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Final Case Study Report: HYDE PARK VISUAL HISTORY PROJECT



INTRODUCTION

The Hyde Park Visual History Project, is a project which culminated during the summer of 2009 that collected video footage, images, and audio from individuals and institutions in the community of Hyde Park, NY, and projected them onto the town's landscape as a forum to create shared experience and dialogue based on memory, identity, heritage, history, and a community's connection to place.

I first heard of *The Hyde Park Visual History Project* when I attended the Open Engagement conference organized by Portland State University's Art and Social Practice Graduate program last May. Matthew Slaats, the artist who organized *The Hyde Park Visual History Project* presented his work during the conference on a panel. His community-based approach to new media art instantly resonated with me as an innovative approach to public art making.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZER

Slaats utilizes new media to reflect on the memories and significance of place using community-based approaches where he defines his role as "a facilitator for interaction."

(Slaats, 2008a) His artistic practice is based on a “bringing people together to meet and discuss ideas.” (Slaats, 2008a) He creates the parameters for participation and engagement by providing a reason for meeting, which is then documented and translated into visual and auditory media. In the case of *The Hyde Park Visual History Project*, Slaats was interested in documenting a visual history of a very specific community, “by allowing the residents themselves, to contribute their ideas of who they are and how they want to be represented.” (Slaats, 2008a) By translating these contributions on-screen the community collectively shares their meaning of the past and hopes for the future.

As seen on his resumé, Slaats’ research background consists of interactive performance, augmented reality gaming, and social practice art. His artistic projects often address forgotten space and urban revitalization through participatory processes. Since the Hyde Park Visual History Project was completed, he has launched *Freespace*, “a website to post, collect, situate and share these places [that interest you] online. “ (<http://freespaceproject.org/>) He also runs PAUSE, an arts space in Poughkeepsie, NY, that partners to “rethink, re-see, and reclaim urban space” through artistic projects that allow residents to take ownership of long depressed neighborhoods. (<http://pauselab.org/>)

WHY I CHOSE THIS PROJECT AS A MODEL PARTICIPATORY ARTS PROJECT

This project appeals to me, because rather than addressing a problem, it focuses on the assets, history, and memories of a place. It’s social purpose focuses on engaging between the past and present in this historically rich town that often battles between the old and the new as it is transformed by shifting populations and a changing society. (Slaats, 2008b). The project creates a space for conversations built on shared history, aiming to keep the community connected to their roots as they move forward into the future.

Matthew Slaats’ approach to art making addresses concepts we’ve explored in Charlie Gere’s *Digital Culture*. Gere discusses the work of artists like John Cage and Umberto Eco that relied on the interaction between the audience and the performer for the work to exist (2008, p.85). In participatory art, the importance of the creator is undermined and interactivity becomes the strategy for creating work.

In describing his philosophy on the role of the artist Slaats states: “the guise of the artist as auteur or “special” has far too long placed artists at the fringe of society. Why can’t we be active participants in everyday decisions? ... it must go beyond visual identity or social critic. It must be about direct engagement.” (Slaats, 2009a)

In *The Hyde Park Visual History Project* the artist’s role is one of a community organizer, or facilitator. The content presented was donated by the community, which made them creators, curators, and collaborators. Slaats used his knowledge of digital media to present the donated footage in a format that allowed the community to engage with

their memories in a new ways, the story is still told in their voice. Slaats artistic role was that of a skilled tech, aggregator and visionary.

HISTORY

After artist Matthew Slaats finished his MFA in Integrated Art focusing on Video, Digital Art, Performance and Gaming (as seen on his resume), he relocated to the Hudson Valley with his family and was eager to get involved in his new community. He found himself exploring unfamiliar territory, learning about Hyde Park's history and meeting new people (Slaats, 2008c).

