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The Making of the Mini-Documentary: "Pockets"

Tricia Opstad
The University of Montana

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THE MAKING OF A MINI-DOCUMENTARY: "POCKETS"
THE CONCEPT, ARTISTIC PROCESS AND PERSONAL REFLECTION

By

Tricia Ann Opstad

B.S. Psychology, Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana, 1998

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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in Fine Arts, Integrated Arts and Education

The University of Montana
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Approved by:

Dr. David A. Strobel, Dean
Graduate School

Karen Kaufmann, Chair

Dr. James Kriley, Co-Chair

Valerie Krex
Media Arts

Opstad, Tricia, M.A., Autumn 2006 Fine Arts, Integrated Arts and Education

The Making of a Mini-Documentary: “Pockets”, the Concept, Artistic Process and Personal Reflection

Chairperson: Karen Kaufmann

In the making of my first movie, titled “Pockets”, I worked to understand documentary making by interviewing members of the community in Missoula, Montana. The immediate and multi-faceted nature of video as a medium gave me many opportunities to actively participate in the creative process and thrive in the spontaneity of interactions in the moment.

Along with videographer Felicia Edwards, I asked random people on the streets, one question: “What’s in your pockets?” We then videotaped their responses, with the goal being to capture authentic human behavior unobtrusively. We designed the interview process as a learning experience by inviting people to participate with very little preparation, allowing for cognitive dissonance to occur. The response we received reveal the many metaphors behind the simple question of what a person might have in his or her pockets; it often seemed as though the respondent was answering a different question, such as “What are you hiding” or “Who are you?” In addition, being an intended learning experience, the project was also designed to inspire a sense of ‘play’ for those involved. Through this process, I began to understand the sensitivity required for interviewing strangers.

The editing program I used, I-Movie, enabled me to develop my vision, incorporating music, effects and rhythm in transitions. The completed movie was screened on a Missoula ‘First Friday’ art night in November 2006. The screening was part of an event involving entertainment. For an added interactive element, fellow artists were staged as live mannequins who allowed the audience to look at what was in their pockets.

This project taught me to pursue an artistic vision to completion using a variety of available resources. It also gave me the opportunity to learn basic technical skills necessary for making a documentary, as well as reinforcing valuable communication skills that will influence my future planning of performance events and movie screenings. In addition, I learned hands-on lessons about proper data management, project documentation, event organizing and advertising. Finally, the project was a remarkable experience in designing learning moments for the public and continuing my development as a well-rounded multi-media artist.

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Chapter 1: Project Intent

The intent of the proposed creative project was to gain knowledge in the area of video production in order to screen a finished product to an audience. I wanted to discover and acquire the necessary skills to make a documentary, become savvy with necessary programs and equipment, and finally, screen the film to an audience. After making and screening “Pockets”, my plan is to produce future documentaries and submit them to film festivals throughout the United States. I also will include making music videos, video art, short movies, commercials or television shows and air them on my web site or on the internet, public television or local galleries. From this final creative project, I can as an artist and educator teach students about technical and artistic aspects of video production. From this experience I can now promote myself or market other artists, organizations or companies. Through the act of any planned project in the future, my hope as an artist and teacher is to find new avenues for ‘play’, improvisation and loosening personal boundaries while interacting with strangers. This allows participants to feel more comfortable to create, in turn teaching individuals a new perspective by stepping outside of standard routines and boundaries.

Chapter 2: The Concept

In September 2005, I was sipping coffee at a local café with friends, while the homecoming parade marched through downtown. The city was buzzing and I felt inspired to interact with people and create something new. The idea involved filming and interacting with people randomly on the street. My undergraduate work in Psychology gave me a strong foundation in observing human behavior. The courses of study taught how to conduct unbiased research. Being an avid improviser and performer, it is my intent to portray genuine human responses as art and encourage people involved to be comfortable in the moment creatively. My background in improvisational theatre began at The Brave New Workshop in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a small theatre and improv school in Uptown. I started taking classes in July 2002, volunteering for payment. After the first session, I was affected positively by the improvisation experience, finding that it helped me and I wanted to learn more. I auditioned for an upcoming show reciting two comedic monologues. After the audition, I shook the director's hand and told him I hoped they would consider awarding me a scholarship. A week later, the director called to offer me a scholarship that would pay for all my classes for the year. Improv had an impact on me in many ways; I realized that my instinctive drive to 'play', take risks, be impulsive and thrive in the moment in real life could be transformed and channeled into performance, entertaining and interacting with others. I felt rewarded for being impulsive in this setting whereas in the past impulsive behavior had gotten me in trouble. During the first few sessions, I learned about the importance of being committed to the character, emotion and scene while improvising. This transferred into my life, allowing me to stay devoted to projects, follow through on decisions and maintain positive relationships.

