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Outside inside out: perspectives on social anxiety

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OUTSIDE INSIDE OUT: PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL ANXIETY

A Thesis

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Agricultural and Mechanical College
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in

The School of Art

By
Kevin Andrew Hagan
B.F.A., Auburn University, 2001
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Abstract

"Outside Inside Out" is a study of how the visual perspective of an installation design can be used to create interaction, animation, and multiple messages. Traditionally, graphic designers have tended to present their messages either as flat printed materials, such as newspapers and billboards, or as videos/animations on television and the Internet. While both of these mediums provide an adequate means to convey a message, they fall short in presenting information to the audience in a non-obtrusive, interactive form. By using a technique I developed called "Passive Interactivity," designers can use a viewer's visual perspective to create interaction, animation, and multiple messages based upon a viewer's physical relationship to the printed material. By utilizing this form of communication, designers are able to engage viewers visually and intellectually by making them active participant in the design. Using the technique of "Passive Interactivity" to discuss the subject of Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), I will be exploring the emotional struggles faced in social encounters by those with SAD. With this installation, the subject matter and the dichotomy of perspective will bring the audience into the mind of one with SAD.

Introduction

From colors, textures, shapes, and sizes we are inundated by an array of visuals, which enable us to perceive scale and spatial arrangements. Without this we have no reference regarding how large or small an object is, its relationship to us, and how to interact with it. As artists and designers, we study this aspect of sight in order to replicate its qualities on a two-dimensional surface. The difficulties with this, from a design standpoint, is that the result yields an image that appears three-dimensional but is static in appearance and positioning, as well as lacking interactivity.

With the development of technology such as television and the Internet, the stagnant appearance of print is no longer an issue. Objects that were once bound to one point in space and time are now free to move about anywhere on the screen. But just as with print, television and the Internet have their drawbacks. While television has allowed the designer to dictate the size, location, and direction in which objects are viewed, there is no interaction from the viewer. The Internet, on the other hand, provides interactivity but functions only with expensive electronics and input devices. In addition, all of these technologies require electricity, which limits where they can be located. Although both of these applications have their benefits, there remains a void between the printed page and electronic media: one in which the viewer can experience a sense of animation, interact with the subject matter non-intrusively, and not have to depend on electronics or input devices. The solution to this need lies with a technique I call Passive Interactivity.

Passive Interactivity

In selecting Social Anxiety as a subject matter, I based my visuals around my own personal experiences, as well as subjects that other people could relate too. The development and location of this installation utilized Passive Interactivity as a critical component to communicating the concept. In order to successfully complete the development of my Passive Interactive installation, many subjects and areas had to be researched and studied prior to the production and installation. To illustrate these challenges as well as provide points to consider for future art and design students, I have provided a general overview of my process below:

• Research the subject matter to generate a basic concept ideas.

• Scout possible locations based upon target audience, making note of positive and negative attributes to each location.

• Finalize the decision of the location, noting how the Passive Interactive process will be utilized.

• Research materials and production methods necessary to implement the design in order to budget accordingly.

• Complete all design work, and study the results of the interactive process by either a physical mockup or a computer generated rendering of the design noting any changes that need to be made.

• Produce final graphics and produce all visuals necessary for the installation allowing extra time to make corrections to the production process.

• Setup the installation with as much minimal invasiveness to the public as possible, and document final results discovered during the process.

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD)

15 million Americans—approximately 6.8% of the U.S. population—suffer from
Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), the second most common form of anxiety.[1] Characterized by
a continual fear of how one is perceived in social encounters or performance situations, those
who have SAD can suffer from panic attacks, loneliness, and depression, and have physical
symptoms such as nausea, rapid heartbeats, blushing, and headaches. While in some cases
these symptoms may be extreme but only last for a short period of time, there are some cases
where milder symptoms may last anywhere from days to even months.[2] Because the
culmination of this fear hinders those with SAD from participating in social activities, they
are often misunderstood and incorrectly labeled as being shy.

