FAMILIE BECK

An Exhibition
Installed At Real Art Ways
Hartford, Connecticut
April 1990

By

RICHARD BAIM

with a text by

THOMAS LAWSON

TIME CAPSULE EXPLODES

Thomas Lawson

History makes a savage sweetheart. Ignore it and you will become entangled in the inextricable web of its irony. Flee and it will play with you without mercy; use you to the point of exhaustion. Court it, however, and you will likely find yourself in a placid backwater daydreaming of better, or more exciting times. You will find yourself forgotten, until, in a moment of your own forgetting, the complications of history will be there to mock you. This is a tale of random returns, concentric passages through a period of fifty years.

At a certain point during the first four years of Ronald Reagan's Presidency, Richard Baim was forced to move out of his studio in Lower Manhattan. The real estate speculation that has gradually destroyed New York claimed another victim. Baim moved to an all but abandoned section of the city bordering on what was once the central business district of Brooklyn. This was an area of dilapidated and often empty buildings that seemed to support two businesses: minor drug dealing and second hand stores. These latter pretended to trade in antiques, but mostly traded in junk. One, however, stood apart, a treasure trove of household effects squirreled away from the court ordered auctions of unclaimed estates. Rudy's was more than a junk store, it was an archive of daily life in Brooklyn over the past fifty years, a depository of photo albums, bundled letters, souvenirs and mementos documenting forgotten lives. Here the patient browser could unearth a cross section of time and discover the texture of a vanished generation. Baim soon became a regular customer, fascinated by the repeated pathos of these discarded memories of lost families.

It was at Rudy's that Baim first encountered the Beck family. First there were snapshots and formal portraits, then some letters and a collection of souvenir brochures from the New York World's Fair of 1939. Passing some idle hours Baim began to speculate about his growing collection. Who were these people, what had happened to them? Then came the bonanza, the discovery of John Beck's camera and negatives. The man had been an amateur photographer of some ability; it was almost possible to cast him in the role of unrealized, or undiscovered artist. An idle fancy developed quickly into a full scale investigation, with Baim in the role of private eye seeking the narrative hidden by the remaining clues. Beck's pictures were developed, the family letters translated. The old neighborhood was staked out, the family grave uncovered. Gradually a story emerged, from the facts, or perhaps the imagination, a story that almost reads as a case study of the American Dream and its disappearance.

John Beck and his wife, Gunda were immigrants, leaving Germany for New York sometime during the Thirties. We can only speculate on their motives. Of course they sought a better life, the chance to make a decent living. Did they also want a new beginning, free of the weight of local history? Local histories, the

source of a proud identity against the world, had become, in the Europe of the Thirties, the engines of an intolerant violence. A sense of solidarity was being manipulated through the repetition of a litany of shared grievances, into a mass desire for a totality of spirit, a final solution to the troubling realities of a depression-racked economy. History, far from being a refuge, was becoming a monstrous threat, a menace to shun or forget.

So John and Gunda Beck arrived in New York in the land of forgetfulness, eager to begin anew. They did not sever the past entirely, however, they kept in touch with the brothers and sisters left behind. Memories were cherished, letters written. In New York the past was banished, it had no place in the city of the future, and no place in the lives of the immigrants who wanted a piece of that future. But in Germany the past was the future, the promise of the Fuhrer was that they could reclaim a golden past and then forever stop the clocks. Both visions imagined a timeless world beyond conflict and contradiction, both rested on a necessary violence. The American vision obliterated the past, the German sought to wipe out the present and future. Living between two cultures, the Becks lived the pressure of the times. No wonder John Beck became interested in the New York World's Fair and its vision of a magically harmonious future where a new beginning could be achieved without the nagging grievances of the past.

Looking back over fifty years, the New York World's Fair of 1939-40 seems either a very innocent, or very cruel response to the times. An elaborate carnival planned during the Depression, opened as the countries of Europe began total war, it inevitably looks trivial, almost shocking in its inappropriateness. Did the planners really believe that their big show would save the economy of New York, and of the rest of the country? That sheer spectacle, without the steel of an ideology enforced by storm troopers, could hypnotize people so that they would forget the realities of their daily lives? The fascination of the Fair is that, although it lost money, lots of money, and served none of its grandly stated goals, it yet managed to predict that in the so-called free world the creation of an ever more elaborate circus would be a more effective tool of social coercion than naked force of arms. The optimistic view of the future presented by the Fair and its exhibits fills us now with a nostalgia for what could have been, but a closer look shows that in many ways that view was not so far from reality. The future proved to be an illusion, but we were nurtured on that illusion, we grew up under its spell.

