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# ART REVIEW: "Audition," by Sam van Aken

## Equal parts ridiculous and wow

By [Rebecca Rafferty](#) on November 5, 2008



If you're down in the East End this month, you might see some young men staring lustily through the front window of Rochester Contemporary Art Center at the giant sphere of car stereo speakers. In my view, art generally falls into two groups: art that is personally owned vs. art that is owned by a culture. This show fits snugly with the latter category. It's also hilarious, humbling, and intelligent.

Syracuse-based artist Sam van Aken is concerned with our consumption of and our overexposed relationship to electronic media, and plays with the pop-cultural implications therein. Through repetition of sampled sound, and the clever arrangement of media vehicles, he creates thought-provoking phenomena out of that which is hollow and routine.

That speaker contraption near the window would be "Thumper," a more than 5-foot-tall, geometric metal sphere, covered in circular auto sound system bling. Emitted from each speaker is a repetitive, thumping beat; the piece comments on our bass-thudding culture, in which we frequently hear an abstraction of music, a fragmented thumping from the next car over at a stoplight. While the thumps faded to silence, my attention was drawn to the exclamations busting from the next sculpture.

"Oh My God" is undoubtedly the star of the show. Van Aken crafted more than 500 boxy stereo speakers into an 8-foot-tall, more than 50-foot-long

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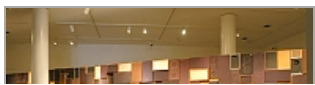
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### "Thumper"



Thumping beats emit from the contraption near Rochester Contemporary's window, part of the "Audition" exhibit. PHOTO PROVIDED

### The star of the show



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wall. The gallery's creative director, Bleu Cease, likened it to "the ultimate Tetris game." Each box emits at random a sound clip of the words "Oh my god," expressed in every conceivable emotion. The unassuming speakers are familiar, the carelessly used phrase even more commonplace, but van Aken combined them to create a physically and audibly imposing structure.



"Oh My God," part of Sam van Aken's "Audition" at Rochester Contemporary. PHOTO PROVIDED

Cease encouraged a peek at the wizard: behind the scenes each speaker is wired to a computer, which is programmed to spew a seven-and-a-half minute loop of randomly played sound files. I settled on a bench positioned in front and center of the sculpture that screams its own name. Silence reigns at first, but the punctuating clips increase in frequency over a few minutes. Some of the voices are recognizable (like Homer Simpson), others are more obscure. The vocal expression ranges from ditzy-squeaky ("Oh my gawwwd"), to breathless, irritated, terrified, orgasmic, and awestruck.

I felt edgy at the building pandemonium, the "ohmygods" overlapping as they came quicker and louder, and I contemplated the simultaneously empty and loaded phrase. In the modern vernacular, its meaning is dependent upon vocal expression: the tone, speed, volume, etc. Even atheists absently use the phrase for lack of a better way to express a lack of words. God just sounds like awe.

The cringe-inducing crescendo was nearly unbearable, and in a deafening roar of silence it was over, leaving only the bass-thump from across the room. I'd had little time to process it before another voice "ohmygod"-ed in reaction to some unseen tragedy. Then I waxed megalomaniac and realized: this is omnipresence. Hearing the floating appeals and then a rush of them during some disaster...it was overwhelming.

The provided transcript of the October 2 WXXI interview between Brenda Tremlay, Cease, and van Aken, reveals the inspiration for the wall. The terrifying attack on September 11, 2001 had been played and overplayed on television, eventually desensitizing many to the horror. Meanwhile, "There was one aspect of the video that still got to [van Aken] - it was a woman shouting three words in the background [...and] van Aken started hearing that phrase everywhere," says Tremlay. Collection began, and 600 clips later, van Aken had drawn from cartoons, porn, hip-hop, cinema, and that famous 9/11 video. "What it really emphasizes more than anything else is the silence", says van Aken, "even as I listen to it now the silence just becomes dead and you're just waiting and waiting."

At the gallery, Cease commented on the "weird dissonance of the disembodied context" of the voices in the "Wailing Wall." He characterizes van Aken's work as, "refined irreverence. It's funny," he says, "but it asks some serious questions." Honestly. Giggling over Homer and the orgasms aside, van Aken's art focuses on the emptiness in the overuse of the ubiquitous phrase, and the gravity of the situations that solicit the automatic utterance.

When you can tear yourself away from the wall (or when you flee from it, be that as it may; I have expressed my concern for the sanity of Cease and his staff...), visit the cylindrical room at the rear of the gallery, where you can view the "World's Most Amazing Video."

"He called this an empathy machine," Cease says, speaking of the artist's explanation for the tiny TV and heating duct installation. The viewer stands under the opening of the duct, inserts her head into the silver tube, and watches two men cleaning an elephant and its stall. I won't reveal the punch line, but I will tell you that your act of watching replicates what you see.

This is the one silent piece in the show, if you don't count your nervous chuckle as you realize where your head is symbolically located. The work asks about "the nature of viewing something like this on YouTube," Cease says. "It comments on the pleasure we get from watching others' torment," simulated again by "the other dynamic of me

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watching you engaging with the artwork." Yes, and emerging from the tube sheepish and slightly pink of cheek.

Van Aken's work creates new and pointed definitions from of the haze of lost meanings in these strange, electronic times.

Audition

By Sam van Aken

Through November 23

Rochester Contemporary Art Center, 137 East Ave

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