

Controversy swirls around artist's plans for project detailing the life — and death — of chickens



Eric Risberg/Associated Press

A Kansas University artist's plans to display a traveling chicken coop - and then slaughter its residents - has generated some controversy.

February 18, 2012, 3:35 p.m. Updated: 18 February 2012, 5:32 p.m.

It's an art project that's certainly ruffled some feathers.

“The Story of Chickens: A Revolution” is set to begin with an unveiling of a mobile chicken coop. That coop will be placed — with five live birds inside — in various locations across Lawrence for the public to see the chickens and “get to know them,” said Amber Hansen, the artist behind the project who also is a Kansas University lecturer.

It ends with a public-invited slaughter and a potluck dinner with the chickens on the menu.

Hansen said it's designed to get people thinking about the origins of food and the disconnect urban dwellers have when eating meat, allowing "viewers to witness an event that takes place every day, but we don't often see."

"It's a community-based project in order to generate dialogue," she said.

But some animal rights activists oppose the means of generating that conversation.

The story

Hansen grew up on a farm, "raising animals — some as pets, some for consumption, we cared for them equally," she said. "The Story of Chickens" came after she left, went to art school and "began to feel disconnected" with her food.

Hansen said the coop will be displayed during next month's Final Fridays event at the Percolator, located in the alley behind the Lawrence Arts Center near Ninth and New Hampshire streets. Anyone is invited to contribute art and poetry exploring humans' relationship with animals to the Percolator space.

Then the coop, with chickens, will be displayed at several open spaces in Lawrence — Hansen is still working out exactly where — for people to observe them and for that collective conversation to take place.

During the display portion, "volunteers and community members alike will become guardians of the chickens as they share in the opportunity of caring for the birds," according to the project's artist statement. [Initial plans](#) had stated the birds would be slaughtered by local farmer Hank Will and prepared by restaurant staff at 715.

But Matt Hyde, manager of 715, said the restaurant will not be involved.

"We wish (Hansen) well with her project. She's a talented artist and a wonderful person, but we're a restaurant and wanted to focus on that," Hyde said.

The project is one of 10 outside-of-museum works from Kansas and Missouri artists who won a juried grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for Visual Arts' Rocket Grants, which is supported by Kansas City's Charlotte Street Foundation and KU's Spencer Museum of Art.

The controversy

Cassandra Smyers, co-president of Lawrence's Compassion for All Animals group, compared the project to one famous to animal rights activists: a South American exhibit of a stray dog chained inside a museum.

She said the group appreciates the potential for the conversation that project would generate but thinks the approach is all wrong.

"We understand the intent behind it is to show an alternative to factory farming," Smyers said. "But it's divorced from that intent. The community won't get relationships with these chickens, and they'll just be stressed."

The group plans to write Hansen with alternative ideas for the project, including choosing to hold a vegan potluck and using pictures of live chickens instead.

"They shouldn't be put through this just so we can have food for thought," she said.

As of Saturday, the Spencer Museum of Art's [Facebook page](#) had nearly 200 comments on a post expressing appreciation for "the thoughtful dialogue generated" by the project.

The national Farm Sanctuary group sent a letter to Hansen and the Spencer, signed by director Bruce G. Friedrich.

"While we completely support your kind depiction of your chickens as 'beautiful and unique' (they surely are), and while we appreciate your goal of helping people to break out of their 'disconnection from the consequences of consuming meat,' if you decide to confine five chickens in a coop, subject them to high-traffic areas, and then kill them, well, that would make you a part of the status quo, not a part of the chicken revolution," the letter read.

The support

Though the Spencer didn't have a hand in choosing the project for funding, and it won't be performed on its grounds, director Saralyn Reece Hardy supports Hansen's right to free expression.

"The importance of supporting artists in innovative, conversation-driving works — within the limits of the law — is one of the functions of a cultural institution," she said, adding that the project's detractors have thus far been respectful.

She said the project's "The Story of Chickens" allows people to "have the

opportunity to engage in a conversation, almost on a daily basis, where people really care.”

“What’s coming up are discussions about food production but also about art that takes place in the community,” she said. “These are very complex, contemporary issues.”

As Hansen continues to prepare the project, the rest of “The Story of Chickens” remains to be told.

She’s soft-spoken, pauses often when talking about her work and “thinks deeply,” as Hardy put it. She shies away from the controversy itself and focuses on the positives of getting people thinking about food and treating animals humanely.

“It’s a community-based project,” Hansen said when asked about what she would say to detractors. “It’s meant to generate dialogue.”

Originally published at: <http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2012/feb/18/story-chickens-controversy/>