



“They Were, S/He Was, I was, I will Be”

Mobile Poster Installation and Active Response

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Abstract

They Were/ She Was is an active response piece to the issue of social stigmatization of sexual assault. It is a mobile poster installation, moving through specific locations of the city of Toronto, where victim-survivor support services are provided. At each location, passers-by were invited to sign their names in the blank space of the poster as a way to identify the need to speak out and acknowledge that violence does occur, and in contemporary society, we cannot be silent. Overall, thirty people willingly signed the poster; some sharing their stories on camera, and others signing in- private. The poem, "The Journey We Take," weaves through the video, subliminally sharing the survivor story of the artist herself. As the poster moved from location to location, the word, "Rape," and all of its connotations and denotations were present for passers-by, creating curiosity and possibly an urge to speak up. The project was created for the course, "Contemporary Issues," with Professor BH Yael, and is linked to the Canadian Artists Against Sexual Assault collective and the "Report to Prevent Campaign." It has been available on the poster activists' blog since November 24, 2007, and has been an excellent way to disseminate information about the project, to increase a dialogue about the issues at stake with sexual assault in Canada, and to keep the project alive, possibly to inspire others to act in a similar way.

Project Summary

Walking around downtown Toronto with an over-sized poster to collect signatures from strangers is not a simple task, especially when the theme is, “Social awareness and prevention of sexual assault;” however, 80% of people whom I asked to sign the poster agreed to do it; in-contrast to the 80% of sexual assault cases that are unreported in Canada (Ontario Women’s Justice Network, 2004).

When carrying this poster, do I have to be ‘the artist’, ‘the activist’, or can I be myself and react as I would naturally to the project and the people participating in the project?

I filmed the paper flowing naturally in the wind and thought of the Gates, by Christo and Jean-Claude (2005). I remember the experience of walking under them, standing beside them, jumping to touch them, and watching them from afar, flip and twist and hang over the walkways of Central Park in New York City.

Each “Gate” was a mark in time, and in contrast, my “mobile installation” is also a mark in time. Sexual Assault is a mark in time as well, but it is often not a topic that is so openly presented or talked about in public. Each marker: the Gates, my poster and a sexual assault is stored into long-term memory forever. My poster, like the Gates and like many survivors of sexual assault, is a mark in time, but also a statement of social justice and activism, and of course, an art object.

I discovered that the citizens of Toronto know what rape is, and they are not scared to sign a poster showing their support for sexual assault advocacy. Society does not often hear or see articles or artwork illustrating the prevalence of sexual assault, so it becomes taboo to talk about and stigmatized as much as issues such as poverty, abortion, homelessness and drug addiction. With the high rate of sexual assault, as with poverty and homelessness etc., it is our job to create awareness for safe and positive change. Hopefully, this mobile poster installation project has stirred up some conversations with the participating ‘signees’ and has fostered a deeper awareness of the issues connected to sexual assault as well as the fact that we cannot be silent.

“Never apologize for showing feeling. When you do so, you apologize for the truth.”

—Anonymous

November 24, 2007: Post-Posting Reflections

Walking around downtown Toronto with an over-sized poster to collect signatures from strangers is not a simple task. Especially when the theme is, “Social awareness and prevention of sexual assault.” However, 80% of people whom I asked to sign the poster agreed to do it; in-contrast to the 80% of sexual assault cases that are unreported in Canada (Ontario Women’s Justice Network, 2004). I also noticed that more men than women signed the poster, but this is only a referential analysis, not an accurate account and more research needs to be done to make sound conclusions. Nevertheless, I questioned this observation, wondering if the male participants want to support female victims of sexual assault, or if they are supporting male victims, or both male and female victims? Media and society teaches us that women are victim-survivors of sexual assault, and this is true, but men are also victim-survivors of sexual assault.

Throughout this report, I use the term, “victim-survivor” coined by Dr. Rhonda Wells-Wilbon model of African-Centered Healing, originally culled from the book, “No Secrets, No Lies: How Black Families Can Heal From Sexual Abuse by Robin D. Stone, 2004” because every person who is assaulted sexually is a victim, they do not remain victims, nor do they forget that they were victims as complete survivors. In text and in dialogue, sexual assault is stigmatized in society and this ‘stigma’ floats in the air and sticks to, magnetizes to the word, “victim” because of its innocence, and vulnerability. In order to move forward, a victim must become a survivor, but this cannot be taken in vain, because there are many stages that a victim of sexual assault must take before they can be a survivor, and before they can feel like a survivor. Therefore, I feel, as does Dr. Wells-Wilbon, that “victim-survivor” is fitting to name a person who has been raped—experienced a horrifying attack on the body and mind— and is not fixed in the position of victim, and is not completely a survivor and will never forget that they were once a victim—but they are moving forward with strength and hope.

