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YOUR (NONPARTISAN) MESSAGE HERE

By Julie Bloom

A giant ice sculpture of the word "Democracy" weighing more than 900 pounds that will melt over the course of eight to 12 hours. YouTube public service announcements created by ordinary citizens about what it means to participate in an election. The chance to take the microphone in a bar and perform a speech by Barack Obama or John McCain, karaoke-style. An acoustic set by D J Spooky about the changing continent of Antarctica.

These are just a few of the many projects planned by artists to appear around the Democratic and Republican conventions, when the eyes of the world will be looking toward Denver and Minneapolis, where the two parties will officially select their nominees. As the political theater commences, artists are hoping to grab some attention as well.

"We didn't want to wake up on Sept. 5 and say we wish we had done something," said Steve Dietz, who



THE DEMOCRACY ICE SCULPTURE BY NORA LIGORANO AND MARSHALL REESE.

conceived of UnConvention, a project that involves organizing artists in Minneapolis to create politically engaging work. Working with major institutions in the Twin Cities, like the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and Intermedia Arts, as well as with local universities and community groups, Mr. Dietz's project involves more than a hundred local and national artists in an array of exhibitions, events and performances that will begin on Aug. 30 and run throughout the Republican convention, which ends Sept. 4.

Meanwhile in Denver, a similar endeavor called Dialog:City is under way. Sponsored by the city (unlike the UnConvention), it will include artworks, musical pieces and video installations by 10 artists and involve more than 300 people from the Denver area. "We have literally 25,000 volunteers for this convention, and we wanted to find some way to include them, since most of them aren't delegates and don't get to set foot in the convention space," said Mayor John Hickenlooper, who has been involved in the planning for Dialog:City. "How can we bring not just the convention but this whole notion of democracy to them?" (The direct costs of the program are \$370,000, with significant in-kind support taking the budget beyond \$500,000. None of the money raised comes from the city's budget.)

And though there will most likely be a few flamethrowers who will use art to promote a political agenda, organizers in both cities are urging artists to create works that speak to the process in a nonpartisan way. Mr. Dietz, for example, is trying to make sure that participating organizations, like the Walker and Intermedia Arts, will at least try to ensure that its nonpartisan principles are maintained. "Any project that is part of the UnConvention must be sponsored by one of these core organizations with the understanding that means maintaining a nonpartisan stance," Mr. Dietz said. There is no formal review committee to guarantee that one voice isn't heard above all others, but every project is vetted by one of the participating organizations.

One such project that emphasizes nonpartisanship is "I Approve This Message," which invites citizens of any political persuasion to create their own short video via YouTube. Sarah Peters, the associate director of public and interpretive programs at

the Walker, which is supporting the project, said the museum agreed to participate because of the UnConvention's commitment to nonpartisanship. "You expect people to respond by organizing a protest and throwing their fists in the air, and you also expect people to respond by flying a 1,000 American flags," she said. "And those are two legitimate ways to respond to politics, but there is a whole in-between area that doesn't get talked about."

The YouTube project is an example of how artists are trying to use the same types of media that have been used in this election.

"There is all this hype around the idea of participatory media, and democracy is one of our most participatory events, but the conventions themselves seem very at odds with this idea; 30- to 40,000 people come to town, and the people in town can't really participate in the discussion," said Mr. Dietz, 49, who has recently run a digital-arts festival in San Jose and is a former new-media curator at the Walker. He is now the director of Northern Lights, a new organization that has received funding from the McKnight Foundation. The UnConvention is the organization's first major project.

One of the ways the UnConvention is trying to get ordinary people to participate is through a project called, "My Yard, Our Message." Mr. Dietz describes it as a "very simple platform where people can design their own yard sign, and then people can vote on them online." The project has received over 24,000 votes, which determined the Top 50 designs from among nearly 300 submissions. The winning signs will be reproduced and displayed in neighborhoods in Minneapolis as well as Denver during the conventions.

The New York artist Fang-Yu Lin has contributed another media project, "Political Science 101," which will be shown at Intermedia Arts beginning on Aug. 31. The piece transforms one of the galleries into a traditional classroom with rows of desks and chairs set up around a slide projector. Mr. Lin has created a custom program that can scan 400 political blogs in real time for key words, like "security" or "McCain." The program is able to then grab data from those blogs and present them

through graphs and charts that are then projected onto a screen.

Intermedia, which hopes to serve as a type of new-media hub throughout the Republican convention, will be hosting several installations in its galleries as well as performances, many of which will remain on view through Nov. 8.

The University of Minnesota is hosting several exhibits too, and Ali Momeni, an assistant professor in the department of art at the university, developed a project with his students called "Art on Wheels." It consists of three three-wheeled bicycles tricked-out with video projectors and small generators. During the convention students will ride them around the city and project images on huge public canvases. Using laser-pointing software, the riders and other members of the public will also be able to draw on buildings in real time, in a way that is similar to using Nintendo Wii.

In Denver, Dialog:City, which is structured like a festival, was proposed by Seth Goldenberg, 27, who was previously in charge of the center for public engagement at the Rhode Island School of Design and a deputy director at the Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver. Dialog:City came from the perspective that "there's this amazing historic public discourse that's happening inside the Pepsi center, and we wanted to bring that scale to the rest of the city." Mr. Goldenberg said.

Each of the artists who are participating in the project has taken on a different set of issues. The performance artist Paul D. Miller, also known as DJ Spooky, is presenting "Terra Nova: The Antarctic Suite," a 70-minute acoustic performance that will include audio samplings of the Arctic terrain along with multimedia portraits of icebergs, maps and other scientific and geographical material.

Lynn Hershman Leeson, a new-media artist, is bringing DiNA, a video project that she has been working on for the past 12 years that features a virtual candidate for president who looks like the actress Tilda Swinton. Using artificial intelligence, Ms. Hershman Leeson has enabled the virtual candidate to respond to and learn from interactions with the public, so people can ask her questions about her candidacy.

Other projects include something by the Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko called "The Veteran Vehicle Project" in which a large-scale projector on the back of a Humvee will display audio and text onto buildings. The text will describe the experiences of Denver's homeless veterans with war. Another project, "Circles of O," by Ann Hamilton, is based on lullabies and the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and will be performed by a number of local choirs that will pass the piece on like a musical baton, creating a kind of traveling song throughout the city.

In one of the most unusual site-specific performances planned for both Denver and Minneapolis (some works are appearing in both cities), the artist Daniel Peltz will present "Karaoke Convention '08," in which people in bars, clubs and restaurants across the city will be invited to perform original speeches from the Democratic and Republican candidates. While the bulk of the projects in both Minneapolis and Denver are, as the organizers wished, process-oriented, there are a few works with distinctive political themes.

Sharon Hayes, a performance artist whose work will be appearing in both cities, sees the convention not just as a chance to engage citizens but also as a way for artists to define and defend their place in American culture. She is staging a live public performance called "Revolutionary Love I: I Am Your Worst Fear, Revolutionary Love II: I Am Your Best Fantasy," which is presented by Creative Time with the Walker Art Center. The piece involves 75 to 100 gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender volunteers who will recite an 8- to 10-minute text written by Ms. Hayes about the relationship of politics, desire, love and the gay community.

The performance at the Republican convention will take place Sept. 1 on the Capitol grounds in St. Paul and in Denver on Aug. 27. "These conventions are one of the most active places where the two parties reach into the space of the cultural imagination," Ms. Hayes said. "And that is a place that we as artists have a claim to and also have a responsibility to be present to."