



Really, How are you doing?

Q&A with Laura Mayer of the How Are You Doing Project?

BY JAMES H. EWERT JR.

PHOTO BY BENN SPECKMANN

We've all been guilty of it at some point. We run into a random friend of acquaintance we haven't seen in a while and exchange customary courtesies like, "Hey, what's up?" and "How are you doing?", but we don't mean it. We use the standard phrases as figures of speech and simple salutations, not the personally probing and vastly ambiguous questions they really are. That's why Northwestern University senior Laura Mayer decided to start the How Are you Doing Project (howareyoudoing-project.com), a website and corresponding toll-free hotline that invites the literal-minded to call and tell the world exactly how they are doing. Mayer sifts through the responses that are left on the hotline as voice mail messages and edits together snippets of the calls to create brief audio segments which she posts to the website for all to hear.

As a journalism student with an interest in radio and audio, Mayer never thought her personal side-project would extend beyond the reach of her social circle, but in the short time since February that the site has been live, The How Are You Doing Project has developed a small but loyal following that grows each time someone takes the plunge and decides to call the hotline and ramble for two minutes about whatever is on their mind. Mayer recently took some time out of her busy finals schedule to talk with Lumpen about awkward social interactions, the crazy lives we live and her goal and inspiration for the How Are You Doing Project.

Lumpen: Hi, how are you?

Laura Mayer: Good, you?

Lumpen: Oh, I'm just great. It's such a beautiful day out.

Lumpen: What led you to start the How Are You Doing Project?

LM: The idea had been percolating around in my mind for a while. That idea of "how are you doing?" as just like a throw

away phrase that has a lot of importance behind it. Personally, some of my awkward interactions with people happen when someone asks me how am I doing or what's up, I want to stop and by like, "oh, we're gonna talk now?" That's just sort of the way that I tend to talk and interact with people. I also happen to be someone with a lot of time. I had done this mini personal project of taking screen shots of the Craigslist missed connections. Everyone loves them for this kind of confessional hopefulness, this digital longing. And the weird anonymous community that follows it, well, not weird, but it's strange that it functions the way it does. It seems like a lot of the posts don't expect a reply back, so it's like this grasping for a connection. So, I've been trying to think about the "How Are You Doing" prompt and the way these people communicate online in their little internet communities and also the audio element. Those ideas had been circulating and it really did happen one day while I was brushing my teeth getting ready to go to my internship where I was just like, 'Aaahhh, I'm in a bad mood,' and I'm usually light on my feet on a day to day basis, but that day something was just getting me down. It was a rare day where if someone were to ask me how I'm doing I was gonna tell them to listen up and they're not going to want to hear it.

Lumpen: So what you're doing with the How Are You Doing Project is basically taking those online relationships and connections people have with each other in these small little internet communities and making them more real?

LM: Yeah, and a bit more personal. Totally, I think that's a really good way of putting it. And from an audio standpoint you get this almost ephemeral quality that you get in the listening experience of a voicemail because it does feel like something so personal because it's not recorded really crisply in a studio, it's recorded outside. There's so much context behind the way voices are preserved and I think the How Are You Doing Project really benefits from the way audio is on the telephone.

Lumpen: Do you consider this an art project?

LM: See, the thing is, initially I didn't. I just thought of it as just this personal, sociological experiment and I wasn't thinking it would go anywhere past; maybe I'd get like 12 callers or something.

Lumpen: Really?

LM: Yeah. I started it the weekend of Valentines Day and I thought it was really funny timing because Valentines Day would be this time that's kind of pregnant with people who I sort of know or kinda know who are just feeling like they want to tell me stuff would call. I made about 60 stickers with the phone number on it and started placing them all over. As it's grown and grown I've played around with the production style because I'm really interested how audio narrative and regular radio and sound art kind of merge together.

Lumpen: Like Radiolab?

LM: Yeah exactly like Radiolab. In terms of an art project though, I think now I do see it as that in terms of production and a lot of the messages people leave are beautiful and really interesting narratives in their own right. There is something artful of that because it is making this very specific comment on the way that people communicate on a day to day and it goes beyond simple critique. There's something beautiful that goes on in a lot of these calls.

