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Artist will reach out and touch through phone calls

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Don't hang up!



Matt Dehaemers works on his Bemis art installation, which ties together the Omaha Stockyards, the old Strategic Air Command and telemarketing. This part incorporates a paper cone of maps.

The next telemarketing call you get might not be a pesky solicitation. Instead, it may be an inspirational message.

One example is "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world," from the writings of American cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead.

Starting at 6 tonight, a small brigade of telemarketing volunteers will begin calling every name in the Omaha white pages. The calls are part of a performance and installation exhibit called "(402) DisConnect/ReConnect." Created by Kansas City-based installation artist Matthew Dehaemers, the exhibit runs through May 16 at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in the Old Market.

"I like art that interacts with and involves entire communities," said Dehaemers, who has been at Bemis for the past couple of weeks to install his exhibit. "We're planning to interact with everybody."

The calls will continue during normal gallery hours through the end of the exhibit. The hope is that they will reach all 100,000-plus people listed in the residential section of the white pages over the course of two months.

Dehaemers' installation focuses on three industries that have held dominant places in the region's history: the Stockyards, the Strategic Air Command — now the U.S. Strategic Command — and telecommunications.

Volunteers from the Urban League of Nebraska, along with students from Metropolitan Community College and the Kent Bellows Studio and Center for Visual Arts, will be among those working the center's phones.

The callers will have a different message each day, with the daily quote listed on a giant, flashing screen at the back of the call center.

"The idea is to transform the negative experience of a telemarketing call into something positive," said Hesse McGraw, the curator at the Bemis.

Dehaemers, 36, often devises his installations after thoroughly researching a community's local history.

Dehaemers began thinking about his current exhibit in the early 1990s, when he was an art student at Creighton University.

During that time, he read an article in the New York Times that referred to Omaha as the telemarketing capital of America. Some of his college buddies had part-time jobs as telephone solicitors. The idea of Omaha as a communications center stuck.

When Bemis approached him to create an installation this year, he returned to that telecommunications idea. He decided that the Stockyards, StratCom and telecommunications were all interrelated.

For example, Edward and John Creighton, the 19th-century founders of Creighton University, were involved in both the cattle and telegraph industries. Omaha Steaks rose to prominence in part because of savvy marketing. And the modern telecommunications industry took advantage of technologies, such as fiber optics, that are key to StratCom operations at Offutt Air Force Base.

Dehaemers uses fairly low-tech means to depict the high-tech industries. In fact, many

You call that art?

Matthew Dehaemers' communications project blurs the line between traditional art and performance art. In a traditional gallery setting, the object itself — a painting or a sculpture — constitutes the artwork. In performance art, the actions of the artist and his relationship with the audience are part of the art.

Dehaemers has a long history of creating unconventional art. In a 2006 project, the artist used chalk to write an account of Will Brown's 1919 lynching in an Omaha race riot. The narrative, which Dehaemers spent seven hours writing on his hands and knees, stretched nearly a mile.

The text itself was the physical art. The writing of the text was the performance art.

(402) DisConnect/ReConnect

of his displays are created from nothing more than recycled phone books.

The multimedia exhibit features a situation room — complete with a facsimile of the presidential red phone — along with a simulated Stockyards conveyor belt and a working telemarketing call center.

His situation room includes an old-fashioned government-style metal desk beneath an illuminated paper cone — made from discarded Offutt Flying Club maps. The Cold War movie "Fail-Safe," starring Nebraska native Henry Fonda as the president, will be shown continuously in the room.

His unusual Stockyards features phone receivers being loaded into Omaha Steaks boxes. The installation's nine call center tables have been decorated with long, glossy streamers.

So far, Dehaemers has commitments from more than 30 people to make calls. He says 100 callers will probably be needed to contact all the numbers in the phone book within two months. He hopes more volunteers will come forward after the show opens.

Glenisha Nelson, community projects coordinator for the Urban League, said her group has signed up to make about 20,000 calls.

"We'll be dialing in force," she said.

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What: Matthew Dehaemers' art exhibit about telecommunications, which will include, among other things, an inspirational phone call made to every person listed in the Omaha white pages.

Where: Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, 724 S. 12th St.

When: Through May 16. Gallery hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. The opening reception is today, 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Admission: Free

Volunteers: People interested in participating in the call center project should phone 341-7130, extension 13.

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