48 Hour Line

Where: Gallery Aferro, 73 Market St., Newark
When: Noon Thursday–noon Jan. 13. Gallery hours are noon–4 p.m. Wednesdays; 4–8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays; 11 a.m.–6 p.m. Saturdays

BY DAN BISCHOFF
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

On Thursday, precisely at noon in the big storefront windows of Newark’s independent, artist-owned Gallery Aferro on Market Street, artist Ryan Brown will start to draw a line on a big sheet of seamless white paper tacked over the gallery’s every available wall space.

Brown and anybody who would care to come along and spell him awhile will not stop making that line move for a solid 48 hours, not until noon the following Saturday, Jan. 13, come hell or hand cramps.

“Ryan is just back from a residency in Germany where he did eight-hour lines and met all kinds of people,” says artist and gallery owner Emma Wilcox, who founded the Aferro with Conceptual artist Evonne Davis. “He just really seems to enjoy people, and since this is a time of year when it gets dark early and the city streets seem to feel kind of empty, we thought it might work to have a performance that went on all hours. That’s what makes a city grand, having places open any time, day or night.”

The all-night performance marks a growing confidence in Newark’s small but increasingly visible downtown contemporary arts community. Last year the Newark Museum and the nonprofit City Without Walls sponsored internationally known performance artist William Pope J.’s “Black Factory” actions in city parks and streets, and a distinguished group of Newark and New York artists joined in “Newark Between Us,” which just closed after a second successful, annual show in empty downtown office space. “48 Hour Line” would be the first all-night art event downtown in recent memory.

The idea for a continuous drawing executed over an extended period has its roots in automatic writing and Surrealism, but Brown’s graphic events are more like group identity maps. As the marker is passed from hand to hand, each successive “hand-writing” transforms the drawing.

“You know, we expect kids to work on it for a while, so that means the drawing will move along three feet above the gallery floor, because they’re shorter,” Wilcox says.

“48 Hour Line” will invert the usual role of drawing — intimate, personal, the place for immediate inspirations or first thoughts — and transform it into a spectacle of public endurance. But it will also be very much in the spirit of the Aferro, the name of which is taken from the Portuguese idiom for being “ironbound” or wedged to a difficult idea. The gallery was first established in 2003 in an Ironbound loft that the group lost to eminent domain in 2005. They have been in their Market Street location since May, with a one-year lease. (They are currently seeking an extension.)

Co-founder Davis has mounted popular “guerrilla” art exhibitions in odd venues, like vacant lots at Coney Island, and Wilcox describes their formal mission as “bringing cultural education and aesthetic engagement in contemporary issues to all people equally.”

Brown and the artists associated with the Aferro, along with neighborhood friends and other artists from Alizira, A Center for Contemporary Art in Newark, will be socializing in the gallery while the drawing is being made, marking the artwork a kind of backdrop for a party.

In addition to creating a succession of individual marks, the “48 Hour Line” will also register differences in tone, reflecting, for example, just how tired Brown gets as he tries to keep working the line himself over the two-day-long event. Hand cramps really can make a difference.

“This sort of thing may seem unusual to someone who has an academic background in art,” Wilcox says, “and in fact it is still fairly rare to find art based on audience participation. We want it to be a little bit like those First Night celebrations that cities sponsor, you know, a safe, fun night, getting people outdoors after dark in Newark. It should be interesting.”