Lumpen: Did the project spawn from your interest in radio or audio?

LM: That's a good question. I'm interested in audio; I don't think the distribution matters. It's the form and way you confuse content in the medium of audio and listening. The broadcast part isn't what's important. The content is just as powerful if not even more being accessible online and having it be just one click away. On the radio you can only listen to something one time or at a certain time.

Lumpen: Do you have a hankerin' for lo-fi music?

LM: I totally do!

Lumpen: How many page views and messages are you typically getting?

LM: They ebb and flow, but during the week 1500 to 2000 page views and the calls vary, but usually about 10 to 12 a day.

Lumpen: Do you ever recognize repeat callers?

LM: Yeah, I can only recognize area codes, but people's voices yeah. More recently there is this man who has been calling pretty regularly for the past week, he calls around the same time each day and it seems to be when he's walking on his lunch break. That's interesting on a couple fronts because men call much less than women do, so when it's a man voice I wonder if it's someone I've already heard before. This man always calls in each day and has this garbled way of speaking. Lately he's been leaving messages about how he works with children and his one buddy whom he works with on a daily basis, yesterday he didn't show up, and left this message where he was kind of casually worried and was like I hope he's okay.

Lumpen: Are you familiar with Postsecret.com? Do you think the How Are You Doing Project is similar?

LM: I had known about it as a sort of Urban Outfitters table book, but that's not to denigrate it or anything. I think what Postsecret and the How Are You Doing Project have in common in terms their confessional aspect has to do with the anonymity that you're able to maintain and I think that anonymity online, when channeled in a constructive way as opposed

to the ol' flame war, I think it really gives people the opportunity to be surprisingly open and honest and not only honest with other people, but honest with themselves in a way that you're not going to get if you've got your name, your picture or some other type of handle attached to it. There is a sense that you don't have to be so careful with the identity that you maintain online when it is this kind of anonymous setting.

Lumpen: Do you think the project could ever get bigger than you can handle by yourself?

LM: I think it would be great if it did. But in order for that to happen it would need a fundamentally different site because I don't think it could be all audio for people to be engaged with it. The How Are You Doing phone line does take a little extra level of engagement for people to interact with it. I'm thinking of it on an everyday basis, but maybe I should be more ambitious about it. I think it's been the best idea I've ever had, I may have peaked. Maybe this will be like the crazy seed that I will nurture into some kind of Redwood. Hopefully that tree will grow by the time I'm 26.

Lumpen: What have you learned about people from the project?

LM: I think I'm confirmed some of my suspicions that people are way more open than you give them credit for on an everyday basis. I've learned that a lot of us have pretty similar everyday complaints or worries and I think that it's sort of made me a lot more hopeful about there being, in a tangible way even though I can't touch it, way that people are out there everywhere and there is this shared fabric of experience. For me, as someone who is getting ready to graduate from college; yeah your life doesn't just end after tossing the tassel or whatever, but it's been this big moment of transition for me, so it feels good to get this feeling of raw humanity.

Whether it's out of habit, lack of genuine curiosity or a half-assed attempt at a conversation we don't care to have, we sometimes forget or glaze over honest sincerity in the midst of our day-to-day interactions with fellow friends and strangers. It's not a global problem or the source of grave injustice, but our collective lack of personal connection with each other is driving a crude, uncomfortable wedge between the emotionally-fulfilling social interactions we're capable of and the empty lonely-awkwardness we're too often left with. Which is why, in a reality pervaded by this complex sociological disorder, the simplicity of authentic candor can be particularly profound.



Illustration by Chad Kouri

VERSION

immodest proposals

From April 23 to May 2, 2009 we helped put on Version>09 Immodest Proposals. Version is an annual convergence of artists, musicians, activists, educators, and cultural workers of all stripes. This year over 350 participants helped create multiple interventions and collaborations within the neighborhood of Bridgeport. By bringing a wide range of people together we hoped to create some staging grounds for further projects, actions and exhibitions. This year we kicked off the annual Chicago Art Parade and initiated the Bridgeport WPA. A half dozen exhibitions, a shelter corps and some fantastic parties made it quite a ten day experience. Lots of hugs to all of you that participated, organized and made it happen. This was our best version yet.

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