

YOUR ART

*Student artists use billboards
to reclaim public space*

HERE



Bloomington resident Sean Fear rides his bicycle east on 4th Street past a billboard by the organization Your Art Here, founded in Bloomington by IU photography students. The organization purchased billboard space all over Indiana in an effort to promote the arts. However, the rented space was oftentimes found in remote areas outside the more popular advertising regions.
Photograph by Jacob Kriese

Story by Eric Carroll

Driving down the highway people could see the “Space for Rent” on billboards across the nation, but rarely would it occur to them to do something about it. Four IU photography students took the pitch seriously. Your Art Here was Owen Mundy, Shana Berger, Nathan Purath and Alyssa Hill’s answer to the billboard ad. The project was a way to bring art to the community and also challenge the creativity of local students and artists.

Your Art Here took artwork from the minds of students and artists of all ages and placed it in a position for all to see – on a billboard. The first billboard was funded by a travel grant the group received. The project focused on the responses from local fifth graders to the question, “What would you like to tell your community?” They had two classes produce collaborative pieces of art. The winner was going on the billboard. Yet when it came time to choose, they simply could not make up their minds. They decided to pay for a second billboard out-of-pocket in order to post both of the classes’ artwork.

Standard retail price for a billboard in Bloomington was nine hundred dollars. The group of Your Art Here was given a not-for-profit price, which reduced the fee by over half.

“If a lot of people wanted to rent billboard space, I don’t think they would be able to facilitate that as an individual,” Nathan Purath said, as the group discussed how much advertising space was available to the public. At one point the group received a comment from a passerby who informed them she drove by one of their billboards and, “was confused because it didn’t tell her what to do.”

The Your Art Here group, who commonly referred to themselves as YAH, were free speech advocates that pushed against the grain.

“Our motivation came from the fact that we’re all artists. Most of us make art that is socially aware, or that [covers] topics that aren’t talked about in popular media,” Mundy said.

The group gave a lot of credit to IU professor Osamu James Nakagawa, their professor in the BFA (Bachelors of Fine Arts) program.

“I would say that we probably wouldn’t have felt capable of a project of this size if it hadn’t been for BFA and professor Nakagawa,” Berger said, “He really teaches his students to do what they want to do, and to believe that it is possible. By the time we started YAH, we knew how to write press releases, we had put on alternative expositions and we knew which local media to contact.”

“All we are,” Mundy said, “are basic students, empowered by their professors. We got it in our minds to do this, and now we have national attention.”

Professor Nakagawa taught the group, ‘There is more to life than just academia.’ He provided them with the confidence to produce YAH.

“There was this time,” said the group as each supplemented info, “we had a contest regarding this idea of war. An 8-year-old did a drawing of the world. One half was peace, the other war. On the peace side there were bunnies and happy little trees, on the war side, the bunnies were all dead, the trees were burning. He titled it “This is your choice.” There was a peace rally starting at the IU sample gates and it ended up in front of this piece that we had decided to post on a billboard. It was totally by coincidence and was a profound moment for all of us.”

The YAH group was very focused on kids and the impact art could make in a child’s life. “We went to go talk to a group of art teachers and give them our pitch for the children making a billboard,” Purath said, “We found out that a lot were unable to work on the project because they were so bogged down by the No-Child-Left-Behind act and the standardized testing that they were required to do. They couldn’t actually do art projects with their students in an art class because the school didn’t want to take any time away from other subjects to administer the tests.”

The YAH group was neither focused on making a political statement with their projects, nor was it interested in creating a civil disobedience; they were interested in reviving art within the community.

One onlooker of a YAH billboard would only allow himself to be called by the name “Fat Dove.” Fat Dove summed up everything the YAH foundation was trying to do. He said, “We’re trying to reclaim our visual space.” 🌱

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