

# Thoughts on BORNS and Beyond

Posted on

April 22, 2016 by stairssite

It's been a couple weeks since our BORNS action, but I wanted to document some of the thought process behind the action, and how it was different from previous actions in Atwater.

We received a lot of positive feedback on our BORNS action, both as students walked through the installation and in the following days. There were many "thank-you's" and many affirmations of the importance and relevance of activism around sexual assault. Though it felt good to receive positive feedback, it was also a reminder that sexual assault is a real, relevant, and personal issue for our campus. I also felt a sense of relief after our action, because there had been so much thought and debate going into that night.

For me, this action, compared to the previous ones in Atwater, was the one I was most hesitant about, and felt the most back-and-forth in the planning process.

Our previous actions had been in the stairwells of Atwater. This space is a lot more intimate, as people going to and from the suites would have to interact more with the performers one-by-one as they ascended or descended the staircase. Part of our installation is documenting interactions with and reactions to our art piece. One of the things we learned in our JTerm class is the way performance art can serve as a reflection of society (think Marina Abramovic's "Rhythm 0, 1974"). We take note of the verbal, emotional, and physical ways people react to our piece to shed light on the relationship people have to the topic of sexual assault. The Atwater suites were a good opportunity to witness and record reactions to our piece.

BORNS did not provide us with that same intimacy. Instead, we sacrificed that intimacy for a much larger audience, and a space where we were more likely to get positive reactions (maybe because people are less likely to say negative/fucked up shit on their way to a concert and in front of a lot of other people). Another reason I think we got more positive reactions is because nobody felt directly targeted (At Atwater, many people, particularly men, would react defensively to our piece). Before, people would ask if we were targeting the people who lived in Atwater suites, or the people who go to Atwater parties. My response to that is that we are targeting what Atwater represents for many people, a space that represents a campus culture where sexual assault occurs and, to some extent, is normalized. However, we know sexual assault happens all over campus, and it is not just people who party in Atwater that are its perpetrators or victims. We never intended to only perform in Atwater, and the BORNS concert was a good opportunity to show that this is an installation we want to bring to all of campus.

The first time we performed, we decided to have blank expressions, and let the piece speak for itself. However, we realize that this came off as aggressive to many people. We made changes

to soften our body language, for bodyguards to be more warm and welcoming, and to allow performers to smile or acknowledge people they knew or who were expressing their thanks. I think this also had a big impact on whether or not people reacted defensively.

A concern we continue to grapple with is how we can take care not to cause unintentional harm, particularly to survivors or people who may be triggered by this piece. We recognize that performance art activism should be disruptive, and discomfort is a natural and intended reaction to something challenging the status quo. However, we also want to be careful not to harm the people we are trying to advocate for. In Atwater, we were able to put a disclaimer sign on both ends of the installation, warning people that this was an installation that dealt with themes of sexual assault. We were able to identify an alternative route for people to access the suites in case they wanted to avoid the installation. There was also an opportunity for people to take the elevator. Of course, this is not a perfect solution, and we are continuing to think of ways that we can evolve the installation to prepare for the potential impact it could have on survivors. At BORNS, we were not able to establish such a clear alternative route (except for people to go behind us and not read our signs?). This was one of the main reasons I was most hesitant about performing that night.

I was also thinking about the potential impact it would have on people going to the concert. I pictured myself going to BORNS, seeing a performance art installation on sexual assault, and the effect that would have on my mood the rest of the night. I think concerts are an important part of student life, and are an opportunity to let loose and have fun with friends. So I also didn't want to ruin someone's night by doing this performance. However, we also talked about our action as having the potential to prevent sexual assault. To not just raise general awareness, but perhaps influence people's actions that night. To me, in the end, those potential benefits made me feel comfortable moving forward with the action.

Some questions we continue to wrestle with: How can we take care of survivors as we engage in radical performance activism? How can our piece prompt our audience to reflect on the role they play in fighting against or enabling a culture of sexual assault on campus? How can this piece evolve over time and space to best address the needs of this campus? How does this installation fit in with the good and important work other groups on campus are engaging in?

If you have any thoughts, feel free to email me ([cjchang@middelbury.edu](mailto:cjchang@middelbury.edu)) if you want to chat, or come to our debrief sessions after our actions! This post is meant to keep the conversation going, as we continue to reflect on and think critically about the role of performance art activism at Middlebury and beyond.

-Chi Chi Chang '18