

Director: Crowdfunding Marks a New Era for Artists

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A scene from the American director's documentary film "Urbanized," which was shown in Moscow this week.

Independent American film director Gary Huswit spoke to a packed audience at the Polytechnic Institute on Monday about "crowdfunding," the Internet phenomenon that is revolutionizing the media industry.

Huswit used crowdfunding to finance his documentary films ("Helvetica," "Objectified" and "Urbanized") on design that were shown Monday and Tuesday in Moscow.

Crowdfunding is the collective effort of individuals who come together and pledge varying sums of money in order to be a part of a project that interests them. In return, funders receive memorabilia or copies of the project as well as a sense of contribution.

Most crowdfunding success stories have to do with the music or film industries, but Huswit

was keen to stress its boundless scope and the possibility of totally undercutting the role of managers and studios, to applause from the audience.

"Crowd surfing also provides a testing ground," said Huswit. The response from the public makes it very easy to gauge "if people want to see this happen."

"You're not asking them for money. You're asking them to become a part of the project."

The majority of crowdfunding takes place on websites such as Kickstarter, which in three years has seen over 30,000 projects funded. The average amount raised is between \$4,000 to \$6,000 but some projects have been known to raise upwards of \$1,000,000.

Huswit spoke to Kickstarter founder, Charles Adler, via Skype during the lecture. Adler said the inspiration for Kickstarter came from organizing gigs in New Orleans in 2001. Keen to "distribute the risk among everyone participating" by selling T-shirts and records, he was able to cover costs without having to rely on an investment return for middle management companies.

Both Huswit and Adler praised the autonomy an artist or creator enjoys using crowdfunding.

"Traditional funding detracts from the original product," Adler said. "Often you lose creative control."

"It's almost like pre-ordering a book or a film." Huswit continued. "It's different from a donation, you get something in return."

Those who contributed \$35 or more to "Helvetica" received a copy of the DVD, as well as a limited edition print, while those who contributed \$5,000 or more received a private screening anywhere in the world hosted by Huswit and memorabilia.

Members of the audience were concerned about the potential for corruption in Russia. The Russian equivalent of Kickstarter is Planeta.ru.

Huswit said that contributors need "to trust that something will come through," adding that "it's mostly artists funding other artists."

The most successful projects are those that are not pipe-dreams, but with something to show already.

"It's not a magic funding machine, there is a lot of work in running the campaign."

Huswit believes that the popularity of crowdfunding is part of a realization that "there is more to this world than just consuming products. The success of crowdfunding projects was a kind of "Darwinian evolution" where only the best thrive, he said.

The idea of mutually beneficial public contribution to cultural projects is not new, however. Huswit recounted the story of the base of the Statue of Liberty. Although the statue was a gift from France, it had no pedestal. New York newspapers offered readers the chance to contribute \$1 in return for a figurine of the monument.

"We could use crowdfunding for anything. To fund a park, or even a city if we wanted to," Huswit said.

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