



HOME | RESTURANT/BAR GUIDE | EVENT CALENDAR | CW FACEBOOK | PHOTOS | BLOGS | ARCHIVE

Search this website... GO

CONTACT US

HOME

Hello, Omaha, Bemis Calling!

Installation art offers gift with its 8-week telethon

By: Michael Joe Krainak

Issue: March 18, 2009

19 Mar 2009



“(402) Disconnect/Reconnect”

Through May 16

Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts

724 S. 12th St.

bemiscenter.org

When is telemarketing not an invasion of home and privacy? When it's a form of art offering the viewer and the listener an opportunity to “(402) DisConnect/ReConnect” from the ordinary to the extraordinary. At least that is what Kansas City-based artist Matthew Dehaemers is attempting with his ambitious, above-titled exhibit at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, which opened last Friday.

“(402) DisConnect/ReConnect” is a complex, interactive and performance based installation made up of several set and sculptural pieces with both an Omaha historical reference and a telecommunications motif. Telephone books, phones

and cable, along with box crates, wooden pens and conveyer belts have recreated gallery one of the Bemis into essentially a multi-media circus of activity. Outer rings include a miniature installation that connects stockyards to Omaha Steaks and a life size Strategic Air Command center office replete with a red telephone.

A sideshow offers dueling megaphones and Swiss Alps-like megahorn, but the center ring features the show's main attraction, a telethon call center with nine dedicated phone lines. Over the next eight weeks, volunteers made up of, among others, the Urban League, high school students, and walk-in patrons will make 100,000 local phone calls to offer a brief message that unites the listener to the community. As a telemarketing, crusader-type artist, Dehaemers says, “the only thing I am selling is Omaha.”

This is not the first time Dehaemers has impacted the local community. As a former Bemis artist in residence in 2006, he gave a public performance at the county courthouse downtown that marked the anniversary of the 1919 Omaha race riot that resulted in the lynching of William Brown. Dehaemers used white chalk to text wrap a mile-long account of the historical event while on his hands and knees for more than seven hours. Since then he has created similar public arts projects in Kansas City and Los Angeles that strive to unite a community's historical past and cultural present “sometimes using a medium unexpected ... this installation will use the digital pulse of the telephone to take the digital pulse of the Omaha community.”

This is how it works: Over the next 56 days volunteers will cold-call every name in the white pages with a different message daily, a “fortune cookie,” Dehaemers calls it, with no catches or preconceived response. Messages could include a famous quote, an aphorism or an historical fact to ponder. The callers will identify themselves, the show and venue, wait for a reaction and then wish the callee a pleasant day. At the very least, Dehaemers wants “for just a minute to change their trains of thought, to provide a point of light.” At the very most Bemis curator Hesse McGraw hopes the telethon will create good word of mouth for the show itself.

“Callers will log the listener's response positively or negatively with no prior expectation,” McGraw said. “Each call asks ‘what is the meaning of a gift?’ In this case, it accrues value as one thing passes to another.” As if foreshadowing this gift that could keep on giving, witness last Saturday's quote for the day which callers offered, “There is more than a verbal tie between the words ‘common,’ ‘community’ and ‘communication,’” said John Dewey, educator and philosopher. This seems to be the signature quote for this artistic experiment, a theme perhaps as it demonstrates what that “tie” is. “It could be the opportunity of an open-minded adventure of accepting something new and

complicated and tying it together to something familiar in order to change one's attitude," Dewey added.

Which is to say, the very experience of this installation, apart from being at either end of a phone call, requires an attitude change as well, perhaps nothing more complicated than being open to a new experience before dismissing it out of hand. Installation art, particularly in the interactive/performance mode, can be polarizing for patrons especially those with a mindset and a comfort zone when it comes to art and its venues. Yet anyone familiar with Bemis in the last five years knows that the center is no stranger to this type of art as part of its evolving role in the regional art scene. Director Mark Masuoka reiterated this at last Saturday's gallery talk with Dehaemers.

"A project as dynamic as this opens up an interesting set of repercussions, both positive and negative," Masuoka said, "and we have anticipated that reaction, which has again placed us as an art center in the community at large." Though it is too soon to gauge how the community will ultimately embrace "(402) DisConnect/ReConnect" as concept, performance and installation, the gallery talk, which included several young families, was well attended and upbeat. Whether Bemis can continue the momentum will depend largely on a continued flow of volunteers willing to make the calls.

