

## **Art and Activism: A Case Study from the Design Studio for Social Intervention**

Founded in 2005, the Design Studio for Social Intervention is a creativity lab for social justice work. It is a space where activists, artists and academics come together to imagine new approaches to social change and new angles to addressing complex social issues. For us social interventions are actions taken to reconfigure social habits, unspoken agreements or arrangements that, prior to the intervention, add to the durability and normalcy of a social problem.

We feel artists are critical to this work because art works with symbols, and artists understand how people, communities and cultures use symbols to make collective meaning. Understanding this aspect of social life makes it possible to work within it as a point of leverage for social change. Art works within and outside of logic, so artists can engage multiple ways of making sense at once. This is important due to the fact that most of what we are working to change is outside of the realm of the rational.

In our work with Judith Leemann, our current Artist-in-Residence, we have a chance to highlight a particular role artists can play in creating social change. In this particular example, the Design Studio worked with youth activists in the Roxbury and Dorchester neighborhoods of Boston around addressing youth violence. We highlight it in hopes of raising these particular kinds of artist-activist partnerships as a meaningful model for engaging artists in activism.

We hired 15 youth interns to work with our summer Youth Activism Design Institute, in partnership with GOTCHA, a collaboration of over 40 youth-serving agencies in the area. Our challenge was to imagine new ways to address social or “horizontal” violence among youth in these neighborhoods. (The term horizontal violence comes from Omali Yeshitela of the Uhuru Movement.) During the Studio’s preliminary conversations with the youth support staff of GOTCHA, we asked what they felt was the cause of the violence they saw among youth. One youth worker described it this way: “One guy might be driving through another neighborhood, and he stops at a red light. He sees a guy from that neighborhood grilling him, so he grills back. Then he drives off and goes to get his boys...”



We immediately recognized this description of the power of the grill (where two peers catch eyes and assume animosity, often leading to threats or actual violence) to demand escalation, and we decided to test it with our new summer cohort. In group and individual interviews with over 60 youth, we found an instant, visceral reaction to intervening in “the grill”. Young people thought that shifting this social practice was both impossible and exhilarating.

The grill caught our attention because in our methodology for designing social interventions we look for an entry point, a less explored angle with potential to interrupt social problems. Here was a simple gesture that functioned on a symbolic level to epitomize a system where violence could start over nothing more than “she looked at me wrong”, but also how *the nothing was everything*, their very reputation and safety being on the line in the instant of response. (Almost all the youth we spoke to said that to not grill back was to be seen as a “punk”, who could then be mistreated by anyone.) So the grill was symbolic, but also a literal act that we could point to, play with and make strange.

Once we hired a set of young people, we had Judith lead sessions on analogical thinking as a way to get young people in a frame from which to imagine. For this, the grill served as both an instance of the thing being investigated (in this case horizontal violence among young people) and the means of investigation. Judith led the interns through in-studio sessions working with notions of metaphor and conceptual mapping to aid them in articulating both the dynamics at play within the grill and the dynamics at play in effective interventions. Each week we moved between the in-studio sessions that were opening up our understanding of the grill and on-the-street interventions testing out hunches around how the grill might be ‘opened up’ in public.

Our first quasi-public intervention into the grill was a game we designed for a GOTCHA barbecue with about 70 teens. We decided to play with how the grill demands the grill as response, instantly creating a narrow space of on-edge intensity and aggression.