Carrying the poster as I walked to each ‘hot spot’ was an interesting process, and holding my camera up to document the signing of the poster was also an interesting process of connection and disconnection to the poster and the installation, but also to the symbolic representation of the entire project. Do I have to be ‘the artist’, ‘the activist’, or can I be myself, and react as I would naturally to the project and the people participating in the project?

The poster was designed to be put onto a wall, or large windowpane for people to sign just above eye level. I wanted the participant to engage with the poster while they signed it, so I placed the words, “They were, s/he was, I was, I will be” at the top left corner in a clear and readable typeface called, Blair ITC and chose to write the phrases in such a way so that they would have to connect to the theme of the poster and step into the poster while signing it. Along the right side of the poster is the word, “Raped” in the same typeface, but much larger and in a grey-tone to balance the hierarchy between the heading and subheading below. The word in itself is bold enough. At the bottom, I wrote, “And I want it to stop,” so the participant reads, “They were, s/he was, I was, I will be Raped and I want it to stop.” Below the subheading is a link to the website of my non-

profit organization called Canadian Artists Against Sexual Assault/Artistes Canadiens Contre L'Assaut Sexuel (CAASA/ACCAS) and the title of an ongoing campaign called, "Report to Prevent" run by CAASA/ACCAS. The size of the poster is 24 x 40" or 2'x 3.5". Instead of hand-lettering the poster, I planned to design it on a computer to ensure that the text is legible and also to present the poster as professionally and seriously as I could, given the theme. If the poster was printed any bigger than the size it is at, people may have found it intimidating to sign and it would not have fit within my budget of \$10.00 either.

So, at \$8.00, I have a poster, which is durable to carry around the city and to hang on walls and windows. To hold it down, I used duct tape on the back and two pieces at the top for the outdoor locations. I also taped 30 cents (a quarter and a nickel) to the back bottom corners with duct tape. The 60 cents worth of coins acted as weights to hold the poster down, but not tightly so that if a gust of wind passed by, the poster would move freely, and possibly attract attention from people walking by. Odd choice for a weight, but hey, it was in my pocket and a functional last-minute solution. The experience of seeing the poster alone and flowing freely in the wind was special, and felt similar to the experience of witnessing the Gates project in New York City, February 2005 by Christo & Jean-Claude.



Fig. 1, Central Park Bridge with the Gates, Photo by Bryn Ludlow, February 18, 2005

I filmed the paper flowing naturally in the wind and thought of the Gates and the experience of walking under them, standing beside them and watching them from afar, flip and twist and hang over the walkways of Central Park in New York City. Each “Gate” was a mark in time, and in contrast, my “mobile installation” is also a mark in time. Sexual Assault is a mark in time as well, and it is often not a topic that is so openly presented or talked about in public. Each marker- the Gates, my poster and a sexual assault is put into long-term memory forever. My poster, like the Gates and like many survivors of sexual assault, is a mark in time, but also a statement of social justice and activism, and of course, an art object.



College Park Subway Station, Toronto ON, November 24, 2007

In everyday adventures, I do not usually stick up posters to poles or walls or windows, so there was always a sense of risk involved to each situation of posting up the poster, especially at Mount Sinai Hospital, Queen’s Park Ontario Legislature, Women’s College Hospital, Police Headquarters and the College Park Courthouse. I wasn’t concerned with the poster being taken down, but felt nervous to install the poster where I may be interrogated or asked to leave and given a fine by police, so I started to think about what I would say to the officer and how I could defend myself as an artist and activist: everyone has the right to peaceful protest, right? At these locations, the participants were all professionals, so by-law they were not allowed to have their photograph taken, but they did sign the poster! I chose the locations because of their dedicated and sometimes not-so-dedicated systems of support (or perceived as such) for victim- survivors of sexual assault, socially and politically.

My first stop was the Ontario College of Art and Design. I installed the poster on the third floor at 100 McCaul adjacent to the elevators and in the foyer of the main floor. The response to the installation was supportive and respectful. All participants signed the poster and agreed to be filmed while they signed the poster.



