

Will ArtPrize reinvent Grand Rapids?

September 23, 2009 — Colleen

Today, election season kicked off in Grand Rapids, Mich. Not to choose a mayor, but to decide who will win about \$450,000 in prize money up for grabs in ArtPrize.

ArtPrize bills itself as a radically open art contest — some 1,200 artists have their work on display, competing for first prize of \$250,000, which is chosen by votes from anyone willing to take the time to register. Depending on your inclination, you could either compare it to the presidential election or American Idol, but the latter seems more apt because all the voting is electronic and you can vote multiple times.



My husband, John Tebeau, is one of 1,200 artists competing in ArtPrize this week.

Voting just opened up this evening and already nearly 10,000 voters are registered and they have placed more than 4,000 votes.

Part of what's so interesting — and what has some in the art world up in arms — is that there's no curation. It's pure democracy. Any public venue in Grand Rapids that wanted to put up a painting, show a piece of pottery or display a sculpture could register on [the ArtPrize Web site](#). Likewise, any artist of any skill level, or lack thereof, with a willingness to subject himself to public scrutiny in pursuit of the prize could [register](#).

From there, it's sort of like getting a sorority bid or maybe online dating. Artists could seek out venues they liked and ask to be considered. Venues could either ask the artists to show or not.

When Rick DeVos announced his idea for ArtPrize this spring, the [Grand Rapids Press reported](#):

DeVos said he sees the democratic and technological aspects of the event as a way to “reboot the conversation between artists and the public.”

The event draws on DeVos' experience with his company, [Spout.com](#), an Internet community for film buffs, and [thecommon.org](#), a Web site that matches the abilities of people in communities with organizations in need.

“A lot of my ideas are around using technology to connect people to each other or to art in new and interesting ways,” said DeVos, 27, grandson of Amway co-founder Rich DeVos and son of former Amway chief executive and Michigan gubernatorial candidate Dick DeVos. “Thinking about that, thinking about events, thinking about an overall love of art, I started to come up with questions like, ‘What if we took a completely different approach to having an event in Grand Rapids?’

“What if the city itself was a gallery?”

The Detroit News’s Michael Hodges [wrote recently](#):

ArtPrize is the brainchild of Rick DeVos, grandson of Amway co-founder Rich DeVos and son of Michigan’s 2006 Republican gubernatorial candidate Dick DeVos. The point of the “American Idol”-style vote, says the younger DeVos, is not to suggest that ordinary people pick better art than experts, but to generate discussion among folks who don’t give art a lot of thought.

[Grand Rapids](#) is not known as the epicenter of art or on the cutting edge of cool. While it mercifully has not suffered [the problems Detroit has](#), it also does not have a major league baseball team ... or a pro football team or basketball team ... or a major airport, to name a few big-city amenities. It does have the Van Andel Museum, a Frank Lloyd Wright house and, of course, a museum honoring hometown boy Gerald Ford.

Could turning the entire city into an art gallery — and having 1,200 artists urge everyone they know to come to town to vote — infuse this city with a conservative reputation with artsy-ness?

Mark Sanchez of the [GR Press](#) wrote last week:

The term is “destination appeal.”

Grand Rapids has it. Just not enough. Or at least not the kind of appreciation or awareness nationally for its arts and culture that Douglas Small believes Grand Rapids deserves.

Come next week, that void could begin to fade in a big way, as ArtPrize launches in Grand Rapids, giving boosters and businesses not just a unique and high-profile event to rally around and support but a one-of-a-kind opportunity to promote the town as a destination to host conventions and conferences, locate a business and work.

“The positive buzz and the energy that is being created around ArtPrize is going to do things that traditional advertising could never do for me,” said Small, CEO of the Grand Rapids-Kent County Convention & Visitors Bureau.

What do you think? Can a high-profile event like ArtPrize change a city’s image permanently? Or is it just a short-term infusion of downtown visitors?

And what about the reputation of [Amway and network marketing](#)?

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