The Fair was conceived as an antidote to the times. In part a make work project, a local version of the New Deal's creation of jobs through real estate development, it was sold to the business community as a potential bonanza of tourism. It was never resolved how people who needed work to feed and clothe their families could be expected to spend lavishly on entertainment. But the Fair took itself more seriously than that. It was also to be an exercise in propaganda, a demonstration of the possibility of social perfection afforded by the American Way. Artists and intellectuals were enlisted to show the world what could be, and all the world was invited to join in the celebration. All the world save Germany, that is.

The vision of the Fair was a populist one, an idea of an improved democracy oiled by the material satisfactions of a consumer society. An idea of the people reigned supreme — people as consumers, not the workers of the Soviet state nor the warrior heroes of the Third Reich. A passive people seeking happiness rather than the sterner virtues associated with work and glory. And in the planning and execution of the Fair was clearly understood that this happiness could only be found by neutralizing history, holding its vengeful fury at bay. Lip service was paid to the notion that the Fair was a celebration of the 150th anniversary of the inauguration of George Washington as the first President of the USA, but nobody paid attention. This was a modern Fair, and that kind of obeisance to the past was seen as inappropriate at best. The business at hand was the promotion of the growing potential of a society of mass consumption.

The central symbolic act of the Fair had nothing to do with George Washington then, but was rather the placement of the "Time Capsule," a sealed container of objects and millions of pages of documents on

microfilm in front of the pavilion of the Westinghouse Company. History was buried, locked from sight. And in place of a headstone stood a display of the finest in electric goods, the real essentials for the new life.

The photographs and negatives that Richard Baim found in Rudy's second hand store, the remaining evidence of John Beck's aspirations behind a camera, point to two moments of intense creativity. The first is Beck's detailed record of the architecture of the World's Fair, a panegyric to a dream world. The second is a series of carefully framed views of the destruction of Nuremberg, matched to older pictures of the city as it stood before the devastation of war. Two versions of a lost paradise, as experienced by one in touch with both, with access to neither.

The war put the Beck's at war with themselves, at war with their family. The pictures of Nuremberg mourn a loss of innocence, and the irreversible destruction of the memories of youth. History here is not an abstraction, but a palpable loss. After the war the idea of brave new beginnings takes on a sour cast. Past and future alike were now impossible luxuries, the new necessity was mapped out in the present; material and emotional survival. Germany was gone, razed and under occupation, its memory forbidden. For decades it would be obliged to deny its past, skirt around the awkward questions of its history. The US was changed too, no longer a beneficent republic, but a military empire in sole possession of the ultimate weapon, the weapon that could indeed end history once and for all.

After the war the Beck's story sinks into the banality of a daily life with no great aspiration. They prosper along with the others in their oceanside community, they fail alongside everyone else too. John Beck lost his passionate interest in the camera. He still took photographs, but the inspiration is gone. What remains is the snapshot record of the everyday, but not the whole picture. Missing is a sense of the greater irony of history. During the late forties the family letters make it clear that John and Gunda took on the roles of wealthy uncle and aunt, sending care packages to surviving family back home. Participating in a kind of private Marshall Plan, they helped their relatives rebuild the homeland. Gradually everyone reached a level of comfort, it might almost have seemed as if the perfect stasis so ardently desired in earlier times had finally come to pass, that after the wrenching violence a peacefulness had been achieved. What nobody chose to notice was that the racial and ethnic strife that had ripped through Europe had not been eliminated. It was here in the United States , and growing in virulence. John Beck grew ill in the Sixties, and died in 1969. By that time Brooklyn was burning, neighborhoods were being lost to an epidemic of racism. Beck's gravestone lies abandoned, the place for Gunda unclaimed. She has simply disappeared. The area they made their home is shabby now, a landscape of empty lots and deserted streets. The future is elsewhere.

During the past decade the U.S., under the leadership of Ronald Reagan, began to breathe life back into that dangerous dream of a golden past that could be retrieved if only the hordes of The Other could be vanquished. It did this because it was becoming painfully clear the present was in ruins. New York, that great city of the future, is a shambles, the dream postponed. The vision of the old World's Fair has been betrayed, the secrets buried in the Time Capsule have returned with the haunting reminder that history will not be denied. During the same period Germany has been grappling with its demons, attempting to come to terms with them, and in 1989 it startled the world by reclaiming its past. On November 9, the anniversary of Kristalnacht, that infamous night when the StormTroopers declared war on mankind, the Berlin wall was opened. The people of Germany walked through to reunite. Once again the forces of historical change were moving, and now it seems as if it is the U.S. that is to be forgotten.

The store where Richard Baim found his archive is no more. Rudy, the owner, died of AIDS last year. Soon after, a development corporation razed the entire neighborhood in the name of progress. Now, instead of buildings and streets, there are muddy fields and cracked walls. Here and there, resting at odd angles to the landscape, lie huge machines. Trash catches in makeshift fencing. Brooklyn/Berlin.