These experiences had such an impact on my life that I wanted to share them with others. This is why I subscribe to this style in the making of this movie and allow for both spontaneity and flexibility throughout the process.

The book Making Documentary Films and Reality Videos: A Practical Guide to Planning, Filming and Editing Documentaries of Real Events helped me realize that I wanted to be sure to offer interesting pictures and show the viewer authentic reactions along with an action of doing something. We decided, rather than a standard interview format, to give the person in front of the camera something to do with their hands and record natural behavior. After brainstorming and considering different questions to ask people, my collaborator Felicia Edwards and I decided on the question, “What is in your pockets?” This question was motivated while doing laundry. There have been numerous times since I have been living with my life partner, Josh, that I have washed his pants only to discover a “jackpot” of items in the pockets. As I stood there in the laundromat, I asked myself, “How could someone generate so many things in their pockets?” This made me curious what other people were carrying around in their pockets. As we explored the question further, we talked about how the question stood for the analogy of what was inside us, as humans. As Hampe states, “...you can’t just plop people down in front of a camera and tell them to be themselves” (p. 42). This particular question offered an excellent approach to talking with strangers. We were confident that it would open the door to reveal more about the person in front of the camera, because they would be more relaxed with something they could naturally talk about.

The shooting format was planned carefully. We wanted to create situations for people to reveal small pieces of themselves authentically and unobtrusively. Part of my

formula for creating and executing an artistic product is to allow flexibility and change plans intuitively with the flow of the project and accommodate the participants reactions. The material was available: an open-ended and provocative question, the location and time of the shoot and the people on the street. Our clear focus was to capture human behavior in response to the question. We only wanted to shoot spontaneous responses, with people as their natural selves. As Barry Hampe writes, “The documentarian can choose to trap them...or to explore them more fully as individuals (p. 57). Hampe describes the role of early late night television in initiating this relaxed style of interviewing, “It was television, specifically the ‘Tonight Show’ that showed us that people talking about things they cared about could be intensely interesting...the entire program, which was broadcast in its early years, was an exercise in spontaneity” (p. 21). In recent years, reality video has skyrocketed on television. Some shows come off as being contrived and scripted, like “Survivor” or “Fear Factor”. Within the design, however, there are entertaining gems, like shooting people in unexpected situations, where truthfulness emerges spontaneously. I am influenced to shoot in a reality documentary style by shows such as “Wonder Shozen”, a spin-off of Sesame Street, but created for adults. In one skit a traveling puppet interviews strangers around Central Park in New York City, provoking anger in some. This demonstrates an up close view of behavior where people are taken out of their comfort zones.

In the third week of Creative Pulse 2006, I registered for the Media Arts apprenticeship, with hopes of using my footage to create a final product. I wanted to learn and further develop my skills in this medium. All the footage fit on one 60 minute mini-digital video tape. I discussed my interests with Rick Hughes, he allowed me to

pursue individual work on my project and assigned me to produce a 90 second trailer for the movie by the end of the week. The last day of the class involved a final critique of our work and people responded positively to the piece. The instructor and my classmates pushed for further filming and editing to produce something longer. I was encouraged by their response.

Chapter 3: The Process

Pursuing my vision required learning the ins and outs of producing a documentary from beginning to end, with many opportunities for troubleshooting. This required devotion to the project, personal strength, good communication with my collaborators, and my ability to recognize the key elements behind an entertaining and effective movie form. Interviewing people and taping real life is fascinating to me; I am attracted to peoples' stories and human behavior. I am also intrigued by interactions with strangers. Breaking personal boundaries motivates human relationships and removes fear of the unknown for myself, as well as providing that space for others. This project allowed me to explore that passion. I consider my role as an artist to be a teacher for the unsuspecting, encouraging people to open up to their creativity so I can showcase the individuality and beauty in all of us. As Barry Hampe reminds us, "the best documentaries are undoubtedly made because the documentarian had a driving desire to deal with the topic" (p. 105). I have the desire to reveal the subtle beauty in people going about their everyday life.

In The Book of Video Photography: A Handbook for the Amateur Movie-Maker Cheshire mentions, "The director's job is to have a clear vision of what he or she wants and communicate it to the rest of the team" (p. 140). My partner and friend in this project was part of my team. She and I met in a weekly writer's group. We enjoyed each other's writing style and connected artistically. In our friendship, trust developed and we were both excited to create something new using video. She had previous experience filming shorts and art videos. We freely talked about what we considered to be provocative and

our mutual interest in promoting individuality. She took the role cameraperson and I that of interviewer.

