



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

“Public Displays” [*an interactive video installation and performance piece*]

The public is invited to enter our version of Thomas Edison’s Black Maria studio and **“give us a kiss”** on camera, just like May Irwin and John Rice (pictured above) did for Thomas Edison Co. 120 years ago. The newly recorded videos will be projected in the gallery alongside the original 1896 film, all set to playful kiss-themed music, and will become part of a final video work that will mix Edison’s original film with the kisses recorded during the Public Displays installation.

How + When? There’s no need to sign up and the event is free and open to the public! Just show up any time between **6-9pm on “First Friday,” February 5th** or between **5-9pm on Valentine’s Day, Sunday, February 14th**, and you can become part of “Public Displays.” Or just come to see what it’s all about. We will provide you with a complimentary copy of your videoed kiss. The show will also on display February 5th-27th, 2016.

Where? Flanders Gallery, 505 S. Blount Street. Raleigh, NC 27601 | Phone: 919.757.9533.
<http://flandersartgallery.com/>

Artists: Louis Cherry, Marsha Gordon, Jason Paul Evans Groth, Josephine McRobbie, Trevor Thornton.

Website: <http://www.publicdisplays.org/>

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History:

Kissing is one of the earliest and most enduring of cinematic subjects. In his Black Maria studio in New Jersey, Thomas Edison produced a silent, around twenty second, 35mm film of the actress Mary Irwin and actor John Rice performing a kiss in 1896 [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q690-IexNB4>].

Framed in a static medium close-up and shot against a black backdrop, the actors mouth words to each other, cheek to cheek, until John Rice pulls back for a moment to ceremoniously stroke his moustache before moving in for the big event: a nibbling series of kisses planted on May Irwin’s lips. Rice kisses; Irwin is kissed. The lip-to-lip climax of the film lasts approximately three seconds.

Audiences at the time would likely have watched *The May Irwin Kiss* through a single-viewer Kinetoscope device in a storefront parlor, peering into a box to see the images move before their eyes. Some Kinetoscopes included a headphone device to allow the viewer to hear a phonograph playing music. As Edison wrote in 1888, "I am experimenting upon an instrument which does for the Eye what the phonograph does for the Ear." The film was also released at a moment of transition, with Edison's Vitascope projector debuting about the same time as the film's release, which allowed some audiences to see the film projected instead of in an individual film viewer.

Edison's catalog description of this early screen kiss promises something much more salacious (at least to a modern-day mind!) than appears in the actual film: "*They get ready to kiss, begin to kiss, and kiss and kiss and kiss in a way that brings down the house every time.*"

One of the things we can learn from our modern perception of this rousing catalog description alongside the stagey innocence of the actual film is that screen kissing often illustrates—through affirmation or provocation—our culture's tolerances and intolerances. Screen representations of kissing between different races or between same sex couples, for example, nicely demonstrate permissible physical contact not only on screen but also in a society at a given time. The famous cultural milestone kisses between Sidney Poitier and Katharine Houghton in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) or between Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) nicely clarify such pivotal moments in mainstream Hollywood representations.

When Edison produced his kiss film, it had to be around twenty seconds in duration since the Kinetoscope viewer could only hold around 50 feet of film. Our truncated attention spans in the twenty-first century are very compatible with moving image material of this length. The fact that limited duration images (such as "Vine" videos, which are only seconds in length) and thoughts (Twitter) prevail at our current moment is a curious circularity.

What's Behind "Public Displays"?

What does it mean to perform a kiss in the first place? Irwin and Rice were performing—in fact, their kiss was a reenactment of a moment in a New York stage comedy, "The Widow Jones," that the two were appearing in at the time. Actors and actresses frequently perform kisses. Do we? When we kiss in private, in public, or in some in-between spaces, do we alter our actions for a perceived audience, even if it is for the person we are kissing? This installation ponders such questions in the digital, post-privacy, exhibitionist age that we all, like it or not, inhabit.

Although playful and meant to be a fun experience for the filmed and for gallery visitors, this installation intends to explore ideas about intimacy, privacy, theatricality, sexuality, and the way that people display affection in an age of digital circulation. At a time when we share so much about our lives online, how does it feel to do something as intimate as a kiss in front of a camera, and then to have that act projected to an audience?