

THINKING ACTS

Installation Combined Play with Contemplation

by Nancy K. Weant

The two-person exhibition *other / self* challenged views of our contemporary world. Though it opened to subdued fanfare on the final day of classes prior to spring break, the work by University of Missouri Assistant Professor of Art Cherie Sampson and Visiting Resident Assistant Professor jj_higgins provided a richly rewarding, thought-provoking experience.

Immediately upon entering the gallery, one was confronted with a series of stations by higgins that encouraged interaction. The first station, *the kissing booth*, invited people to step into a three-sided Plexiglas compartment and kiss themselves. A small shelf in the booth held gloves, lip-gloss, eye shadow, and an eyelash curler, and for those wary of germs, there was a large, white cylinder of alcohol wipes nearby. A two-way mirror and a camera captured each participant's kiss, shown on a small video monitor positioned on the floor behind, so that the only person unable to view the actual kiss was the person doing it. The frustration of knowing that others are watching you engage in a normally private act served as an uncomfortable reminder that, in today's society, our behavior is often being monitored in public spaces.

Another humorous piece, the *not-so flat files*, consisted of four wood shelves filled with white shirt boxes stamped with the words "This is not art." A set of meticulous instructions invited visitors to rearrange the contents of the files and also pointed out the surveillance camera watching them engage with the mass-produced consumer items and other odd objects: toys, bizarre food — such as a marshmallow treat shaped like a fast-food box of fries — even a hospital gown, bedpan, and a needle-less syringe. After completing documentation steps, including photographing the new re-combinations, participants encountered a final reminder, to make certain that "all objects are in the file containers, no remainders." The extensiveness of the process pointed out the absurdity of the extravagant amounts of time we spend on the organization and rearrangement of the objects we possess and the spaces we inhabit. How might our world differ, for example, if only we spent as much time making connections with one another or our outdoor environment?



Installation view of *other / self*. Foreground: jj_higgins, *in: tent*, vinyl tent, mixed media installation. Background: Cherie Sampson, *River of Spirit of Life* (ice piece), mixed media video projection date, medium. Photo: jj_higgins

The station before entering Sampson's exhibition space also called into question values of privacy and connection. A clear, dome-shaped vinyl tent (*in: tent*) snapped shut around its base and required one to lean down, unsnap, and then wiggle to get inside. There, participants found a portable chair, lamp, sleeping bag, books, S'mores ingredients, and a monitor playing a video of a previous *in: tent* exhibition shot at an RV camp. Noise was at a minimum inside, making participants feel as if they were enjoying a private space, even though they were in no way hidden. This false sense of privacy demonstrated how readily we accept intrusion into our private lives while thinking little about the consequences.

Sampson's video installation, *River of Spirit of Life* (ice piece), flowed well from higgins' play stations. Outdoor performances of the artist moving about on ice sent a chill through viewers as they watched projections onto two irregular-shaped screens constructed of felt and supported by multiple groupings of writhing trees. The dark shadows cast from the twisted, bark-stripped trees set a haunting yet contemplative tone in the gallery. In one performance, Sampson reclined nude on a slab of

ice on a river. Her back to the camera, she slid her body across the ice at a snail's pace toward a large body of water just beyond the ice slab. On the other screen, the nude artist performed a graceful dance on her knees in a cave-like setting in front of a frozen waterfall. Each performance ran a little more than 15 minutes in real time, but the ease with which Sampson moved gave the appearance that she was slowly merging herself into the natural environment; this created an unusually peaceful mood despite the discomfort she must have felt.

How refreshing to experience an exhibition that allowed for play, questioning of contemporary realities, and thoughtful contemplation. The artists connected with viewers through reflecting, reminding them of the things that truly matter. I hope viewers left feeling as I did, that is, challenged to play more, question more, and connect more with one another and the environment. •

Historian and art educator Nancy K. Weant holds a bachelor's degree in art and art history and archaeology and a master's degree in art education from the University of Missouri - Columbia. Currently, she is an adjunct lecturer in the art department at the University of Central Missouri, in Warrensburg.