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Interaction as a Lost Art

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INTERACTION AS A LOST ART

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Upon deciding what this honors exhibition would include, I knew that I wanted to create art that would teach a lesson. As a graphic designer, we are taught to create work that is going to be influential. So after much deliberating thought I decided to create a visual of something that I know displays a topic of concern in not only my life but others as well. In this narrative, I am going to share my exhibition's message, describe each portion of the full show, my process, and my inspiration.

The message I wanted to convey through this exhibition was the idea that technology has ruined the opportunity for people to connect in person. Especially with the current younger generation, we are constantly on our phones and looking at screens. We have been consumed with social media and the belief that conversations only occur over text. People nowadays don't even look up from their phone when they're crossing the street. Due to the rising phenomenon of new iPhones and Twitter updates — people have lost the simple concept of speaking face-to-face. Essentially, it has become easier to just send a text with no emotional attachments or post a status about someone instead of confronting the person. We are as a society losing the ability to have a decent conversation with someone in front of us. Technology gives us the leeway to think before we speak. Therefore, when we're put in situations where we don't have the ability to do that, we don't know how to handle it as well.

My exhibition involved a proposal to take the initiative to meet with old friends and take the time to build in-person relationships that matter in your life. As much as we can say technology is overtaking true communication, we as humans have never lost the ability to make the effort to meet in person. We are unconsciously acting upon not exercising it. Technology has made it easier for humans to connect over long distances, but it has also allowed people to disconnect by giving people the illusion that they can have a real relationship without ever

actually meeting. This exhibition challenged the viewers to think about someone who they might wish to reconnect with. It also asked the question of what two people might choose to do together that doesn't involve technology. The critical lesson of this art piece was technology taking over our culture, resulting in people not conversing face-to-face.

According to the book "Face-to-Face Interaction", "in Goldschmidt's (1972) words, "Social interaction is the very stuff of human life. The individuals of all societies move through life in terms of a continuous series of social interactions. It is in the context of such social encounters that the individual expresses the significant elements of his culture, whether they are matters of economics, social status, personal values, self-image, or religious belief.""¹ Essentially, social interaction is the basis of the process of human decision. The physical presence of interaction therefore influences the opinions of others. The beliefs of people can't be molded and shaped without the viewpoints of others. When in-person communication occurs, the visual expressions, tone of voice, and movements are something that you cannot possibly receive from talking over technology. In the book titled "Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction" it states, "There are times in which important information about your emotional state, attitudes, and intentions leaks out of you nonverbally."² You get none of the emotion by looking at a screen, other than the receivers own take on the information presented. The article "Cross-Culture Pragmatics" continues to support my idea by saying, "A person tends to experience an immediate emotional response to the face which a contact with others allows him; he cathects his face; his "feelings" become attached to it."³ When someone talks about a passion

¹ Starkey Ducan and Donald W. Fiske, *Face-to-Face Interaction: Research, Methods, and Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 1979), 3.

² Mark K. Knapp, Judith A. Hall, Terrence G. Horgan, *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction* (Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2012), 4.

³ Darren Ellis and Ian Tucker, *Social Psychology of Emotion* (UK: Sage Publications, 2015), 136.

of theirs or a sad experience versus a happy experience the way they speak changes drastically. Both of the people engaged in conversation then are improving their connection because they are receiving and giving emotional reactions. It's hard not to feel close to someone when you're sharing pure empathy. It becomes more authentic when you are able to visually see it occurring.

Overall, the substance of this art piece was meant to display the ongoing issue of pure communication that people forget about when consumed with technology. It was intended to make the viewers stop and think about their own relationships and what they'd do to reconnect in a way other than through the phone or computer. After deciding the main issue, I then had to figure out how to portray it visually.

Hand lettering has always been an interest of mine. Although there is an overload of inspiration out there in the world the first that came to mind was Timothy Goodman, who is a graphic designer residing in New York City. The one thing he does that catches my interest is his illustrations using sharpies. He does handwritten murals that usually combine hand lettering paragraphs along with simple drawings or icons. What first captured me is his ability to compose words that both relate to everyone and work together in harmony that rolls off the tongue. His writing is simple yet speaks to everyone, and usually has a lesson that gives an emotional reaction. One of his writing projects is titled "Memories of a Girl I Never Knew" which comprise of his handwritten thoughts about previous relationships he's been through. An example of his writing is "you know she's special when you really try to listen to everything she says bc everything she says says something about who she is."⁴ I think what draws people to his work is both the visual minimalism he uses along with his relatable and beautiful writing — this is what I aimed to do with my art exhibition.