As he explored his new surroundings he developed an interest in using the Hyde Park Drive-In as a site for an art project. The Drive-In was one of the few functioning outdoor theaters left in the mid-Hudson Valley. He saw the drive-in as a symbol for the type of vanishing public spaces in America where families and friends could meet and relax with one another outside of the home. "Screens such as these have cult status and hold a vivid connection to a nostalgic point of view that remains prevalent in our culture. These types of environments allowed those attending to escape into another world that they could share with the stars of Hollywood." (Slaats, 2008a)

He wanted to create something that would explore the history of this place by juxtaposing images and home video footage onto the physical landscape. In the summer of 2007 he began engaging in the community with the intention of embarking on this project and began seeking sources of funding and support. The project was well received within the community noted by the Dutchess County Arts Council, who sponsored the project, as a prime "example of how the efforts of the council were working to make an impact in the community." (Slaats, 2008d)

Slaats began the project by working with individuals and institutions to seek support and to collect visual materials. Participants donated images and videos of weddings, meetings, parades, portraits, landscapes, and more. Through this exchange personal narratives began to emerge. "No longer were places and people just occurrences in an album, but real people that once walked the streets. In the end the project provided a way of preserving this social history, by playing an active role in digitizing and archiving the material for future use." (Slaats, 2009b)

After almost two years of collecting resources, in the summer of 2009, Slaats resituated the collected footage back into the landscape by projecting video, images and audio, not only at the drive-in as he initially had planned, but also onto private residences and buildings. Video of a couple's 1952 wedding was projected onto their former home. Images of a hamlet were projected onto the library that housed them. The drive-in theatre hosted an interactive installation that allowed the audience to control the media through their actions. "These presentations provided a further avenue for engagement, generating feedback loops between the audience, the context, and the

media. Placing the media within these contexts emphasizes the integration of the media into daily life, being the cornerstone of local identity.” (Slaats, 2009b)



MISSION/PURPOSE

The main purpose of the project was to connect the past to the present and to energize historically rich space. The project aimed to open a public dialogue that emphasized the role that images play in connecting people to place and to illustrate the importance that history and memory continues to hold in Hyde Park. It also served to digitize the collective historic archives of both individuals and institutions.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

- **Hyde Park Free Library:** served as his community sponsor and as a “home-base” site for Slaats to engage with community members. Their archives were also a source for footage. The building became a site for projection.
- **Staatsburg Library:** hosted the first public showing of the Hyde Park Visual History Project on its façade and provided archival footage.
- **Roosevelt Library:** granted access to archives as a source for footage.
- **Culinary Institute of America:** granted access to archives a source for footage.
- **Hyde Park School District:** connected Slaats with students who either provided or created footage in partnership with the documentary film course.
- **Scenic Hudson:** permitted use of the drive-in site, which they own.
- **Hyde Park Town Council (Pompey Delafield):** aided in outreach by allowing Slaats to host workshops and use meetings as an avenue for spreading the word about his project.

- **Hyde Park Chamber of Commerce:** aided in outreach efforts by allowing Slaats to speak to businesses during a breakfast event to gain support from businesses to post and talk about the project at their locations.
- **FDR and Vanderbilt National Park sites (Philipa Ewing,):** supported the project in conjunction with the parks who co-operated the drive-in.
- **Dutchess County Arts Council:** in addition to funding the project, provided opportunities for outreach with the community at events.
- **Hyde Park Historical Society (Patsy Costello):** gave Slaats access to archives, supported outreach efforts to historically minded residents, made financial donations and provided a formal letter of support.
- **Steve Hughes:** town webmaster, provided documentation he has created of events and meetings over the years.
- **Herb and Barabra Sweet:** supplied footage, and personal references to other supporters.
- **Nancy Alden (former town supervisor):** served as a resource for historical material.
- **Pare Lorentz Film Center:** Dedicated to understanding the Roosevelt's, the center creates media for education from its historic holdings. Provided footage and personal references.
- **Molloys Pharmacy:** Donated 20 disposable cameras to be made available for residents to document town life.
- **Hyde Park Farmer's Market:** was a hub for Slaats in the summer months to engage community members in the project.
- **Susan Schryver-** Donated video of her parents wedding in the 1950's, which she allowed Slaats to project onto and out of the home of her parents.
- **The Hyde Park Community at-large:** contributed content to the project

FUNDERS

- Dutchess County Arts Council
- Dutchess County Historical Society
- NY Foundation for the Arts
- Explore NY
- Hyde Park Free Library
- Quadricentennial Celebration
- Scenic Hudson

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT PHASES

2006: Slaats moves to the Hudson River and begins theorizing a project that engages the community in its history.

