

CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM: Marketing Without Walls

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For the Contemporary Art Museum (CAM), headquartered in Raleigh, the challenge during much of the ADI study period has been to maintain the museum's presence and profile as a presenting organization in the Triangle while conducting a \$2.5 million capital campaign to renovate a warehouse in a historic neighborhood that will serve as CAM's new home. In a tiny office on the fourth floor of the Wake County Government Building downtown (ironically also under renovation), CAM executive director Denise Dickens has been operating a museum without walls since 1998. The museum gave up its former space downtown with the purchase of the half-million-dollar warehouse, but fundraising for the renovation has been slowed, in part, by a sluggish economy. A controversy over the promised application of local hotel tax revenues to help support arts organizations, including CAM, has also created a challenge.

"We're not quite at a million in private dollars raised for the new space," says Dickens. "We are still waiting on the public funds. Because of the slowdown, we are looking for a two-year tenant to occupy the warehouse while we continue to raise funds."

When it was founded in 1983, CAM was the only museum in the area focused on contemporary art. Since then, the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, the Ackland Art Museum in Chapel Hill, and the Duke University Museum of Art have all brought in contemporary shows, but CAM has maintained its distinctive leadership in

this niche. It also sustains a strong connection in the area with public school teachers through ongoing arts education programs and exhibit-related materials.

"We are an urban museum," says Dickens, "and we draw audiences from all across the Triangle." For its part, CAM has benefited from the changing demographics in the region. "So many new people have moved here and have stumbled into us -- people who want avant garde theater, art, and music. As for the longtime residents, Durham and Chapel Hill have always had audiences that are hungry for that kind of programming," she says. "But we've had to work a bit harder at attracting the people in our own backyard -- the people in Raleigh who tend to be a bit more conservative."

As a means to broaden their audience base and blend local and global flavors in their exhibits, CAM has made a deliberate effort to solicit work from international artists while also adding five or six North Carolina artists to every major exhibition they undertake. "What we're trying to do is take our North Carolina artists and put them in an international arena. It is good for us in terms of community service and good for the homegrown artists," says Dickens.

As a result of the eclectic mix of artists and media exhibited, CAM has likewise drawn eclectic audiences that include "purple hair, black leather, and body piercings alongside government officials in \$600 suits," Dickens says. "And we want to sustain that mix." To this end, the vision for the new museum facility is a space that will serve as a community center, a social gathering place, and a hang out for a range of people in a neighborhood that is being gradually revitalized, with new businesses moving in.

Driving audiences to the website with cinema advertising: For CAM, participation in the Audience Development Institute along with its "homeless" status, brought an unanticipated opportunity to test a new form of advertising -- in local cinemas. As part of the cooperative advertising program offered through the Durham Arts Council to

ADI participants, CAM prepared a single slide of a photograph taken from a public art project and submitted it as part of the ADI advertising program.

"At first we didn't know what we might advertise through this venue," says Dickens. "We didn't have a physical space to promote." Then the staff realized that they might simply offer a striking photographic image along with the museum name and its web address -- nothing more. The slide appeared along with other full-screen ads before the regular trailers and feature presentations in the three largest area theaters -- one each in Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill.

"We went from between 200-300 hits on our website per week to nearly 4,000 hits in one weekend. It was phenomenal," says Denise Dickens. The Museum later purchased another cinema ad, this time preparing an animated piece about an exhibition that was opening in borrowed space. The ad ran at art cinemas in Raleigh and Durham. Some 800 people attended the opening -- a very large crowd, Dickens says.

This surprising fit between these two visual media makes Denise Dickens long for the budget to do more cinema advertising, but it is simply too costly to sustain, she says. "Still, the whole concept of cinema ads was huge for me. It has made me think beyond print in new ways." Having driven more curious prospects to the CAM website via the cinema ads has led to other plans for making and maintaining an electronic connection to audiences, especially while the museum goes homeless.

Establishing more web-based communication with membership: The success of its cyber connection with museum patrons has also led CAM to rely more heavily on e-mail notices and reminders about ongoing events to its members. "We have found that the computer is a great community tool for us, even with audiences in their 50s and 60s. It is the means by which many people in our audience like to get their information."

"For us," says Dickens, "ADI was also a wake up call for us to work a good bit harder in creating a stronger presence with the African-American population." The ADI statistics showed that the African American market is ahead of many other groups in their use of technology, so CAM recognized the utility of the web in reaching that audience group. There is also a need to recruit more African Americans for board, volunteer, and staff positions.

Offering virtual studio tours: CAM has now created a virtual studio tour of forty-some local artists on its website, featuring one work per artist on the CAM site along with links to the artists' own home pages. Representing painters, sculptors, videographers, mixed media, and installation artists, the tour is both a resource for curious art patrons who might be planning a daytrip to visit local artists who have open studios, and it is an important way to promote the local arts community in general.

See: <http://www.camnc.org/>

Using billboards for an exhibition: Some ten artists whose work is presented in the virtual studio tour have also been selected to participate in a traveling billboard exhibition. The Art on the Move Billboard Campaign will consist of ten vinyl billboards that will travel over a two-year period to all three regions of North Carolina -- mountains, piedmont, and coastal plain. As with its other exhibitions, the billboard campaign will have a web-based instructional component for teachers who may wish to use lesson plans related to the art works in the program. Curious travelers who see the billboards in passing will be able to learn more about the participating artists and their work through the CAM website.

Addressing the negatives: As if it weren't challenging enough to run a museum without walls, recent negative press about another museum in North Carolina's capital city has caused some conservative political leaders to paint all museum projects with the same brush. "To build an audience does generally require identification with place

for a museum," says Dickens. "But we are in an awkward position with the negative press about other museum projects as we are trying to raise funds to complete our building." To counter some of this potential backlash, Dickens has placed a non-controversial exhibit in a traditional performing arts venue -- the BTI Center for the Performing Arts, which is part of the Raleigh Convention and Visitors Bureau Complex. The show presents paintings by a contemporary eastern North Carolina artist whose work is representational and easily accessible to mainstream audiences. "We will be curious to see if we can interest more traditional funders by contact with this exhibit," says Dickens.

Another temporary public art project at Meredith College (a Baptist college for women) and several shows in town will also maintain a physical presence around Raleigh in addition to its cyber- and traveling exhibits -- all designed to foster a positive image and maintain momentum for the building campaign.

Deepening neighborhood relations: Though it will likely be two more years before CAM moves into its renovated warehouse space, the Museum is planning to create a neighborhood presence by placing artwork and hosting events at other businesses and restaurants in the warehouse district. "We want the neighborhood to get a feel for us and for us to get a feel for the area, even before we settle in," says Dickens. "We are looking at the physical identity of the neighborhood and our appropriate place in it."

Through this challenging transitional period, the Contemporary Art Museum will also be studying the final report from ADI with an eye toward its future audiences, continuing to develop contemporary and innovative means for audience services and development.