When I approached people on the street, I did it at random, asking anyone I saw, in an attempt to show an accurate cross section of the population. This way, the film would portray multiple responses making for a revealing and multi-dimensional piece. In Hampe's book he describes the riskiness of this approach, "In essence, these documentarians put their research on film and showed the audience whatever they found" (p. 22). Most of the people we approached were slightly hesitant, yet humored us and were willing to reveal the contents of their pockets. There were only two people who didn't want to participate. One young man declined to participate, declaring he was all dirty and he had been living in his truck the past few days. Another man was asked the question and responded angrily, "No, you can't see anything in my pockets, you can't see anything about me." We consciously decided to include the shot of myself reporting what one person said when I asked him what was in his pockets and he did not feel comfortable with it (see appendix A). Hampe recommends a shot of a crew when creating this kind of documentary, "The pretense that the camera is not there...simply distorts the evidence that is recorded in a behavioral documentary...that's why I often include at least one shot of the crew at work. It reminds the audience that what they are seeing took place in front of a camera with one or more strangers tiptoeing around behind the scene" (p. 43).

During the editing process, I had creative control over the message delivered. The editing software provides tools for sound, transitions and effects, altering the speed of the shot. This is where I fully realized the vastness of the proposed question, "What's in

your pockets?” Most interviewees responded, rephrasing the question. Often, documentarians struggle to get people being interviewed to do this. This made it easy to repeat the question in alternative voices. Also revealed was the authentic reaction to such a question and we were able to watch people “buy” more time to mentally scan the contents of their pockets, before they opted to participate. The reason I opened the movie with a shot of two women, a mother and daughter, is because of their willingness to ‘play’, laugh and have fun with the question. One woman stated, “What, these pants are so tight, how could I fit anything in my pockets?” They interacted with each other naturally and seemed comfortable in front of a camera (see appendix B). Obviously, I wanted to make sure to keep the interest of viewers, so I designed the frequency of the shots and their order carefully, to maintain a fluid rhythm. As Hampe recommends, “When you begin to assemble your shots...remember that the rhythm of a sequence is determined by the duration and frequency of the shots” (p. 184). I simply wanted to reveal actual human behavior in response to this one question, to show the audience my research and have them gather their own conclusions. I wanted the frames and shots to contrast with one another, adding variety and texture to the piece.

Chapter 4: Technical Difficulties

In August 2006, my computer unexpectedly crashed and did not have enough memory to boot and start up the programs. I had saved too much information and did not check the amount of memory left on the computer. Without hesitation, I contacted Valerie Krex, a committee member, mentor and friend. She suggested I ask The University of Montana Media Arts Department for technical assistance. With the approval of Dr. Kriley, I delivered my sick computer to Tim Howard. After several weeks, he had vague answers and no time to fix it. I had no money to take it Computer ER, a local computer repair shop. In the beginning of September 2006, Tim called with horrible news, “We have to reformat your hard drive, and you will lose everything. Do you have your files backed up on an external hard drive or on disc?” The answer was no, I only carried two DVDs of the final version of “Pockets”.

The hard drive was reformatted and it just sat Tim Howard’s office. Josh and I decided to take this into our own hands. I retrieved the computer and Josh set out to repair it. He did research and contacted colleagues about the computer’s ailment. He looked online to purchase a new hard drive, but learned we could find just what we needed at the Staples in Missoula for a reasonable price. I purchased a new two hundred and fifty gigabyte hard drive, specifically made for Macintosh computers for \$150. He installed it with consultation from Computer ER. The new hard drive would provide a clean system, transferring all video and media information to an external hard drive to ensure backup of all files.

Chapter 5: Screening

When the project was near completion, I submitted it to the Big Sky Screening Series Committee in Missoula, Montana. The intent of the project was to show the movie at one of the monthly “First Friday” screenings. It was accepted with praise by the program director and was slated to show on August 2, 2006, at the Wilma Theatre in downtown Missoula. I requested that it be shown later, needing more time to invite my committee, classmates and generate an audience through advertisement. “Pockets” was scheduled to screen during the Women Filmmaker Series on Friday, October 6, 2006. On the day of the scheduled event, I emailed Damon Ristau, director of the Big Sky Film Festival and Screening Series, and he left me a message saying there had been not enough submissions for the Women Filmmaker Series and “Pockets” would not be shown. I contacted Damon Ristau to express my disappointment. Damon and I had a discussion over the phone, about the cancellation. During our conversation, I communicated the importance of screening “Pockets” and he apologized. Damon suggested contacting him a lot sooner than the day of the scheduled event. This is where I realized the importance of open and clear communication. Immediately, I called Karen Kaufmann, my committee chair to alert her of the change of plans. She informed Dr. Jim Kriley and other committee members. I sent out a mass email to inform everyone. I accepted the reality of this unexpected development and saw it as a catalyst for building the skills I needed to promote my art. Within the next week, I brainstormed ideas for new locations for the screening premiere.