2007: The idea is born. Slaats begins discussing the project with community leaders and actively seeks support and funding. The collection of content begins and partnerships are developed.

2008: Partnerships continue to be developed and content is collected and digitized.

2009: Content is presented through digital projections and interactive presentations at libraries, private residencies, and the drive-in. The project is documented and begins the transition to legacy phase.

June: first installation presented in Staatsburgh in conjunction with Staatsburgh Spirit Days.

July: Project presented at Staatsburg Firehouse, and at Susan Schryver's home.

August: Project shown at Hyde Park Free Library.

September: Project presented to Hyde Park Town Council.

October: Project installation at Hyde Park Drive In Theatre.

PARTICIPATORY MODEL and SIGNIFICANCE/UNIQUENESS WITHIN THESE MODELS

Professor Helen De Michiel outlines several models for participatory projects in framing the Participatory Media and Social Practice course taught at The University of Oregon's Arts & Administration program in Fall 2011. These models include: user generated, contexts, tactical media, community, collaboration, the database, and interdisciplinary models. While the digitization of footage undoubtedly creates a database of digital images, audio and video, I see this project most closely aligning with the community based models examined. In describing the community model of participatory projects, De Michiel explains that they "stay continually grounded in real history, real geography and real time — what we know as human beings... [They] are thoroughly tethered to the real — and work to draw in people from these communities who have deep and intimate feelings about the environs that the media makers are looking at." (2011) Examples explored included *The Triangle Fire Open Archive*, *Holy Mountain*, and *Gaza-Sderot*. These projects collected narratives and objects relating to specific locations and historical events. *The Triangle Fire Open Archive* and *Holy Mountain* presented these collected materials as web-based archives, while *Gaza-Sderot* was a video documentary series that could be viewed on the internet. Unlike these three projects, *The Hyde Park Visual History Project* exists within real physical space as opposed to the web. The project is documented and can most certainly be experienced remotely through the web, but its main purpose was to interact with the physical landscape and architecture of Hyde Park for a limited time period.

I also see *The Hyde Park Visual History Project* as fitting within the collaboration model, defined as "projects whose creators have made community outreach and relationship building a central feature of their media making practice." (De Michiel, 2011) Examples of collaborative models included *Blood Sugar*, *Saving the Sierras*, and *Lunch Love Community*. In all three of these projects, the organizers engaged in depth with the communities they were examining over long periods of time allowing these communities to provide the raw footage that they then, translated either as a documentary or on a web-based platform. Slaats engaged with the Hyde Park community as a new resident for nearly three years before the project reached its final presentation phase, all of the raw footage for his projections was provided by the community through endless outreach efforts in nearly every facet of the community

from the diner, to the pharmacy, to the school, to the library, to the farmer's market, to city hall, and so on. Unlike many of the models we've examined, The Hyde Park Visual History Project is unique in that it exists in physical space and does not fit into any traditional documentary format. Like Sharon Daniel's projects, the raw footage is poetically and artistically compiled in a non-narrative fashion, but in an entirely different setting. The purpose of the project, is less to educate and inform, than it is to create an immersive experience structured in a format that mirrors the non-narrative form of memory. "This is not going to be a historic film of Hyde Park. It will be a collection of moments that represents life in Hyde Park." (Slaats, 2008a)

Additionally, many artist-initiated participatory media projects we've examined in the Participatory Media and Social Practice course such as the work of Brooke Singer and Stephanie Rothenberg, use technology to engage with concepts surrounding technological themes and issues such as: surveillance, e-waste, immaterial labor, etc. Alternatively, *The Hyde Park Visual History Project* uses new media in conjunction with grassroots community organizing processes to engage in the past as much as the present and future. In many ways the project is a resistance to the fading practice of public assembly. It strives to bring people together within geographical space to create shared experiences and new memories by reflecting on the past. I see projects like this as an emerging form of public art practice.

