

Thursday 01a - Mandy Rose discussion

There's the MIT *Docubase* [<http://docubase.mit.edu/>] ...this useful resource of 172 projects, and more. That's worth checking out: *Blabdroid*. It's a documentary by robots – actually, robots being one of those cardboard boxes. I experienced it at IDFA in Holland last year, or the year before. The scary thing is – it's got a cute voice! It asks you [?] and you want to reply! It's asking you some questions and you open your heart, the next thing is that you're talking to a cardboard box, telling it all your secrets...

So [...unclear....] *Question Bridge*, it's the last project I mentioned and it's remarkable; which I first saw at Sheffield Doc Fest maybe 3 years ago?

(Plays part of *Question Bridge*)

I saw it at DocFest and I saw the installation: I walked into a room and round you were these monitors at head height, with these guys talking – really affecting, there's that direct address and the fact that you're being spoken to as if you're part of that community – anyway, that notion of community, they're deconstructing as they go. Both an idea and also very different to each other. So that thing about the direct address is I think very interesting. The idea of a documentary project that started with asking people what questions they wanted to ask. It's an interesting project: there's the installation, you can see the website, there's the roving events they're holding around the States, so these conversations are going on. I think they've engaged with hundreds of thousands of guys already. And they've only recently launched this, they call it the interactive version, it's a second version and it has an app associated with it. And now people can contribute. So before the video that was included, the filmmakers – let's call them filmmakers - went out and recorded it around the States. Now there is an app, and with the app on the phone you can contribute to...and that generation of the project also allows you to navigate through, to explore, to see the content mapped in different kinds of ways so you can understand more about the background, the socio-economic, the geographic context of the different guys. So you can see commonalities of

things they are saying, how they link together. You can see it through base [?] contributions, you can see it ...all the guys in Alabama, what they're talking about ... you can see regional differences and characteristics.

And as well this project expresses something else that is interesting about the life cycle of these projects. I mean this project – in fact after a small video project by an artist called Chris Johnson had done; and which he then showed to his students at CalArts ten years ago; one of those students then thought about this particular video a lot and got the opportunity, got a commission, got the opportunity to make some work. So this guy Hank Willis Thomas went back to Chris Johnson and said “can you do something with that video to camera sort of thing?”

And that was maybe 5 years ago. For four years this was an online project, and this was the installation. Then they did a Kickstarter campaign and raised \$77K on Kickstarter last year and created this new interactive phase.

I think the life cycle of these interactive projects is so interesting. None of the people who started this thought in ten year's time. Actually that's quite typical: I would say to anyone, if you're starting an interactive project, start thinking about where it ends. Because I've got a couple of [???] that are lurking in the world and still rumbling on and still ... one broke yesterday and I'm thinking about how to get it back online; the budget ran out many moons ago...so it's something you have to think about. Not the most interesting thing, but it's something you have to think about.

So that's *Question Bridge*. Any thoughts or questions about *Question Bridge*?

Delegate

It's now interactive...do they want to censor what someone might want to post...

Mandy Rose

Moderation is the word [...] about the kind of controls you might put in ..

Delegate

Really offensive...

Mandy Rose

The position they've taken on this is that if it's legal, it can go live [...] that's the position at the BBC. That's kind of quite nice. They've taken the view: somebody wants to go out there and say some racist stuff [...] then let 'em – they're there, they're seen, they're part of the discourse. I mean that's just an example, somebody might say something completely different ...so if it's not defamatory ..

But project for project you have to decide if you're working with content that's coming in from the public you have to take the issue of moderation in the context of a particular project. Think how you're going to deal with it.

Humphry Trevelyan, USW

Doesn't it partly depend on the nature of the interaction – is it just a comments page, or are people seriously engaging creatively with it?

Mandy Rose

Yes, totally

Humphry Trevelyan

My experience with online newspaper feedback is that sometimes, say, when it's on immigration you get this flood of horrible stuff..just puts off, nobody else wants to enter into that so you end up with a lot of people not engaging because they're so offended and horrified....so that thing about, if it's legal, it's OK, I'd question that a bit.

Mandy Rose

In this project, I said it's contextual. In the project that's an interesting approach because what they're trying to do is engage in a conversation about the situation of African-American men. If someone wanted to [...] and say

something racist, that would be an interesting part of that conversation, part of that story. The project's about that legacy of slavery and racism on that community...so yes, that's a contextual decision you have to make. But I totally hear you about comment boards – who wants to get involved with comment boards? Seems like it's full of a bunch of racists or people with whom you have no sympathy with...you don't want to engage with, so that's true...so I think it's a contextual decision.

But I think that when it comes down to documentary making then you start thinking about – what is the ... what is the...relationship with the participant. It comes to the heart of that business, what is your relationship to those people who are getting involved? And I guess in a way my guiding principle on that is about transparency. I'm not saying that's all, but it's a guiding ...it's a beginning principle. I don't believe that in the history of documentary making – sorry, I'm going to be contentious here – that documentary makers have been transparent with people that take part in their projects. They have been – frankly – systematically obfuscating about the lack of power people taking part in documentaries have. A contentious point, but that's my view.

I think, in this environment... we don't have to be in awe of it, but I think it's something that really needs thinking about. What are the ethics of those relationships? Transparency seems to me to be a starting point, also an end point to thinking about those things.

Peter Gordon, London Film School

Can you talk about the nature of authorship in this sort of project? When you talk about a documentary project ...it does alter what authorship is about, doesn't it? You said a moment ago documentary filmmakers have been obfuscating. That is true, actually, I think we are in way...and maybe we are because we feel we are authoring or creating something. This is kind of different, what are your feelings about that?

Mandy Rose

What I would say is – I have a brief paragraph on this, but I skipped over it this morning – so there are a few books on the subject of authorship [...] and I would say: authorship can be totally what I might do as an “auteur” authorship in this kind of environment. There are I’m thinking of [???) is a very sweet kind of NFB interactive documentary – highly authored, there’s a strong voice ... the context of the person, the creator ...so there’s no kind of participatory aspect to it. [...unclear...]

Then there’s a shift from - in the interactive environment – a shift from some kind of narrative with some kind of beginning, middle and end, towards authoring an environment. So what a lot of what Jonathan Harris is doing is ... he’s more like an architect creating an environment where things happen. In a way you have to script both sides of the interaction ...you can’t just imagine...even if you’re thinking, you’re expecting a response, you have to think through what form that response might take. So although you may not be in – as it were – may not choosing to be in control of every part of the story you’re telling in the same way....in way I would say that you are, if you’re editing a documentary in a cutting room, you decide where it’s going, you play with that – perhaps – chorus of voices, work with that chorus of voices. Perhaps you’ve recorded too many people, but you choose where they’re going, you choose where they begin and you choose where they end. That authorship may not occur, but you’re still authoring an experience, you’re deciding on the shape of it. You’re deciding on the voice of the “call to action”.

And we come to the business of participation (so-called). There’s a whole other conversation to be had about the clarity of the relationship, about what it is you’re asking people to get involved, to get involved in? The question is: participation in what? What are the terms, and what are their rights or possibilities in terms of...I don’t know, for example in choosing not to be involved in a certain [...] if they change their mind, or whatever. Different people are negotiating those issues in different kinds of ways and diverse ways. As I said, for myself I found that the *Life in a Day* model was thin – it

feels like the power's all in Ridley Scott's and Kevin McDonald's hands ... but lots of documentaries are made like that..

[technical fault – end of recording]