowd of marching feet as they become smaller and more animalistic. Yet, upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that the heads were cast from a single person, none other than Beitz himself. With this realization, a more comical translation emerges, one rooted in the sweet ennui of everyday life and work. Lighthearted interactions amongst the sculptures become more visible, as if the heads were kissing or whispering assurances to one another. No longer equipped with shoulders on which to hold the weight of the world, the minds are at peace.



*brick with ear*, 2001, Brooklyn, NY, cement.



casting, 2009, cement.

As a product of Beitz's casting hundreds of heads at a rate of two per day (an outcome that could easily be matched by a modern machine), the viewer is provided with an impressive magnitude of objects that serve as quantifiable evidence of his labor. The resulting heap of cement is anything but waste, as evidenced by his strategic placement and care. However, for Beitz, it is the therapeutic quality inherent in the actual process of making and collating that holds meaning. He explains, "We know ourselves new every day. To cast is to create the positive and to cast is to discard. *crossing* and *casting* are both about arriving and departing."

The repetitive nature of the act allows Beitz to think clearly and escape the monotony and heavy burden of the daily routine by emulating it. It is in this context that these works might also be read as poetic monuments to

manual laborers throughout history. The terra cotta feet elicit thoughts of the Chinese craftsmen forcibly employed to build the First Emperor of Qin's Terracotta Army in 210-209 BC, while the pyramid of heads mimics a social structure in which blue-collar workers define the base, the importance of their grueling work suggested by their functional role of providing structural stability to the rest of the pile.

These works, along with Beitz's outdoor interventions, reintroduce the notion of the hand in our understanding of the urban environment. For his sculptural graffiti works, Beitz replicates the knowledge and precision of the bricklayer, cleverly and skillfully repairing the gaps left by missing bricks with cast body parts such as foreheads, ears, noses, and belly buttons. By catching the unsuspecting passerby off guard and disrupting his/her path, he provokes the viewer to contemplate the disparities between hand fabrication and automation with a renewed appreciation for the laborer, thus engaging in a form of community revitalization that brings vivacity to the derelict surroundings.

- Cori Wolff, Exhibition Curator



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Major support provided by: Erie County Cultural Funding, M&T Bank, Tri-Main Development, LLC  
Additional exhibit support provided by: Buffalo ReUse, Cohen & Lombardo, P.C., Niemiec Builders Supply