The project is also unique in that for the most part, it was temporary. The installations only happened in the summer of 2009. The documentation exists, but the experience was designed for a specific location and for a specific duration of time, making it both site-specific and time-based. The web-based and documentary pieces are designed to be experienced in numerous contexts at any time without the experience being impacted.



SIGNIFICANCE/ UNIQUENES TO HYDE PARK

Evidently, *The Hyde Park Visual History Project* is unique in the context of participatory media projects. It is also very unique and significant to the community of Hyde Park. Located two hours north west of New York city just south of Albany, Hyde Park is a small town known for it's history, being the hometown of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Its population is just over 20,000 people. (Wikipedia) As a town that bases its identity in its rich history, there has been conflict between the past and present within the community as it has grown (Slaats, 2008e). While the community is full of historians and archivists, a scan of the Chamber of Commerce's web site will show that it is not full of contemporary art centers. *The Hyde Park Visual History Project* was an entirely new way for the town to interpret its history in a cutting edge way. The project embodied the dichotomy between old and new in a seamlessly un-conflicted manner, serving as an inspiration for future growth of how the town can move forward into the 21st century without compromising it's historical heritage.

PROJECT VISION

Slaats' vision for the project was to make the past meet the present through images that capture moments in time. The images would transform the landscape and create spaces for rich dialogue around history, heritage and cultural identity as interpreted through the place of Hyde Park. The project was challenged by the cost of equipment necessary to produce the desired quality of projections. Slaats was surprised to learn that he would need a 30,000 lumen projector to achieve his desired results at the drive-in. This type of projector costs tens of thousands of dollars. He met this challenge by applying for grants to multiple funding sources, which proved successful but time consuming.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT/ CROSS SECTOR INTERACTIONS/ OUTREACH EXTENSION

Leading up to the project Slaats used real world avenues. He spent days engaging with residents face-to-face at the Hyde Park Free Library, where he made himself available every Saturday morning. When that was not enough, he organized workshops around digitally archiving images. In the summer months he set up a station at The Hyde Park Farmer's market. He attended meetings at the Hyde Park Town Council, the Hyde Park Chamber of Commerce and with the Hyde Park Historical Society. He gave back to the contributors of the project by digitally archiving the materials they donated. He sent press releases and conversed with local journalists to spread the word about his projects through print media. He hand distributed posters to local businesses and mailed cards to residents. He connected with local schools to partner with students in the digital documentary course. He continually engaged in conversations with people in town about the project. He also promoted the project and provided project updates through his blog and a Facebook community group. The most activity came from direct face-to-face interactions. Slaats made sure the projects presence reached almost every corner of this community. Although it was an art project, the art was merely a medium to highlight the strength of the individuals who have lived there.

Now that the project is in its archival phase, he continues to maintain the website, blog, and Vimeo archive of the project. He presents the project at conferences and hopes that others will take what he has done and re-enact it in their own communities. If the time and resources were available I'd suggest he make the type of community engagement kits *New Metropolis* has put together and distribute through their website (<http://www.thenewmetropolis.com/resources.html>). These kits serve as step-by-step guides for people wishing to reproduce the project in their community. Even without this type of guide he has captured the project process in detail through the project blog. He has also continued working with the themes he began exploring with *The Hyde Park Visual History Project* in his more recent project FREESPACE, which takes the concept of sharing footage of the places that matter to us through a web based archive. He also launched community based art projects through the art space PAUSE, where he serves as the Executive Director. PAUSE collaborates with artists and communities in Poughkeepsie to reclaim underutilized public spaces.

INTERACTIVITY AS AN INCUBATOR FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

The project initially created interactions with participants the old fashioned way: by word-of-mouth. It functioned to create social change by giving community members a reason and venue to reflect on their historical heritage. Within the safe space of art, the community was able to tell their stories by sharing images. Slaats took what the community provided and remixed it with his own technical skill and artistic vision to create a series of unique and meaningful events where the community could come together for a one-of-a-kind experience that they could speak of for many years to come; an experience that they collaboratively created. The fact that the community served as a collaborator allowed for the participants to take ownership of the project.

Now in it's legacy phase, the project interacts with audiences outside of the Hyde Park community through documentation. Slaats kept a detailed blog of the process with the intention that others can use his blog as a resource for their own projects. Both the project web site and blog now serve the purpose of preserving the archive of digitized footage Slaats created, as well as to inspire similar projects in other communities.

