

# Omaha artist will attempt to call every Omaha phone number

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There are more than 100,000 phone numbers in the Omaha white pages, and over the course of the next two months artist Matthew Dehaemers will attempt to call them all.

Of course, he won't be doing this alone, as such a feat is almost statistically impossible.

Instead, the feat will be attempted with a group of volunteers in tandem with Dehaemers' latest art exhibition, "(402) DisConnect/ReConnect," opening Friday at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, 724 S. 12th St. in Omaha.

The ambitious effort to call every individual in the city's phone book is just one component of the exhibition, which strives to connect three of Omaha's many histories – that of STRATCOM, along with the telecommunications and stockyards industries.

"When I was in college about 10 years ago at Creighton, I realized that a lot of my friends worked part time as telemarketers in the area," Dehaemers said.

Soon after, he read an article in the New York Times that described Omaha as the telemarketing capital of America.

"I get inspiration from history and how different aspects of communities relate to each other," he added.



Bea Huff

One aspect of the exhibit showcases a miniature stockyard, with endless rows of stockyard pens acting as a parallel to the endless rows of cubicles in the city's telemarketing firms.

Japanese lanterns made of phone books adorn the gallery space. And in the phone-booth room where volunteers will make the phone calls to Omaha's residents, Dehaemers will screw each page of the Omaha phone book to the walls to show what all of the names look like next to each other.

"My biggest challenge with this was that it's a big orchestration and it needs a lot of collaboration in order to work," he said. "The staff of the Bemis and the various volunteers have helped construct the exhibit and will make the bulk of the phone calls."

Dehaemers is hoping for as many as 100 volunteers to take part in the phone call section of the operation, which will take place starting Friday and continue until Monday.

Each call will include a scripted conversation that will explain the project and offer a quick quote of the day that deals with different aspects of the community.

"Quite literally we're using the phone as a tool to reach people," Dehaemers said.

"It's a way to get people from different cultures and ethnicities to offer up and create a dialogue."

The exhibit won't be Dehaemers' first foray into the workings of Omaha and the Bemis Center.

In 2006, he was an artist in residence at the Bemis when he put on a public performance to commemorate the 87th anniversary of the 1919 lynching of William Brown. He moved on his hands and knees through downtown Omaha while writing an account of the events leading to Brown's lynching.

While the seven-hour event was witnessed by many in downtown Omaha, Dehaemers' current exhibition might turn out to be an even bigger spectacle.

"It's an absurdly ambitious effort, not so different than trying to get into the Guinness Book of World Records," said Hesse McGraw, curator for the Bemis.

"But the interest has been pretty phenomenal, so we might be able to pull off calling a couple-thousand people each day."

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