

# Art project destined to end in slaughter of chickens

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Rich Sugg

Artist Amber Hansen works in her studio in Lawrence.

In April, five live chickens will go on display in a coop in downtown Lawrence, where residents will have a chance to get to know them, perhaps even care for them.

Then the chickens will be slaughtered at a public event. The next day, they will be served in a community potluck.

That's the artistic vision of a Lawrence artist named Amber Hansen who wants to establish a connection between people and the animals that they

eat.

“There is something to be gained through experiential knowledge,” Hansen said. “This is an art form that creates a real life situation and a situation that exists and happens every day.”

Hansen, artist in residence at the University of Kansas, hopes the project, “The Story of Chickens: A Revolution,” will transform public opinion of the birds from simply “livestock” to unique creatures.

Not everyone shares Hansen’s vision.

JoAnn Farb sees the project as a cultural injustice that will negatively affect the arts as well as Kansas’ reputation.

“When people in other states think of Kansas, they will think that we don’t teach evolution in our schools and we do those gruesome, public slaughters of chickens and call it art,” said Farb, who has written a book about social reform and compassion toward animals. “This is just backward.”

Lawrence officials also question whether the slaughter of the chickens follows city code.

“The city code does not permit the willful killing of animals within city limits,” said Megan Gilliland, communications manager for the city. “There are exceptions in the ordinance for some activities, but butchering animals for food is not one of the excepted activities.”

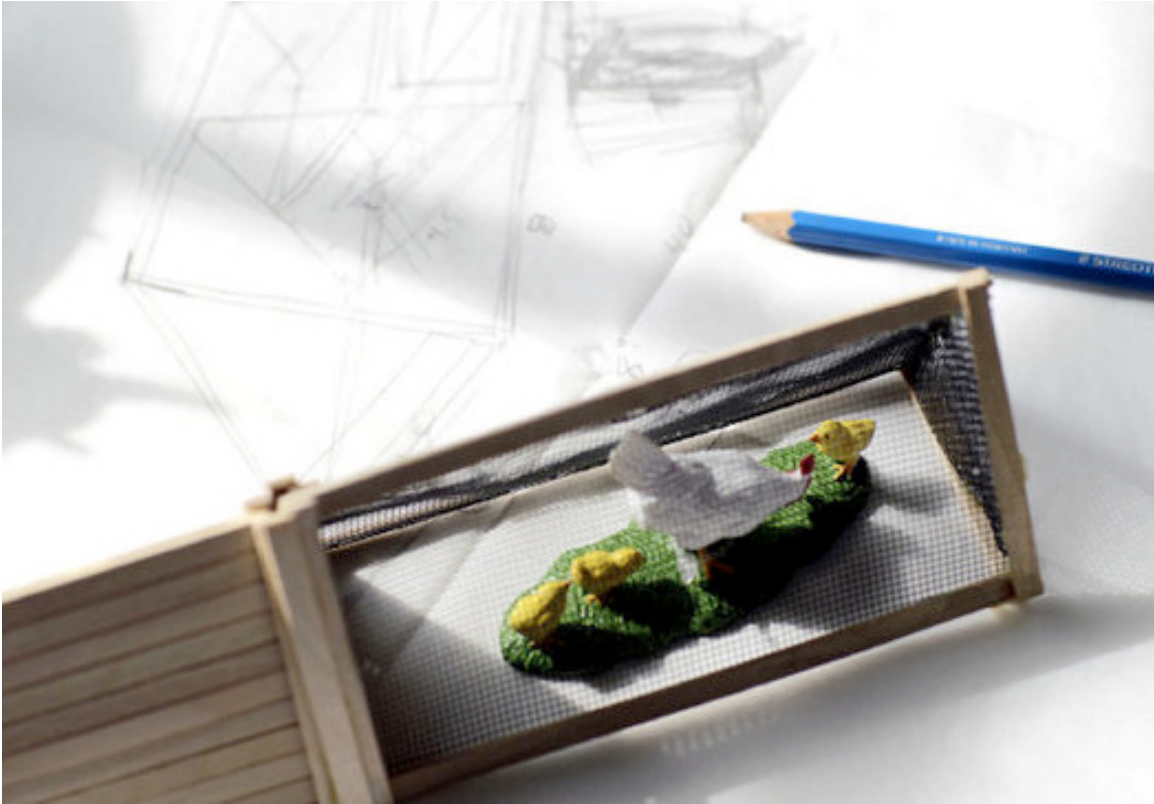
But Hansen has backers.

Her project is funded by the Andy Warhol Foundation for Visual Arts’ Rocket Grants program in collaboration with the Charlotte Street Foundation and the University of Kansas’ Spencer Museum of Art. Launched in 2009, the Rocket Grants attempt to encourage innovative, public-oriented work in nontraditional spaces. The Warhol foundation’s website says that the grant amounts are \$4,000

The director of the Spencer Museum, Saralyn Reece Hardy, believes the most important aspect of the grant is that the artists’ work takes place outside the walls of museums and art galleries.

Hardy acknowledges that “The Story of Chickens” may be controversial, but says contemporary art has a function of raising awareness of issues in

the public eye.



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Drawings and scale model of Amber Hansen's chicken coop.

"Sometimes they are unpopular and risk-taking, but they are designed to stimulate public conversation about art in the public sphere," Hardy said.

Kate Lawrence, a Denver blogger, has contacted the Spencer Museum to object to the project.

"It's as though a bloodstain has been cast on the otherwise good reputation of the university," Lawrence, a Topeka native, said in an interview.

Hansen, who grew up in Iowa, said she constantly witnessed the cycle of life and death on her family's farm. She thinks people aren't aware of the change from small farms to the industrial process of factory farms.

"The project imitates life, where the animals are well cared-for and treated with respect, as well as providing ... people with nutrients they require," she said.

Hansen is still hammering out the project's details and dates. Currently the coop is scheduled to be unveiled March 30 during Lawrence's Final Fridays, a re-creation of Kansas City's popular art attraction First Fridays.

The chickens will then be on display in grassy areas with specific times set aside for the public to interact with them. There will be someone with the chickens at all times to look after them.

Hansen, who plans on spending a lot of time with the chickens, says she is looking forward to the discourse that the chickens create.

"A very important part of this project is the voices of local community and now that the dialogue is online, that's important too," Hansen said. "This affects everyone because everybody eats."

The coop is tentatively scheduled to close April 21, and then the birds will be slaughtered at the Lawrence Percolator, a nonprofit project space of the Lawrence Corporation for the Advancement of Visual Arts. The public may attend the slaughter.

Originally, according to the Rocket Grants website, Lawrence restaurant 715 was intended to prepare the birds, but Hansen said the restaurant has withdrawn its involvement. Hansen says she respects all participants' decisions on whether or not to partake in the project.

The restaurant's owner and chef did not return phone calls for this story.

Megan Willsen, co-founder of Animal Outreach of Kansas in Lawrence, says she has reached out to Hansen to find another way to conclude the project without the slaughter of chickens.

"The dialogue has been introduced, there has been discussion and public outcry online, the project has raised awareness, and there is no need for this to end in the betrayal, torture and slaughter of the chickens," Willsen said.

Hansen has heard the criticism.

"I don't want to say anything to anyone specifically," Hansen said. "I just want to hear their voices."

Read more here: <http://www.kansascity.com/2012/02/17/3436536/art-project-destined-to-end-in.html#storylink=cpy>