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Interactive exhibit at University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum gets you in the frame

Lennie Bennett, Times Art Critic

With help from viewers, Werner Reiterer's conceptual exhibition shows off some surprises.

Editor's note: If you're looking for the video we planned with this story, we were unable to provide it because of technical difficulties.

TAMPA

All art exhibitions need you; they exist to be experienced by an audience. But "Raw Loop," Werner Reiterer's recently opened show at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, *really* needs you. Not only to see the art, to complete it.

Participatory art isn't new, but Reiterer's is especially aggressive in its demand for interaction. The reward is the surprise, even delight, given back. Which is not to say that there is anything sweet about it. I don't want to spoil all the discoveries but, for example, one work gives you permission to yell loudly and the power to alter the lighting in an entire gallery.

This is a good opportunity to talk about how and why "Raw Loop" is fine art. It's part of that vast modern and contemporary category known as conceptual art, born in the early 20th century with the dada movement, which grew from post-World War I disillusionment. It became a protest against all tradition, including art forms. Probably the most famous dada work is Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, a porcelain urinal he signed and mounted on a wall as a sculpture. The major point of the art was its idea, not its execution.

The whole thing was met with predictable outrage. Today conceptual art continues to baffle many people because it often doesn't manifest any obvious skill the way a realistic painting, for example, does.

Reiterer's *I Thought it's an Idea but it's my Brain* is a bathtub, the top covered with panels from which the head of a man, painted orange with a towel wrapped around his neck, protrudes. Beside it are casually arranged clothes. When you get close enough, a sensor activates and vapor exits through the head's right ear.

You have every right to ask why it's art. But in asking the question, you have a responsibility to come to an answer that respects the work and its maker, whatever your final conclusion.

I believe it's art because I believe in its idea and the way the artist realized that idea. Or ideas, since the work can be appreciated on several levels and in many ways.

First, and easiest to get, it's funny. You can stop right there if you choose. Art that makes us smile gets a lot of points from me.

Go a little deeper and find the irony and wit of its visual pun, suggested by the title. He's burning with ideas! Or is he? Maybe he's just burned out.

If you want to delve more, think about why the figure looks like a poached lobster. He's imprisoned in the tub, buried up to his neck. In hot water. Is it an existential metaphor? Perhaps; it's your call. The artist doesn't like to elaborate much on the work, preferring the audience seek, like water, its own level.

Get Closer to Leave looks like nothing much, just a stack of speakers as sculpture. As you approach, the sculpture speaks to you in a gentle voice ("Trust me," "Don't be afraid," "Come closer.") You do, and then you are assaulted by the same voice yelling a barrage of insults telling you to go away that become increasingly vulgar. The worst words are bleeped out and by the end, the invective is one long bleep. Back up and the sculpture begins the seductive come-on again.

You might feel more like you have been punked than a participant in art. Yet you will have been part of a creative process and remember, it's "idea" art. In this case, as in a lot of his work, Reiterer wants us to think about communication. Here, it's transformed into an intense, almost physical act, initiated or disengaged by us. Our physical closeness to the speakers triggers a reaction that we interpret as threatening toward us, but perhaps the response is really the opposite, that of feeling threatened by our proximity.

Psychologists speak of the invisible zone we create around ourselves that, when violated, causes discomfort. Reiterer's work here is an extreme manifestation of that discomfort.

Or maybe he's exploring our linguistic perceptions. The "bad" words are never heard but we know what they are in our lingua franca of epithets. We're insulted by the tone and implication rather than the words actually spoken.

Then again, maybe it's about both. Or something else entirely. That ambiguity is necessary to conceptual art and must be embraced rather than rejected. If it's instantly "gotten," it's probably too pat and little more than a one-note gag. Teasing out the various possibilities, the ideas and associations that we bring to it, is the reason conceptual art matters.

The execution is important, too, of course, and is often what helps us determine if we think it's good, bad or mediocre art. In "Raw Loop," we're helped by a series of drawings along a wall that are studies for installations, some fully realized, others still in the idea stage. Reiterer doesn't need to validate himself by giving us examples of his formal training and that isn't the reason they're exhibited, but they contribute to our understanding of how he noodles around with an idea.

Art, when we find it, is a gift for mind and spirit. And artists such as Reiterer respect us enough to give us choices in how we experience art. That, too, is a gift.

Lennie Bennett can be reached at (727) 893-8293 or lennie@sptimes.com.

.IF YOU GO

Werner Reiterer: Raw Loop

The exhibition is at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, 4202 E Fowler Ave., Tampa, through March 7. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday. Free. (813) 974-2849 or cam.usf.edu.

Can't make it?

See how people reacted to those ranting speakers by going to entertainment.tampabay.com for a video of *Get Closer to Leave* and other installations by Werner Reiterer.

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