During it's inception the project provided an infrastructure in which community members could share the memories of the town's past with one another. The project served as an incubator for conversation, memory, and shared experience that strengthened the identity of this town. This heightened sense of community is as relevant to the future as it is to the past, as this community embarks on the process of redefining itself in the 21st century.

BRANDING/COLLATERAL

The main collateral for the project was the project web site, which served as a hub for news about the project and for instructions on how to share content during the early phases of the project. The branding and style is clear and to-the-point. It let's the

images, videos, and audio clips speak for themselves, while providing the context and process behind the project. Selected archived resources can be accessed from this main hub including links to raw footage (audio, video, and photography).

CURRENT PROJECT ASSETS

- **Project Website** (<http://thehydeparkproject.com/>)
- **Informational Blog** (documenting process) (<http://hydeparkproject.blogspot.com/2008/01/ideas-behind-this-project.html>)
- **Digitized footage** (both belonging to individuals and public archives)
- **Digitized Documentation** (housed within the libraries and historical archives)
- **Vimeo channel:** Stores and makes accessible video documentation of the events along with raw footage. (<http://vimeo.com/user1093559>)
- **Flickr Group** (<http://www.flickr.com/groups/hydeparkproject/>)
- **Facebook Community page:** now mostly inactive (<https://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=9886598757>)

PROJECT GOALS

- To bridge the past to the present.
- To energize space that has a significant history.
- To open a public dialogue that emphasizes the role that images play in connecting people to place.
- To digitize the historical and personal footage belonging to both individuals and institutional archive collections.
- To create a venue for shared collective experience in the community.
- To inspire other communities to undergo similar projects.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

- Public events brought the community together to collectively experience and engage with the installations.
- In providing footage, participants engaged in reflection on their own heritage, history, and identity.
- The past visually collided with the future in visually creative and interactive installations.
- The towns footage was digitally archived to be preserved and easily shared in the future
- The project was archived to be utilized as a tool for other artists and organizers to enact similar projects in other communities.

PROJECT IMPACT

As far as I've been able to look, I have not found evidence of any formally measured impact. Through project documentation, it is apparent that many community members were involved in this project and attended these events. All published press, interactions on the Facebook page, and comments from residents which Slaats chose to

share in his blog, demonstrate curiosity and excitement from participants and on-lookers. "A broader understanding of this place was produced, showing the role that images play in creating and sustaining identity at the local level." (Slaats, 2009b)

PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT ASSESSMENT

Slaats actively sought the engagement of new communities throughout the project, by exploring various avenues to reach people. He used participation in his collaborative process for developing content throughout the project. He also utilized participation in its display during the installation at the drive-in. He installed a video camera at the site which detected motion. The amount of motion in the space directly correlated with how much video would show on the screen. Participation was a crucial element to every aspect of this project. This project did not just use participation for participation's sake, it used participation to create a rich visual history. This process engaged an entire community in celebrating its historical past. Individuals were able to celebrate more than their mainstream history, they were able to share extremely personal stories from their own family's past.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

Overall, I find this to be an extremely successful project in both the field of participatory media and community based arts. It energized a community surrounding issues of importance to them, while also creating a stunning, artistically rich, and technologically skilled contemporary art experience. Examining the planning of this project in detail, has confirmed the validity of processes I've used as an arts administrator working to create community based media projects. The bulk of Slaats efforts in this project consisted of community partnerships. I wouldn't be surprised if he spent more hours talking to community members than he did at his computer digitizing footage. *People* lie at the center of social practice art projects. When he was not busy building community support he was applying for grants and seeking financial support. In many ways, this illustrates a new form of artist: an artist as a community organizer. We are shifting away from this idea of artists being holed up in their studio completely separate from society. Through participatory media and social practice, we are entering an age where artists facilitate the creative expressions of communities. This confirms my decision as an artist to shift my focus into the field of arts administration, where I can hone my skills in community engagement and resource development to execute projects I could never imagine taking on as a sole artist. I'm excited to see what the future holds as more projects of this collaborative nature take form.

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