

ArtPrize: Competition and Social Experiment

by Donna Schumacher



View of the crowd at Rob Bliss's *100,000 Paper Plane Melodies Over Monroe*.

ArtPrize, the so-called “world’s largest art prize,” dangled a \$250,000 award in front of the citizens of Grand Rapids, Michigan, enticing them to visit its 2009 inaugural exhibition, cast their ballots, and become part of an impassioned dialogue

about art. With nearly 38,000 voters and 1,300 competing artists, the city was soon abuzz with opinions about who should win. Thanks to the “Ripley’s Believe it or Not”-inspired title, founder Rick DeVos created an innovative

platform—“think <Matchmaker.com> but with artists”—that cleverly conjoined Internet connectivity with a city searching for a sense of place during an economic downturn. Artists posted images of their work and described their ideal type of location. Venues posted possible sites to encourage proposals. Interested parties contacted each other to determine if there might be a good fit. By generating plug-and-play art matchups, ArtPrize gave artists a unique opportunity to try their hands at the sometimes daunting public art realm.

As a result, large metal sculptures popped up in urban plazas like mushrooms after an

autumn rain. Dragons (*Nessie on the Grand*) surfaced in the water, while abstract and kinetic sculptures sparkled with solar-powered lights at night (*The Grand Dance*). Shop and restaurant owners, museums, galleries, and homeowners selected artworks for 159 venues. Tapping the energy of community volunteers on a grassroots level, the sheer volume of opportunities was remarkable. Artists from around the country, and the globe, descended on Grand Rapids, stayed in local homes, organized donations from neighboring stores, and created works of art from one end of the city to the other.

Deborah Doering’s *Code for Grand River, Grand Rapids 09* beautifully exemplified this confluence of physical place and technology. Ah-Nab-Awen Park, located on the front lawn of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, provided the canvas for a series of marks developed from binary code. Doering stenciled her large white curves, dots, and dashes onto the lawn’s green canvas with a nontoxic paint that slowly faded with time and finally disappeared. The scale of the work and its public location were a first for her, providing a potential springboard for future commissions.

Rob Bliss engineered a half-hour-long event, *100,000 Paper Plane Melodies Over Monroe*, in which brightly colored paper airplanes floated off six

Thomas Birks, Richard App, Joachim Jensen, and David Valdiserri, *Nessie on the Grand*, 2009. Styrofoam, 100 feet long.



different rooftops and onto a crowd of 20,000 spectators, while a volunteer orchestra played a commissioned melody. Like ArtPrize itself, much of the spectacle and success of Bliss's work relied on the enlistment of thousands of volunteers from the general public: participating in everything from plane fabrication to final lift-off, each volunteer became more invested in the concept of this particular work and in the meaning and validity of creative endeavor in general. Monroe Street runs straight through downtown Grand Rapids, and like the center of many Midwestern towns, it is generally devoid of crowds and activity. Recent additions to the Grand Rapids Museum of Art and Maya Lin's Rosa Parks Circle have done much to draw residents back to their downtown, but there are obstacles yet to overcome.

Established local venues employed a more traditional form of curation, attracting artists with funding and a cultural seal of approval. The Urban Institute for Contemporary Art, one of the city's primary contemporary art venues, invited emerging artist Jason Hackenwerth to create a large installation to fill its daunting warehouse space. *The Ecstasy of the Scarlet Empress* was balloon art gone fine art, manipulated and multiplied until the little carnival dog morphed into a biomorphic thing from another planet or deep beneath the sea. Hackenwerth's whimsical opening performance engaged both young and old, indoctrinated and skeptical alike. Like many ArtPrize "top 25," he used everyday materials and innovative methods to make work that was simultaneously inventive and accessible. Pushpins orga-

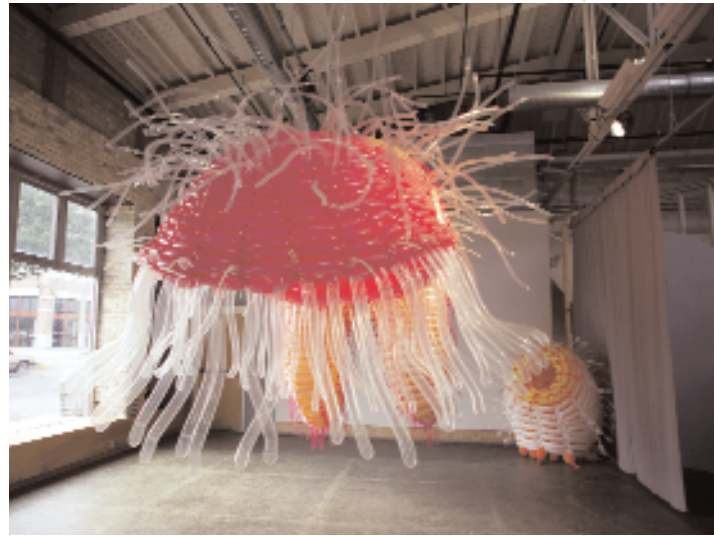


nized as pixels became larger-than-life close-ups in Eric Daigh's *Portraits*. Nails set in neat rows like hairs in their follicles covered the skin of Bill Secunda's *Moose*.

Entering ArtPrize with an eye to win raised the question of what makes a winner in a grassroots endeavor based as much on the Internet as on physical space. Is it innovation, talent, or familiarity? Think animals and landscapes. "Location, location, location?" Some venues are favored with easy access and centrality. Or is it something even less quantifiable, like social buzz? Some participants posted Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook links to help generate votes. Artists often self-fund their projects, and for works as specific and large as these, the incentive to offset expenses is keen. For 2010, ArtPrize has added more exhibitions to offset the location advantage and encourage voters to explore more regions of the city.

Public art has traditionally played a pivotal role in the cre-

ation of civic space by providing landmarks for shared experiences. In the late 20th century, it was easy to question the importance of physical place as we pointed our heads at ever smaller screens. But the 21st century has shown us the other side of this dynamic interrelationship. When I say "Chinese restaurant" in the direction of my iPhone, Google's voice-recognition app and Apple's GPS locator join forces to direct me to an inexpensive restaurant, with delicious food, just around the corner from my house. I had walked by this



Left: Deborah Doering, *Code for Grand River, Grand Rapids 09, 2009*. Paint, installation view. Above: Jason Hackenwerth, *The Ecstasy of the Scarlet Empress, 2009*. Balloons, installation view.

unassuming little place countless times, but it was invisible to my gaze; the collective knowledge harnessed by the Internet popped it back into view. Using the same magic, ArtPrize can lead viewers to discover what has always been here: the cumulative energy of our communities, the inherent collectivity of civic space, and the unlimited power of creativity.



John Douglas Powers, *Field of Reeds, 2008*. Wood, steel, plastic, and electric motor, 4.5 x 14 x 10 feet.