Open Dialogue

Individualized Major Program

My project evolved out of reaction to new discoveries about film and the role it plays in society. Film is a good starting point to project an idea into the world; however, the idea of the film doesn't often get much further than the cinema. Once the lights go up, the film is over, thus the conversation is over. The conversation is only one-way: the filmmaker speaks to the audience. This was where I noticed a deficiency with film and "Open Dialogue" began. I wanted to create an event using what I've learned from studying various cultures and documentaries and begin to apply these methods to help engage the public to create an open dialogue, changing the one-way conversation to a two-way conversation.

While watching thought provoking and challenging documentaries, I became very moved, but didn't feel as though I gained any tools on how to react to what I'd just seen. Documentaries had the ability to spark conversations between my friends and I, but would stop there. Whether the reason was that we were lazy, didn't care, or just didn't know how to approach issues, for example, challenging the church on same sex marriage, minimal progress was made beyond the conversations. I knew that It was possible for more to be done. While

watching these films, I knew that I wasn't the only one who felt this way. I began

feel paralyzed. I empathized with the people in these documentaries. Because of

the abundant amount of films and television people are watching, the audience

might forget the people in these documentaries are real. This can result in the

audience becoming numb to screen based media in which they may detach

themselves from the reality of what they see on the screen. I knew then that I

had to pull these issues from the entrapment of the screen and project them into

the real, physical world where people can engage with other people, taking them

from spectator to participant.

Open Dialogue was a public space video projection of two boys kissing. It

was accompanied with a question and answer booth that was labeled "Ask a

Queer". I knew I wanted the social experiment to be documented, but I never

intended that the documentation be the final product or the product that is used

to create the two-way conversations. The documentation is, however, a device

used to help reflect on the event, to figure out ways to push the ideas forward

and improve things. What's more important was what took place during the time

of the experiment. The project did what I believe film doesn't currently have the

power to do. I took an issue that I consider to be controversial and re-introduced

it into the public realm through a different means. I had an idea of what the crowd

would be like, but because it was now in a public space, it could be viewed by

anyone. I didn't give people the choice of what it was they were going to see,

unlike most viewing situations today. By doing this, my intentions were to provoke an immediate response and then provide an outlet for them to express their emotions.

This method of public space projection attracted a diverse crowd and facilitated space for groups of people who wouldn't normally speak to one another openly about issues. Mainstream film, on the other hand, is normally watched alone in the comfort of your own home or in a dark movie theater, still very much isolated even when in a crowded cinema. Neither space is ideal for discussion. Although the proliferation of Hulu and Netlfix has made it easier for people to discuss what they've watched online, it doesn't allow people to address their issues face to face with someone else. People have the option to hide behind their computer, screen names, and avatars in order to say what they want without reaping the same ramifications as they would have had they said the same things in person. When people see that others aren't as different as they think they are, it's much more difficult to insult someone to their face. However, it's still takes place, but at least someone can take responsibility for his or her words and actions.

When coming up with the idea for "Open Dialogue", I knew I needed images that would provoke and draw people in. Based on my interests at the time, the more explicit the better. Although I knew the more graphic and sexual, the less likely people would want to participate, and possibly not be taken as

seriously.

The issue I wanted to address was homosexuality. To make the issue relatable, I chose to show a kiss. The kiss was not a sloppy makeout session, but instead a short sensual one. The image attracted controversy because it was two boys who performed the kiss, rather then a male and female.

The video of it was a medium-close up of the heads slowly moving toward one another. The kiss only lasted about 2 seconds, but I chose to slow it down to about ¼ the original speed. By doing this, the kiss becomes more sensuous and accentuates the lips pressing, the shadows formed by their faces, and a little spit appears as they pulled away. This 45 second video now becomes an infinite loop.

I built a large booth, one that resembled a lemonade stand, and spelled out "Ask a Queer", with the "gay" flag painted onto each side. In the booth, I had a friend stationed as a facilitator to speak with people on the street and get their reaction to the video. He considers himself bi-sexual if he had to put a label on it. He comes off as a "normal" straight guy, except with a better fashion sense. It was important to have someone who wasn't too flamboyant because I wanted the person in the booth to be easily approachable to people who may have been intimidated by someone different than themselves.

The basic idea was that I would set up a large projection screen and project the loop of the two boys kissing in an attempt to lure people over from the

local bars and restaurants, and others just passing by. Because no one outside of my team knew this was going on, people were perplexed as to what was taking place. So as the crowds grew, people would ask one another what this was and this created the first dialogue. Once a few people began to congregate and converse, this drew the attention of others, essentially this made it more comfortable for others to approach the booth. Soon after, people began to engage Zach, asking him questions as to what was going on and then inquiring more intimate questions on homosexuality. Sometimes people would get loud when speaking with him, which caused others to join in, which helped further the discussions.

While watching the videos of the conversations, I was surprised by a lot of the conversations. I predicted there would be more homophobic comments and ignorant people, but many of them were just curious college students using this opportunity to ask questions they haven't had the chance to obtain answers for. Bloomington has a reputation for being diverse and accepting, but I notice student's insensitivity for certain words such as, "fag." A male walking alone can expect a "fag" shout out by a passing car, likely filled by a group of other guys.

