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CANADIAN VENDING MAGAZINE

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ANDREW OWEN
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NAMA SHOW ISSUE

ART FOR VENDING'S SAKE

Two artist-entrepreneurs mix art and commerce in a rather unique vending machine

At first appearance one could dismiss Andrew Owen and Jamie Osborne as two young men out on a lark, mocking conventional commerce. But there is a lot more to them.

What these two Toronto-based artists and budding vending operators have come up with is a blending of art and commerce in their art produce vending machine, the @rtomatic. It's an Automatic Products C-Series merchandiser that vends original and limited editions of local artists, both well-known and obscure, much the same way as the traditional operator vends candy and snacks.

The merchandiser is striking in its contrasts; it makes a statement just standing in place, so unlike most vending machines. With striking colours and the product window in an antique gilded picture frame, it virtually screams for attention. And it takes loonies.

The idea of an automated art gallery came to Andrew from the automats of New York City and from a trip he and Jamie took to Japan, where vending is so prevalent. He wanted to market art as it related to culture and entertainment much the same way a jukebox has become a cultural icon.

Another reason for the art vending machine is to show artists are becoming serious business people. "We are trying to unravel what we call 'the Van Gogh syndrome'," says Andrew, where common perception sees artists as starving in attics perfecting their craft, never getting any significant commercial benefit from their work.

Jamie sees @rtomatic as a way of getting into the public realm. "The average person are often intimidated by art. This breaks down art in a consumer guise so people are comfortable with it." He doesn't consider it a big money-maker but through word of mouth and public exposure, it may be.

The items in the machine sell for between two and six dollars and range

from hand-made books, self-portraits and jewellery to music tapes, even discs with a computer generated interactive art puzzle. Artists make a limited edition and each product is backed with a card explaining the concept of the @rtomatic and some background as to its uniqueness. Since art can be an in-



Jamie Osborne and Andrew Owen flank their @rtomatic.

vestment, many of the items could appreciate in value.

Since the time of its launch at the Reactor Gallery, in a relatively obscure part of downtown Toronto in December 1990, @rtomatic has vended hundreds of items. Currently the artist-entrepreneurs are negotiating several, more prestigious high traffic areas. Their company—AO1+JME arts corporation—plans to have more machines. The longer term goal is to establish a network of @rtomatics in regional centres across Canada and beyond. At these centres, they will dispense the best-selling existing products, as well as local artwork, making the art relevant to the regions' creative community.

"Jamie and I are concerned in art practise with the 'commodification' of culture—our perception of packaged nature," says Andrew. "People have a strong desire to be in contact with nature." The @rtomatic was originally

conceived to vend packaged pine cones etc., a sort of "environmental automat." What they finally came up with was the present merchandiser.

"We're not really unique," says Andrew. He noted he had heard of one in Germany and in New York City there was a "Vend d'art" utilizing an old coke machine. "But these couldn't show off the art. Here you can see it and choose which one you want." "Our eventually goal is to get it in the National Gallery or the Art Gallery of Ontario with a credit card acceptor and vend high end drawings."

The men are currently looking to affiliate with a vending manufacturer or distributor because the capital investment in machines is high. Up to now they fund this project and others through their commercial art production company, DecorAction Systems, which produces interior art murals for night clubs, etc. and large scale art murals for clients such as Molson Breweries, Q107 radio station and Murad Communications. They have also exhibited their art in many "high brow" galleries in Canada and the United States. "We have shown in a lot of large fine art galleries. We like to do stuff that is fun and engaging, that maybe takes a bit of a poke at the established art world," says Andrew. "We don't see @rtomatic on a mass production scale" but he is confident it has commercial viability.

As a vending operation, they pay a 50 per cent split with the artists (an art world standard) and also pay a location fee. Just like traditional vending, they visit regularly to replace product and empty the coin box. Change is recycled at the gift shop cashier in the gallery.

Owen and Osborne take a strict business approach to this venture, but they are having fun with it too. Both men have their mischievous side too.

—James Haley