Chapter 6: Planning My Own Screening

The deadline graduation was approaching. I made a list of possible places to show the movie. At one point, I considered a laundromat. I had considered showing at the Roxy Theatre on Higgins Avenue or the Crystal Theatre in Missoula, where other independent screenings had taken place and was appropriately equipped. However, I decided I wanted the event to be collaborative and in a place where it would be likely to have plenty of foot traffic. Ultimately, it would have been ideal to have a showing during another artist's visual art show, for example at the Catalyst Cafe, Shakespeare and Company Bookstore or the Gold Dust Gallery. I contacted a friend, Jason Wiener, a writer for the Independent newspaper, a local, free and progressive publication distributed in Montana. He advised contacting Damon Metzner, the booking agent at The Loft, which is a music venue above a fine dining restaurant in Missoula. Jason also gave me all the information for submitting an event to the Independent; he told me to write a press release (see appendix C), provide a flyer (see appendix D) and a trailer for the movie. He said that following these steps meant that my event would likely be highlighted (see appendix E) in that week's Independent.

During my conversation with Damon Metzner, we confirmed the space availability for four hours, with two technicians for lighting and sound on First Friday, free of charge. At this point in the process, I had very little time to accomplish many tasks. Clear communication and follow through were of utmost importance. Positive relationships, solid public relations and faith would ensure the screening's success. The announcement for the screening was submitted to the Independent and the campus radio station, KBGA, was also contacted to promote the show on the air. Postcards were

distributed throughout Missoula (see appendix F). The event would take place at The Loft on November 3, 2006, with three separate screenings throughout the evening.

I realized the event had to be designed to entertain people between the screenings. I decided live entertainment was in order. I knew about a barbershop quartet and contacted the person in charge. He seemed interested and wanted to promote his group, promising to contact me in the future. In the end, however, they were unable to perform.

Leafing through the Independent, I hoped for some new ideas, using local musicians singing or playing instruments. I considered performing with aerial fabric or executing circus and clown tricks. These wild imaginings did not fit the theme of the event. I recognized the need for consistency with “Pockets”.

One evening, while relaxing and watching the movie, “Mannequin”, the idea for live mannequins during the event came to mind. Actors could play mannequins draped in clothing containing many pockets. They would fill their pockets with contents that pertain to their identity. Members of the audience would be encouraged to “search” or investigate the models’ pockets. I began asking friends if they were interested being models. I had four people agree, saying it sounded like a fascinating idea and wanting to be involved. On the day of the screening, however, one actor got cold feet and said she just didn’t feel comfortable enough to do it. I didn’t panic, I just called another actor that I knew while I was involved in an improv comedy group, he said yes without any arm-twisting. This moment also highlighted my ability to connect with my community and collaborate with other artists.

That same evening the barbershop quartet declined, my close friend, Erin Chambers contacted me. She asked if I had found anyone to perform at the screening. She and I

had organized an original performance in November 2005, where she sang and I recited poetry. Erin and I have been friends for two years and I am always trying to promote her incredible voice and original music to the public. She and her guitarist, Frank Stepek had been practicing and I invited her to perform for the “Pockets” screening. The duo decided they would commit to about 30 minutes worth of songs. My preparations were nearing completion.

The day of the screening, I purchased a flight suit for \$45, adorned with twelve pockets. The pockets were filled with random items to represent my identity, including a high school photograph of my father, a pill box filled with candy, money, a squeaky toy pig and lighted dice with words about love on them. With the costume finalized, I picked up the equipment from the University. The DVD player, video projector and screen were loaded into my car for delivery.

With the event set in motion, Damon coordinated my arrival to the venue. At The Loft, the light technician tested new lights. Techno music blared and patriotic lights were spinning, impacting my mental state. My stress was building and I wanted him to turn up the house lights. Luckily, the light guy was around, because there was no way I was going to carry the monstrous 20 foot screen up the fire escape.