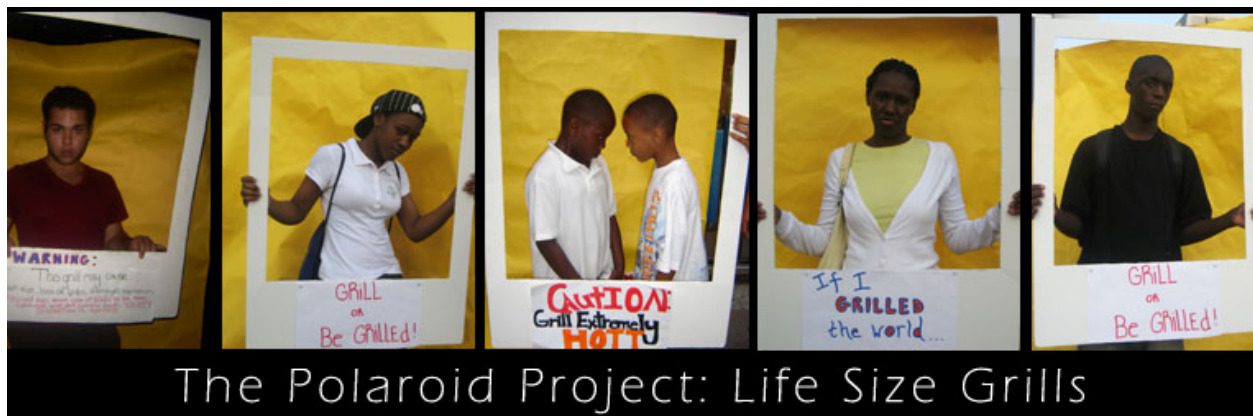
In the Grill Game you had to make someone *smile* by grilling them as hard as you could. Since ordinarily getting grilled would not make someone smile at all, it was the very introduction of the game rules (and subsequent crowd pressure, hyped up by two interns who were fabulous game hosts) that all of a sudden made the smile an irresistible response to the grill. As one player said afterward, “Damn, now I’m gonna smile every time I try to grill someone.”



We felt we were beginning to surreptitiously mess with the power of the grill, since the automaticity of its escalation depends on a certain kind of conceptual isolation. It operates by locking the eyes of the participants on one another to the exclusion of everything else. In that moment, all that matters is what the grill says matters. So anything we did to connect the grill to something else made it more difficult for the grill to be its greedy self.

Our second grill intervention was done completely in public space, with over 100 young people in Dudley Square, Uphams Corner, Downtown Crossing and at an end-of-the-summer cultural festival hosted by the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative. In this intervention, known as the “The Polaroid Project”, the interns asked teens (and early 20-somethings) to give us their “best grill” as they posed holding a “life size Polaroid” frame (white foamboard, actually). The interns had also designed statements that they stuck on the white frame, making it look like someone had written at

the bottom of a polaroid. We left participants to make their own sense of the point being made, which was quite difficult for our youth activists to understand at first. We, as activists, are used to drilling our point home. Judith helped us understand that offering “a moral to the story” actually deflates the power of your intervention.



Midway into our exploration of the grill, Judith brought in props and structures borrowed from performance to “make the familiar strange” and give us new insights into the grill. A video camera was brought in to see how the presence of another “eye” watching a grill being performed shifted things. She brought large made and found props to see how they enhanced or interfered with grilling. One at a time the interns stood in front of the group and were handed a prop and asked to grill while holding it. A young man stood with a three foot tall droopy paper daisy and tried to grill through his embarrassment, a young woman stood grilling with a candle in her hand and later described how surprised she was by the grief that came with holding the candle.



Having an artist in the room treating the performance of the grill as just another form to be investigated revealed new lines of possible engagement. Wonderful and difficult questions came up as the young people prepared to shape these investigations into something they could bring to the public. After seeing the grill performed with props, the group hung onto two of the most powerful ones – the candle and a short length of two by four lumber, and crafted a simple gestural performance for their closing public event. They stood in darkness in two facing lines, one line with two-by-fours and the other line with lit candles. Each facing pair grilled each other in silence and exchanged the candle for the two-by-four at regular intervals.

While their internal experiences of these actions during the preparations were quite profound, they had struggled with whether their gestures would mean anything to those watching, and whether someone should stand up first and tell audience what this was intended to symbolize. They decided not to. Their brief, “unexplained” performance produced a remarkable affective shift in the room, allowing a conversation afterwards in which audience members and interns honestly—and