⁴ Goodman, Timothy. Instagram Post. November, 2016.

Taking Timothy Goodman's work into consideration as inspiration, I decided to create something that I've always wanted to do — a mural, along with an interactive section. This involved a great amount of thought; the material, the design, the size, and much more. I felt as though this would be a great way to inspire others because it would be simple but include meaningful words, icons, and encourage people to think.

The design of the mural itself was type based. While simultaneously using Goodman as inspiration, I decided to create my own set of words to illustrate for the main visual impact. It reads as follows:

“When was the last time you said hi to a stranger in person instead of liking their photo? Or met up with an old friend over coffee? Today is a good day to do that, and I know we're all scared of the unknown but what's the fun in that? Because the people surrounding you one day could impact your life the next, and the person you haven't spoken to in years could give you the hug you need. And you're not really touching lives through screens, you impact souls through presence — words don't matter if they aren't heard, and relationships don't mean anything if they aren't explored. We're all full of stories, so let's not mistake the importance of the person in front of you and the physical experience of raw emotion. The key to logging off and refreshing your life doesn't call for a password or user id, it calls for you to be present.”

I wanted this writing to be of great impact to the readers through display and meaning. The paragraph itself is meant to be read as slam poetry; with emphasis and passion. It speaks directly to the reader, asking them to reflect on the last time they spoke to a stranger or friend in person. It explains how human contact is extremely important due to the fact that it could change lives. We all have stories that can influence others without even realizing. The paragraph ends with some technology related words asking the viewer to be present in their lives and with the people around them. The mural also included sharpie drawn icons to give it some interesting visual impact against the words. The paragraph written was a visual representation of communication itself. The viewer and the material piece of work are both face-to-face, interacting and sharing ideas. The people passing the mural can't possibly understand the meaning behind it until they

take the time to stop and read. This also plays with the idea that to keep relationships alive and pure it takes time and face-to-face communication. The mural was essentially asking the viewer to pause and take a few minutes out of their lives to become inspired.

As for the material I chose to go with white vinyl fabric because I wanted the design to be clean, and the black sharpie to stand out. The vinyl was about four feet wide and a little over a foot in height. It was hung in the Myers School of Art's upper atrium wall. This was the perfect place for it to be as the wall itself wasn't much bigger than the size of my vinyl. This allowed the piece to stand out.

As for the handwritten font, a simple but strong and modern font seemed to be the way to go. It would easily invite viewers to read it in passing without struggle and it would support the idea that communication should be easy to understand. I varied the height of certain letters to give the words an inviting feel. It also involved some script and condensed fonts to make specific words such as impact, matter, raw, and present stand out.

This exhibition included a second portion aside the mural on the wall. This consisted of two white chairs, a black table, and a corkboard. The chairs had painted on them the words "have a seat" which encourages viewers to sit down and have a chat. It prompted the idea of two strangers taking the risk to sit and chat with one another. On the table were small sheets of colored paper, tacks, and pens. The corkboard above this set up proposed observers to "name something that you can do to reconnect with someone that does not involve technology or write down who you'd like to reconnect with." This portion of the exhibition was vital, because if interacted with, it would prove to me and potential future spectators that this art had already awoken people's minds to this issue. All you need is someone to make that first step, or in this case the first answer tacked to the corkboard for others to follow with their suggestions. I chose

the specific question because it was simple yet it forced viewers to think about how they're living their lives through communicating. This section was important to add because if someone didn't take the time to read the mural and understand the meaning behind it, they would at least benefit from the corkboard and get a sense of what the exhibition was all about.

The last main portion to the exhibition was small cut out speech bubbles that had short sayings on them. They were black vinyl and displayed white hand lettering. The sayings were handwritten in a script font to contrast the block lettering on the mural. Some of the sayings include phrases like "talk to a stranger", "be present", "let's meet for coffee", and "make eye contact." I chose to add these to support my idea next to the mural in a visually interesting way. It broke up the white mural against the wall by adding some contrast.