This is probably why Bemis chose to place this installation in a first floor gallery with its regular hours and staff, which takes advantage of a steady stream of visitors. Interactive installations had long been the hallmark of the Bemis Underground, which is currently in a state of limbo with no large shows scheduled yet in 2009, according to their Web site. Installations such as the innovative and successful "Nuclear Dichotomies" created and curated by Tim and Ken Guthrie in 2006 and the somewhat less so "Nest Egg" of Bryce Speed and Eric Lopez Wilson. Bemis has also attempted such pieces on the first floor as well, including Martin Morehouse's "Through the Sausage Factory" in 2007 and last year's "Nascita" by Therman Statom, both of which required a leap of faith and a willing suspension of disbelief.

"I like people to work at it," Dehaemers admitted. "I don't think of art as something easy." One glance at "(402)DisConnect/ReConnect" and a protracted walk through its several set pieces and mini-installations confirms how labor-intensive it must have been for Dehaemers, McGraw and several Bemis staff including Matt Lowe and Joel Damon, to construct this labyrinth of telecommunications and cultural interconnection. Yet questions remain. Will the public join in and complete this hands-on project? And, more to the point for some viewers, is this acknowledged piece of work, a work of art as well?

While the former will take the required time, the latter has already been debated, and some say answered, by art theorists such as Arthur Danto. Philosopher, author and art critic for "The Nation" magazine, Danto has written of this Postmodern age, "It is a mark of the present moment that there are no outward criteria any longer of what can be a work of art. The meaning of 'work of art' could no longer be thought of by example or understood through precedent." As if anticipating a public's befuddled response to new media, installation and all things Postmodern, he asks, "If all the rules and standards are down, what happens to drawing, composition, the materials of the artist ... how do we judge, where are there standards, how can one evaluate?"

In general, Danto says, art is something created with meaning and within the context of that meaning. "It's meaning is its anatomy." More specifically, he argues, one must identify the meaning and assess the adequacy of its embodiment in the work. "A picture becomes art when, beyond representing its idea, properties of itself become salient in the work of embodiment," Danto said. "Rembrandt's paintings embody and do not merely show light." Danto has continued to apply his critical method in a series of essays and books since he wrote the above in his introduction to his 1986 anthology, "Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present."

Will a similar approach enlighten the viewer as to Dehaemers' purpose and relative success with "(402)DisConnect/ReConnect"? Leaving questions aside as to the telethon's altruistic objective and, does the installation support and embody the project's concept? For the most part yes, and with an exception or two the result is pleasing aesthetically, inviting, and thoughtful. Holistically, the installation is professional and playful, organic and fluid. It makes creative use of found and appropriated objects, especially telecommunications paraphernalia, which heeds Danto's dictum, "Its meaning is its anatomy." Furthermore, Dehaemers' imagery is enhanced by careful attention to scale, light treatments and even the wind for effect.

As you enter the gallery, a wall of fluttering white pages grabs your eye as they catch a breeze from strategically placed fans. The wall is a paean to populism, a memorial to the common man as it lists every phone number in Omaha with equal status and priority no matter who one is. One has to fight the temptation to rush over and look one's self up just to be sure of inclusion. Off to the extreme left is a small call-in box the artist will use to check on the telethon's progress periodically after he returns to Kansas City. To get to it you have to pass between two more archaic means of one-way telecommunication, the set of megaphones on the left and the long, undulating megahorn on the right covered with more phone book pages. Visitors are encouraged to man these devices in a curious sort of call and response.

Directly ahead is the calling center with its phones and phone lists atop "desks" decorated with glittering red foil draped across plywood crates. The call center also features colorful, pagoda-like lampshades and beaded electrical cords uniting each station. Completing the festival atmosphere of the telethon is the clever marquee with its rotating light treatment that projects the official quote of the day. Almost unnoticed are the "cattle pens" to the right that house single handsets as they await their turn on a conveyor belt to Omaha Steaks. The concept here is a bit of a stretch but it is an interesting commentary on another form of telemarketing "cattle call" that has put Omaha on the map.

A less effective connection in the show is made to the city's historic relationship with Offutt Airbase when it was known as Strategic Air Command. Dehaemers has devised a war room in the gallery's own ante-chamber off to the right complete with a mini phone book floor, an eerie red glow, and the proverbial red phone hidden under the desk. A continuous loop of Sidney Lumet's "Fail Safe" in the corner is a nice

finishing touch, but the Guthrie brothers' message of world annihilation in "Nuclear Dichotomies" being only one phone call away was more unified and better served by their installations' materials. Nevertheless, "(402)DisConnect/ReConnect" is a worthy addition to Bemis' tradition of exhibiting interactive installations that connect this contemporary arts venue to the community. How individuals respond at either end of the buzz in the coming weeks remains to be seen ... and heard.

Comments

Post new comment

Subject:

Comment: *

[More information about formatting options](#)

CAPTCHA

This question is for testing whether you are a human visitor and to prevent automated spam submissions.

Math Question: * 6 + 13 =

Solve this simple math problem and enter the result. E.g. for 1+3, enter 4.

