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'Then and Again' placards mark iconic, defunct businesses

Signs of past times

by Jay Rath

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History can be a lot of things, but is it art?

"Then and Again: A Public Project by Nicolas Lampert" will be on exhibit around the city through Sept. 26. It was unveiled April 24 by the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art.

The pieces are essentially historic markers honoring past Madison businesses, now all defunct, including the Mifflin Street Co-op, which closed just four years ago, and Hotel Washington, a former home to *Isthmus*, destroyed by fire in 1996.

"The signs honor the past history that gave credence to Madison's reputation as 'the Berkeley of the Midwest,'" says Jane Simon, MMoCA curator of exhibitions. "They look like a cross between highway signs and historical markers. It's a very basic, normative sign."

Conceptual art can be a lot of things. Just by virtue of placing a real or figurative frame around something, an artist arguably performs a creative act. But are the signs conceptual art?

"You could call it that," says their creator, Lampert. He prefers to call them merely "public art."

"Lampert takes a lot of his aesthetic from gritty street art," observes Karin Wolf, Madison Arts Commission program administrator. In fact, street art is what Lampert, a Chicago and Milwaukee-based artist, usually creates.

"What makes this project unique is that I sought permission to put up the artwork," he says.

The arts commission provided a \$750 grant for the exhibit. Anonymous donors kicked in more, and MMoCA spent around \$3,000.

The project was originally titled "Then and Again: A Sign Project." It was to be far more extensive, but the artist and museum ran up against Madison's stringent sign ordinances.

"What got nixed were about 20 other signs — more of slogans," says Lampert, whose work has been featured by the New York Museum of Modern Art and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, and at MMoCA's 2007 Wisconsin Triennial exhibit.

Rules for historical markers are more relaxed than those for signs, however, and a smaller project proceeded.

Lampert researched and selected the sites himself. "It's really about spaces," he says. "It's about what was, but also what is, after they leave."

The past Madison institutions marked by the signs are Freedom House, 1925 Winnebago St.; Hotel Washington, 636 W. Washington Ave.; Lysistrata Restaurant, 325 W. Gorham St.; Mifflin Street Co-op: 32 N. Bassett St.; O'Cayz Corral, 504 E. Wilson St.; and the Whole Earth Co-op, 817 E. Johnson St.