Mobile Poster Installation at OCAD

The second location of the ‘mobile installation’ was on the facade of Mount Sinai Hospital. Two nurses and a patient transporter signed the poster, but chose not to be filmed on my video camera. So, feeling the urge to collect more signatures, I installed the poster at College Park Subway Station on the street level. A homeless man approached me inquiring about the project and the poster and said that he would “sign the poster if I gave him a couple bucks.” He needed money to buy dinner and said that his shelter [kicks] the men out in the morning, but lets them back in for the evening. He was cold, and said that he was anemic. He seemed to be psychologically- sound, not high on drugs or drunken and not talking to himself or hearing things, so I felt safe and rather enjoyed the conversation we had. I also felt empathetic for him and his situation, as well as powerless, being a University student with little money myself.



“Joe, triptych” (video stills)



“Joe,” (video still)

For the next stop, I ventured over to the Medical Sciences Building at the University of Toronto. They were having a fair and conference on Saturday discussing Sexual Education topics for medical students, so after walking around the tables for a bit, I met one of the organizers and she asked me if I could put up the poster on their wall for people to sign if they chose to. This was the only venue with the poster where I left it alone because I felt that the location was secure enough to do so. It gave me a good opportunity to walk around the fair to check out what people were presenting and to network with their agency members. When filming a woman who saw the poster from her table, she inquired about the Canadian Artists Against Sexual Assault/ Artistes Canadiens Contre L'Assaut Sexuel (CAASA/ ACCAS), and I told her about it so now she is interested in talking to me more to find out about the artwork produced by CAASA and to have exhibitions at the gallery in the Centre for Women's Studies in Education at OISE/UT. At this moment, I felt like an activist and felt motivated and energized to engage myself in the cause of sexual assault and domestic violence to disseminate information through artistic exhibitions. It will be another project, and a future goal.



"Preparing to sign the canvas" (video stills)



"I will use orange" (video stills)



"An encounter" (video stills)

After the experience at the University of Toronto, I jaywalked across University Avenue over to the Ontario Legislature "pink palace" to see if I could stir up some political activism with my poster. I walked up the hill towards the crowd of people standing along the driveway, but realized that they were peacefully protesting for another issue: for the Taser Gun Ban in Canada. I was not disappointed that I couldn't install my poster at all, and instead felt a deep sense of grief and sympathy for the protesters, who were fluent in Polish. I realized that there are so many issues in this world that cannot be addressed at once. I did share my project with them, but told them that I did not want them to sign the poster as it would not be respectful to their protest. They had a small area of lit candles, signs saying, "Ban the Taser Gun in Canada," and photographs of the Polish man who was Tasered and passed away a month ago at the Vancouver Airport.

The Honourable David C. Onley, O. Ont.
Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario outside
of the Ontario Legislature building



I walked away from the Legislature building feeling full—of the experience seeing fellow Canadians protesting and standing for the innocent victim, as well as see The Honourable David C. Onley, O. Ont. Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario supporting the crowd— and I felt stronger inside to continue to present the poster to the final set of locations.

Women's College Hospital and Mount Sinai both above have programs specifically tailored to victims and survivors of sexual assault. I hoped that the experience of installing the poster at these locations would represent the support and fantastic service offered at these hospitals, but to also identify that sexual assault is still an issue today and not an issue to be pushed aside. Institutions like hospitals and police services need to continue to support and develop programs specific to sexual assault and domestic violence until the percentage of cases completely disappears to 0%.



9th Floor, Women's College Hospital

Women's College Hospital offers the Women Recovering from Abuse Program (WRAP), the Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Care Centre (SA/DVCC) which provides court support (the counselor can attend court with the victim-survivor), Art and Music Therapy programs, Emergency and Follow-Up Care, Women and Violence & General Counselling Program, and the Trauma Therapy Program. Mount Sinai Hospital has a Trauma Clinic and also offers court support. The Nurses and Doctors available at Women's College Hospital inside the hospital and outside gladly agreed to sign the poster, however were not comfortable to appear in my video and they did not like to have their picture taken.

On my way over to Toronto Police Headquarters, I ran into a man who wanted to know what I was doing for this project. He noticed me hanging the poster onto the sculpture of the boy pulling the obelisk engraved with "Serve and Protect," and said that he has a story to tell.

To Serve and Protect
(video still)



He said that when he was visiting/ or living in Saudi Arabia, he heard of a story of a woman who was raped and when she took the perpetrator to court, he was given a light fine and released. He felt that the judicial system needs to be re-accessed not only in Canada, but in all nations of the world and he signed the poster as a petition for this call.



