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## Telephone Line



Former Bemis resident phones homes

**by Sarah Baker**

Today's quote of the day — at least according to artist Matthew Dehaemers — is one about the greater good.

By the time this story runs, though, it will have changed. So if you got a call Monday, March 23, live from the Bemis Center as part of Dehaemers' show (402) *DisConnect/Reconnect*, you heard a friendly voice tell you that Jane Addams said, "The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life."

A bit deeper than your everyday, run of the mill telemarketing message. And although the phone calls are center stage in this show, there's a lot more at work here than just phone calls. If you somehow are reading this and haven't heard about this show, the backstory is simple: Dehaemers plans to make a call to every number listed in the Omaha white pages between now and the end of his exhibition.

Dehaemers created a number of large-scale works and even room-size installations in the Bemis Center. He studied the history of STRATCOM, Omaha's telecommunications industry and the stockyards. In the city's past, each of these held a primary place and all three depended on each other, at some point, to survive. In one installation, Dehaemers creates a "war room," with stack upon stack of phone books covering the walls, floor and making a desk, where a red phone rests. Omaha phone books are stacked haphazardly against one gallery wall, taking an ordinary object and elevating it to a piece of art. Another piece covers a whole wall with open phone books, and a strategically placed fan ruffles their thin pages in a soothing rhythm.

Omahans will remember Dehaemers — a 2006 Bemis Center resident — for his public performance in 2006 that explored the anniversary of the 1919 Omaha race riot resulting in the death of William Brown. Dehaemers used hundreds of pieces of white chalk to write in a contiguous line an account of the events leading to Brown's lynching. His seven-hour performance featured Dehaemers moving and writing, on his hands and knees, on the sidewalk surrounding the courthouse, where the mob first gathered.

Dehaemers said, from his home in Kansas City, that the calls for his new project are going well. Of course, some volunteer callers have been greeted with a negative response — one, even, on opening night. Some responses have been quirkiest — for instance, one volunteer called a house where a child answered, handed his phone to his mother, and then, when the mother heard the message, handed the phone back to her son so he could hear the quotation for that day.

He has received some unexpected attention: a California-based website that focuses on no-call lists put a story about Dehaemer's exhibition on its front page.

"The website said this show sounded like something that would happen in California, not Omaha," Dehaemers said. "They said there must be something in the water in Omaha."

Dehaemers is also making calls to the gallery through a phone installed in a phone booth in the gallery.

"I never know who's going to pick up that phone," he said. "I talked to a girl just out of college who said she should have been studying but was at the gallery instead. I also talked to a little boy named Oscar who was asking me where I got so many phone books."

He'll continue to make such calls during the show — he said cold calling the gallery makes him face his own "phobias."

"Technology has changed us so much," Dehaemers said. "I have to work up some confidence to call a stranger. Texting and emailing let us get by without having to talk to somebody."

The phone calls being made at Bemis aren't being taped, but there is a record of each person's response: the actual pages of phone books are highlighted a certain color over a name to categorize the response. Dehaemers hopes to eventually post those pages for public view.

"The color coding creates a social document," he said, "and it tracks the pulse of the community. It will be interesting to see how that unfolds." ,

(402) DisConnect/Reconnect *continues through May 16, 2009 at the Bemis, 12th and Leavenworth. If you would like to volunteer to make*

*calls, you can contact Hesse McGraw at [hess@bemiscenter.org](mailto:hess@bemiscenter.org), or just show up during regular gallery hours. For more information, visit [bemiscenter.org](http://bemiscenter.org).*

*26 Mar 2009*

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