At about 4:30 pm, the actors and musicians started showing up. I tested the projector and sound. I had food available and everyone got into place and started warming up. The faithful crew of technicians, especially Aaron Bolton, was helpful and professional. He cleared the stage, organized the sound booth and calmed my nerves. They did a sound check with Erin and Frank and before too long it was 5:15 pm and the start of the event was madly approaching. A handful of people showed for the first screening,

mainly friends and professors. I was able to gain some practice in presenting the movie throughout the evening.

At the last screening, the room was packed and there weren't enough seats. My pulse was thumping. I smiled, somebody even handed me roses. The evening had been a success. All I could think to do in my last presentation before the movie screening was to thank everyone that helped along the way. In that moment, I felt how necessary it had been to ask for help during my creative process. I am deeply aware of the amount that I can accomplish with the effort of others; it is much more than I could have done alone.

Chapter 7: Event and Screening Reflections

Although I felt the event was successful, there were a few things I would do differently. Since I am trained and rehearsed in improv comedy, something I would change would be to ask fellow improvisers or audience members to come up on stage to reveal what was in their pockets. This format would have paralleled the project's concept from the beginning, spontaneously asking people what was in their pockets. As it was, the mannequins had been staged and 'planted' items in their pockets. The models said that they noticed a lot of people having reservations about the pocket search. One model, Christine Morris, said she wished more people had approached her.

Screening the movie was also integral in my development as a filmmaker. When watching it with an audience, I noticed when the sound was imperfect and lighting indirect. Viewing it several times helped me see what could be added to enhance the vision. It would have been beneficial to interview a wider range of ages and perhaps explore beyond the downtown area.

Chapter 8: Conclusions

Despite the unexpected mishaps during this process I remained resilient and determined. The moments of challenge, taught me the most important aspects of producing a short movie: data management and proper backup, using the software to articulate my vision and clear communication. In this tenacity is where my true voice, style and vision came forth, leaving behind all the strain and forced expression. Ultimately, the significance of this project is revealed in the interviews. It was to capture human behavior naturally, spontaneously, identifying people's reactions to 'play', be in the moment and reveal a small part of them selves. Like teaching in a classroom, my aim is to take this philosophy into society, as well, delicately inviting people to explore, learn, create, respond and interact with each other.

Appendix A



Appendix B



Appendix C

October 19, 2006

Dear Mr. Ehudin,

I am screening an original mini documentary (5 minutes) for my Masters of Arts degree in Integrated Arts Education at the University of Montana. I interviewed people on the street about what was in their pockets.

Please promote me. It will be a fun event with food, drink and live entertainment in between screenings. Don't hesitate to call or email if you need more information. Enclosed is a copy of the trailer for the movie.

We hope to do more screenings of locally made films and video art at The Loft in the future.

Who: Tricia Opstad, 406-531-4249
triciaopstad@hotmail.com or taopstad@mcps.k12.mt.us

What: "POCKETS", a mini documentary

When: November 3, 5-8pm, Screening times: 5:30, 6:00 & 6:30

Where: The Loft

How Much: Free

Thank you,

Tricia Opstad



POCKETS

a short film by Tricia Opstad & Felicia Edwards

November 3rd Screening Times: 5:30, 6 & 6:30
at the Loft 424 Higgins

SPOTLIGHT

movie a la marsupial

Our stories are told by our personal effects. Anthropologists study a Neolithic wanderer's frozen mammoth-bladder pouch for precious clues. You ponder the significance of an earring found in your lover's pants on laundry day.

Our fascination with other people's stuff prompted Felicia Edwards and Tricia Opstad, an artist pursuing a master's degree in Integrated Arts Education, to shoot the mini-documentary, *Pockets*. During Homecoming weekend 2005, they asked passers-by to submit the contents of their pockets to the camera's lens. What they found was an open and trusting community, ready to reveal the mundane—keys, lighter, wallet—as well as the mildly discomfoting—hemorrhoid cream, for example.



WHAT: *Pockets*

WHEN: Friday, Nov. 3, 5:30, 6 and 6:30 PM

WHERE: The Loft, 424 N. Higgins Ave.

HOW MUCH: Free

In addition to a desire to learn about her fellow Missoulians, Opstad admits that the film was inspired by her own sense of voyeurism. At the premiere of *Pockets*, guests can indulge their own scopophilia as they root through the pockets of four live mannequins.

Live music, food and beverages will round out the event, but a final word of advice: consider the contents of your pockets carefully before attending.

—Jonas Ehudin

a short MOVIE

live entertainment,
food & drinks

FIRST FRIDAY
November 3rd
screenings at
5:30, 6 & 6:30

THE LOFT
424 Higgins

FRIDAY

PROJECTS



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