

Art Eats Art

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There has always been a thin line between art and advertisement. This line is perhaps at its thinnest when the medium used is a billboard. What are billboards if not giant pieces of art?

Maybe that was the thought that led Design Museum of Chicago to put up a billboard at the corner of Randolph and Jefferson. Their design (pictured above) features the artwork of Troy Lehman. The quote comes from László Moholy-Nagy: "It all looks familiar but when you investigate it, it's a different culture — it is no culture yet, just a million beginnings." The billboard is being used to advertise their ongoing project, Great Ideas of Humanity.

Both the general public and art connoisseurs alike have enjoyed seeing the streets of Chicago turned into a living gallery. I recently had a chance to speak with Lauren Boegen, Executive Director of Operations and Collections at Design Museum of Chicago. We talked about the billboard, the museum, and lightly touched on the meaning of art.

Tell us a bit about the Chicago Design Museum.

Well, we're actually now the.... drumroll please.... Design Museum of Chicago! The Design Museum innovates, inspires, and educates through design, and thinks about design very broadly. We've done shows about graphic design and architecture, but also about design thinking and video games. Our founder and Executive Director Tanner Woodford is a strong

believer in design having the capability to fundamentally improve the human condition, and we hope that visitors are inspired to think about the impact of design in their lives and communities.

On the factual side, the museum began in Chicago in 2012 with a pop-up exhibition in Humboldt Park. Since then, we've displayed materials in El cars, in Hong Kong, in Block 37, and most recently, in Expo 72 at 72 E. Randolph.

Why a billboard? Where was it placed?

The billboard showed a poster designed for an ongoing project, Great Ideas of Humanity. The project is directly inspired by the Chicago-based Container Corporation of America's (CCA) groundbreaking advertising campaign, Great Ideas of Western Man. CCA worked with artists and designers to create visuals to pair with quotes from the Great Books of the Western World series. Then, those ads (if you could call them ads, as they didn't actually talk about CCA or any of their products), were run in popular magazines, like Time and Fortune. The campaign was focused on presenting philosophical ideas to the public in an accessible way.

Great Ideas of Humanity is a 21st century version of the CCA campaign. We try to stay true to the vision of bringing the material to the public in an accessible way, and we thought that a billboard at Randolph and Jefferson, where people are waiting to get onto the highway before heading home, would be an interesting way to do so.

Had you used out-of-home to advertise before?

No, and we were able to do it this time with grant support from Terra Foundation's Art Design Chicago initiative.

Who was László Moholy-Nagy?

A bit of an enigma, but very important to Chicago design. As an artist, he was a photographer and painter. Moholy-Nagy was also a Bauhaus professor, and was devoted to the Bauhaus principle of integrating technology and industry into art and design. In 1937, at the invitation of CCA's president Walter Paepcke, Moholy-Nagy moved to Chicago to direct the New Bauhaus. Eventually, this became the Institute of Design and was integrated into the Illinois Institute of Technology in 1949.

Talk a little about the design.

The work is by Troy Lehman, a Chicago designer who operates You With Rhinestones, a print and design studio. It can certainly be interpreted in many different ways – I think that each segment represents a beginning of a bigger project, or is a detail of a something larger. The viewer can guess what each is – ripped paper, a scribble, a bad photocopy – but there's no larger context yet.

Can you give us some details about the quote? How did it fit in your design and message of the Billboard?

The quote is Moholy-Nagy's thoughts about Chicago, and is from a letter he wrote to his wife, Sybil, while in town discussing the beginnings of the New Bauhaus. It is an observation of how

Chicago seemed, to him, still incomplete, still striving to achieve. This was inspiring to Moholy-Nagy, he wanted design (and himself) to make a mark here in Chicago.

What has the response been?

We've had great response to the series, and every time we display work in a different place and media, people are thrilled to see it "in the wild."

Would you consider buying more billboards in the future?

In the right context and with the right funding, of course! Billboards are a great opportunity to present public art in an unexpected context.

Can art exist without humans?

Oof. That's hard. Maybe – I don't know if animals make art in ways that humans don't understand, like birds building bowers or monkeys drawing. But, if we take that variable out, I don't think so. Art needs feeling and emotion, and without humans I don't think that exists. At least not in the way we understand art right now.

Anything you want to leave your readers with?

A goal of the Great Ideas of Western Man series was to encourage a strong democracy during the Cold War. Today, it is essential to celebrate and share the ideas that unite us, inspire us, and caution us; to consider ideas that transcend our individual worldviews and establish a common ground that binds us. Keep finding ways to do that!