The colors included in this work are important to the symbolism behind the idea. I chose for my work to be mostly done in black and white because I believe that communication is black and white. There are no grey areas. You either are meeting with someone in person, or you're not — it's as simple as that. The pieces of cut paper intended to be pinned to the corkboard were colorful in order to resemble the ideas of a brighter future ahead without technology as our main form of communication. This also allowed that part of the exhibition to stand out in a small way, encouraging people to read other people's thoughts.

This was a longstanding project that required a lot of sketching, brainstorming, collaboration, and time. To inform you a little about my process for this task, I'd like to start from the beginning. After determining my main topic, I created multiple word maps, sketches, and started researching and putting together mood boards for hand lettering and murals. This was over the course of a few months. The next few months involved much deliberation with the actual sections of the art exhibition. I wanted the piece where people could stop and digest but

also interact in some way. After that was decided, I started to write the paragraph because I couldn't do much more without it. After the revisions of the words were done I worked with it in Adobe Illustrator to resolve how the size and segment would work together. I chose a typeface close to what I hoped to render, and once that was finished I knew the proportions would have to be increased to fit it on the vinyl. I mapped and drew out the paragraph on the vinyl before using the sharpie, and once it looked correct I got to work. The mural itself took almost a month to complete. I spent increments of time on it while also focusing on the rest of my project, doing things like finding the materials, spray painting the chairs and table, painting the phrase on the chairs, getting supplies for the actual installation, and organizing where and how it would be hung. The actual installation only took about an hour. I used screws and nails to hang the vinyl and corkboard. Altogether, the project was a very thought out piece up until the very end.

I had a lot of art inspiration to help with my direction for this honors project, but the one experience that really activated this idea was from a trip abroad two years ago. It still has an impact on my everyday life today. This was a solo trip that I took to Florence, Italy to study for a month. I went through a third party organization that both housed me with a group of people and had planned activities with whomever went through the same organization. This trip really opened me up to how important it is to allow yourself to meet new people when given the opportunity. It also for the first time taught me how unimportant Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. really is in the scheme of life. More than not we didn't have any access to wifi, and for the first time in my life I learned to really appreciate and live in the moment with the people around me.

After returning home from this wonderful experience I realized that I had become closer with the abroad people I had only met a month previous, than some of the people I'd known for

years. I think a part of that reason was due to the fact that most of us could not connect to internet and therefore were forced to communicate with the people in front of us. This gave us the chance to experience the connection with people and the details around us with greater perception. I can remember the streets of Florence more vividly than any other vacation I've been on.

Going through the experience abroad plays into the meaning behind my exhibition because I learned that in-person interaction plays a big role in relationships. I also learned that meeting new people and allowing yourself to open up your life to someone can really impact someone else in a positive way. We all have our own stories and can learn from each other immensely if we choose to share them.

Another personal inspiration into why I chose to do this is simply due to the people that I have lost contact with from not making the effort on both sides to see one another. A huge part of life is interaction. When you lose people for a reason as simple as not making time to see them even once a month, it's hard to justify. So in finishing this art piece and using it to reflect on my own relationships I have learned a lot about myself and what I want out of life in regards to people.

Overall the art exhibition was a success and I am excited about the feedback. I received good reactions from my peers, and the corkboard with the proposed question was full of people's ideas on ways in which we could interact other than technology. As a graphic designer and artist, I learned a lot from this experience. This was the first time that I've ever put together a small art show like this. I didn't realize how much work would go into this process. It forced me to actually appreciate the creation of deadlines because giving yourself a timeline can really improve your ability to get things finished. I also gained more knowledge on the art of hand

illustrating type, and in a sense studio art. As a graphic designer most of what I do is on the computer so it was a nice break to be able to create something without staring at a screen, which again plays into my technological themed message. If asked what I would change about this project, I would say that the only thing I wished I would have done is used a bigger sized sheet of vinyl than I did but there's always next time. I hope that my project inspired at least one person to think about their relationships with others. If someone made an effort to speak to a stranger, or reconnect with an old friend — I did my job as an artist.

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