A story to tell (video still)

Toronto Police headquarters at 40 College Street is the central organizing unit for all police operations. There are 55 Police Divisions in the GTA and an installation of the poster at Toronto police headquarters is most-fitting to the theme of sexual assault and domestic violence because of the service that police offer to victim-survivors of sexual assault, as well as to dispel the common myths and urban legends about Toronto Police. A division of police headquarters which is not really well-known to the public is the office of Toronto Victim Services.



Mobile Poster Installation outside of Toronto Victim Services

An important service and program, Toronto Victim Services is a division of police headquarters with Registered Social Workers, Psychologists and Counselors who answer phone calls 24 hours a day, 7 days a week from victim- survivors and police as well as

“secondary survivors” known as parents, family members and friends who are concerned about their friend, family member. When a victim of a sexual assault crime reports the case to police and presents their information statement, the police call Victim Services to connect with the victim to offer them support and counseling, as well as help find community supports for the victim of the crime. Police officers also contact Victim Services to attend to crime scenes if the victim calls immediately after being sexually assaulted so Victim Services can provide support right at the scene of the crime. This service is invaluable because the impact of sexual assault to a victim-survivor can be extremely distressing and symptoms can develop into a chronic condition known as Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) if not treated right away. The counselors and social workers available at Toronto Victim Services gladly agreed to sign the poster, however were not permitted to appear in my video documentation.

College Park at 444 College Street has a Courthouse on the second floor. This is the location for the majority of sexual assault and domestic violence criminal trials and pre-judiciary trials in Toronto. The closest I could get to the actual courtroom was to stand at the elevators on the main level, so I did and here is a photograph:



Mobile Poster Installation outside of 444 College Street Courthouses

The courthouse has its own separate Art-Deco style elevators, shown in the photograph above. The experience of walking towards the elevators thinking that you are going to court is incredibly daunting. It is one thing to experience a sexual assault on the body, but another to have to prove that it happened at all to a group of strangers. I stuck the poster on the elevator passively to illustrate the intimidation as well as to show that there really is no room for this form of activism at the courthouse because the law is the law and cases of sexual assault must be proven beyond a reasonable doubt by a Judge. I was approached by some passers-by, but they were not interested in signing the poster or talking about the topic of sexual assault in Canada. Totally understandable; perhaps the reason was because of the location of the installation, or because they find the issue

unattractive, or they have a personal connection with sexual assault and do not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, but I did not ask and respected their choice to say no.

In conclusion, as an artist, pseudo-activist and as Bryn, I learned so much from experiencing the process of installing this poster with words and signatures, including the word "Rape" on it at selected hot-spot locations in the downtown core of Toronto, Ontario. People of Toronto know what rape is, and they are not scared to sign a poster showing their support for sexual assault advocacy. The common signing position of the participants was a close-up stance so as to cover their name at the same time as signing it. Not everyone wants to connect their name to this issue, but it is common for social justice issues to not be accountable, or responsible for the cause. One in every four people who you know, have been or will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime (Yahoo! Inc. 2007). Given this statistic, sexual assault cases are still the most underreported to police. Society does not hear or see articles or artwork illustrating the prevalence of sexual assault, so it is taboo to talk about and stigmatized as much as issues such as poverty, abortion, homelessness, drug addiction. Hopefully, this mobile poster installation project has stirred up some conversations with the participating 'signees' this weekend and has fostered a deeper awareness of the fact of the issue of sexual assault: we cannot be silent.

References

Ontario Women's Justice Network (2004) Sexual Assault Information page.
<<http://www.owjn.org/info/basic-sexassault1.htm>> (2007 Nov. 25).

Yahoo! Inc. (2007) Yahoo! Answers.
<<http://ca.answers.yahoo.com/answers2/frontend.php/question?qid=20071113185222AAPW1zb>> (2007 Nov. 25).

Resources

The Poster Activist Blog
<http://theposteractivist.wordpress.com>

Canadian Artists Against Sexual Assault/ Artistes Canadiens Contre L'Assaut Sexuel
<http://www.igloo.org/caasaweb>

Women's College Hospital, Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence programs
<http://www.womenscollegehospital.ca/programs/program116.html>

Mount Sinai Trauma Clinic
<http://www.mtsinai.on.ca/psychiatry/programs/trauma/overview.htm>

Victim Services Toronto
<http://www.victimservicestoronto.com/>

All participants shown in the photographs and video stills above agreed to having their image documented and recorded for the sake of this project. External use of the images is prohibited, unless authorized by Bryn Ludlow.

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