Choosing People's Park on the Saturday night right before Little 500 was strategic. I wanted a location downtown on Kirkwood that would have a sufficient amount of space to facilitate such an event. It was also chosen for its location across from Kilroy's, a local bar, normally frequented by those stereotypical

fraternity and sorority boys and girls. Aside from that, it's also surrounded by a broad range of restaurants, from cheap to expensive. So, I was hoping the diverse surroundings would allow for a diverse crowd.

I started setting up around 9pm. By 9:20 pm, everything was ready to go. This was an ideal time because it was when people were finishing up their meals, and students were arriving to the bars. Despite some warnings from city officials to shut it down because we didn't fill out the right paperwork, the event lasted around 4 hours. Within this time, people of all ages, races, and sexuality visited. By the time it reached 12am, the students who had been drinking started to come over and participate. Most of them acted respectful and were just having fun with it, but there were a few cases when they'd walk by screaming obscenities. One purpose of this project was to allow the audience of onlookers to actually confront the person they're screaming at, face to face, instead of from the safety of a car. I was only able to stop one of the passersby and ask why he believed and said what he did. He simply stated, "that's what's in the bible".

Having a chance to speak to people with opinions and views different than mine was a lot more rewarding than having no one to talk to at all, which is what happens most of the time after watching a film. Not only was this beneficial for me as the artist, but for the participants as well. When would they have the chance to speak openly about these issues? A lot of people don't want to or have the chance to leave their comfort zone. This project forced people to do so,

even if it was just witnessing the infinite loop of the two boys kissing.

One fraternity guy asked to speak to me. He was really into the experiment and was moved by it. Listening to him describe his feelings on homosexuality, and whom I had previously stereotyped, broke those stereotypes. He was kind, considerate, and believed everyone was entitled to happiness, no matter who they are. This was when I realized I was just as much a participant as the ones I made this event for, even though the purpose of the project was to create an open dialogue between everyone else. I had never really factored myself into the equation of this project, but realized I was just as central to the idea as was everyone else.

When editing the documentation and audio recordings from the event, I realized that many of the same questions were being asked and would be easy to drag out. I knew the event that everyone saw wasn't the whole picture. Getting ready for the event was stressful and my crew and I had to make sure every detail was given proper consideration. When working in the public sphere, there is a very likely chance things could go wrong. I wanted that to show in the film. So, I built that suspense into the first minute of the video. I chose to show us going to the site carrying our tools and gear, the reaction shots, and only flashes of the projection screen. In a typical documentary, talking heads can go on for too long and lose the attention of the viewer. Most of the footage I used was of people talking in the booth. So, through suspense and quick cuts back and forth

between opposing views, I was able to carry out the conversation longer than what was typical.

I documented the event with four cameras, all strategically placed around the premises; two around the booth, one on the outskirts of the area, and another on the second floor in Kilroys Bar. I wanted all angles of the event and conversations to be captured. Most of the footage used in the film was high definition video, but degraded because of the light conditions. I intentionally chose to use the grainy footage to show that a film doesn't solely rely on the technology used in the production but also the message and stories being presented. This was in reaction to the majority of films I was seeing by students in the Telecommunications department here and in the local film festival, Campus Moviefest. Because of the timing of completing my film, I decided to enter it into Campus Moviefest. It was selected to be screened at the Festival here in town and was nominated for top 10 best films and ironically was awarded top 3 "Best Drama". I think the judges might have missed the point of the film, but despite not being the most aesthetically pleasing to watch or listen to, the message was strong enough to shine through.

This project wasn't just conceived from thin air. It took a lot of preparation, help from outside sources, and influence by other artists and their work. I went to the LGBTQ headquarters, and spoke to the director there, Doug Bauder, to see if their organization was interested in providing any support. Doug had friends in

the Mayor's office and was a good middleman to use to communicate with people from the city offices. Aside from Doug, Jon Vickers, the IU Cinema Director, was also a huge support. He aided us with equipment and advised us when he thought we might be stepping out of line. I also assembled a team of about 12 students to aid me during the event. Some were friends, some were just supportive of the project and wanted to lend a hand. Without their help, none of this would have been accomplished.

Part of the original influence stemmed from an episode of "This American Life", the TV series. This episode was about an Iranian man going around the country with a sign that said something similar to "Ask a Queer". I thought this was a good way to engage people and got me thinking about what other relevant issues this could work with. Another influence was the entire attitude of the Downtown Avant-Garde movement. Filmmakers were picking up Instruments, musicians were picking up cameras, but no one was trained in either, but just did what felt right. That's exactly what I did with this project. Previously, I had only shot and edited short films. I'd never staged a performance, or planned such a large and public event, but I was inspired by their attitude and figured, why not? While learning about this movement, I became drawn to the "Happenings" in New York City, which were put on by artists such as Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, and Jim Dine.

Kaprow wanted to create experiences that would activate the viewer to become more aware of their body in space. He wanted spectators to become participants, which was an idea influenced by the philosopher, John Dewey, who said, you only know by doing. The Happenings made it a lot more difficult not to participate, which would ultimately lead to greater understandings of the experience.

"Open Dialogue" is a social experiment to help bridge the gap between groups of people that wouldn't normally associate with one another. This multimedia interactive event was designed to give the audience a chance to engage in a real conversation with the filmmaker and each other. This isn't just another fictitious film trying to depict a social issue, but the documentation of a real attempt to address a social issue of today and help draw awareness to it as well.