Currently psychologists are focusing on the biological and sociological areas to learn
more about the causes of this disorder. Some studies suggest that children displaying socially
inhibited tendencies are more likely to have a parent with Social Anxiety Disorder.[3] This,
however, may not be the only factor causing this disorder. Because children often mimic
behaviors of their parents, the environment in which a child is raised could also influence the
development of social anxiety. To a child, a parent's actions of avoiding people they don't
know or not answering the phone could be interpreted as something dangerous, and therefore
an action that should be avoided.[4] This could lead to children responding in a similar manner
as they grow up. Although there is no compelling argument that either biology or sociology

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[1] "Statistics and Facts About Anxiety Disorders," ADAA.org, Anxiety Disorders Association
of America, 19 Jan, 2007 <http://www.adaa.org/AboutADAA/PressRoom/Stats&Facts.asp>.
[2] Murray B. Stein and John R. Walker, *Triumph Over Shyness: Conquering Shyness and
Social Anxiety,* McGraw Hill, 2002, 11.
[3] Ibid., 23.
[4] Ibid., 23.

plays more of a role in the development of SAD, they both affect the development of a child's social interactions and are being studied further.

From self-help programs to individual or group therapy sessions and medication, there are a number of treatment options for people with social anxiety. Self-help programs provide the groundwork to understand the disorder and assignments to develop a way of coping with anxiety. These tasks help individuals build a better understanding of the way they interpret social encounters, and how they can control their level of stress. This method is helpful to many because the treatment is less expensive than therapy or medication, and it has been shown to be very successful.[5] Another successful treatment method is therapy sessions. Although more expensive than self-help programs, therapy sessions provide an outlet for those with social anxiety to express their concerns without fear of condemnation. Therapists often work with their patients to develop new ways they can approach social encounters and deal with their emotions.[6] Equipped with various treatment options, individuals with SAD must select a treatment focused on their particular needs. [7]

While millions of Americans are affected by SAD, the condition is rarely discussed and understood by the public, making it difficult for those with SAD to feel accepted. Only through education and communication can the public's perspective on this disorder be changed, and the common misconceptions on this condition be clarified.

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[5] Ibid., 52.
[6] Ibid., 47.
[7] Ibid., 51.

The Work

In the process of creating my thesis I had the unusual task of filling the roles of both client and designer in order to balance both the logistical and visual aspects of the design. At the same time this also involved developing a new form of visual communication. While my work with Passive Interactivity could have been applied to many different subjects and styles, it was important to me that there be one overall cohesive theme. After much contemplation I decided to use the topic of Social Anxiety Disorder. Because social anxiety is also a form of perspective, the use of Passive Interactivity provided an interesting venue to explore both areas.

Through the process of creating a Passive Interactive installation, I knew a good environment was key to achieving the desired experience. While I investigated many possibilities, both public and private, the back room of the art gallery in Foster Hall provided the ideal location to reflect the private side of life of those who suffer from SAD. Tucked away in the back, this room mirrors the loneliness and solitude of social anxiety. Its black ceilings, dark carpet, windowless walls, and silence remove it from the outside world, providing the emotional and intimate experience.

In a Passive Interactive installation direction and flow of an audience are key in creating a sense of interaction and/or animation, and for this reason it was essential for me to create my own environment. In some locations, a structured layout predetermines how this interaction will take place. Foster Gallery, however, allowed me the necessary flexibility to create my own environment in which to establish a general direction of motion. While there is no guarantee that all viewers will move in a predictable pattern or direction, I chose to locate the entrance to my installation at an angle to direct viewers around the room in a clockwise

motion. In addition to this, I set up my installation in a circular format to covey two notions. The first notion, represented by the exterior circle, is the never-ending cycle of Social Anxiety Disorder. Unlike the common anxiety most people experience, those with SAD dwell on their fears continually. In the installation, imagery placed in this orientation reinforces this notion. The second notion, represented by the interior circle, provides the distorted self-reflective view and mental stress caused by SAD.

While the circular format of my work establishes a directional flow of the audience, it is the visuals in the circles that reflect the situational and emotional aspects of Social Anxiety Disorder. The outer circle is composed of seven large transparent panels, and the inner circle is composed of fourteen double-sided opaque panels. I divided the inner circle into seven groups of two, each corresponding to one large transparency. Each grouping represents different social experiences and verbiage that many people can relate to on some level. The two opaque background panels make up the majority of the image, with the left panel representing the more exaggerated side of SAD. The foreground transparency layer acts as a visual connection between the two background panels in order to unify the imagery. Utilizing my concept of Passive Interactivity, I placed two words on every set of posters, each reflecting a positive and negative connotation of the imagery represented. The foreground transparency displays a negative terminology, while the background layer displays the positive terminology. The decision to separate the words on two separate layers creates a visual interaction depending upon a viewer's motion. As the viewer moves in a clockwise direction, the negative term and chain-link fence appear to overlap the positive term because of the shift in the visual perspective.

Upon entering the inside of the circle, the viewer is surrounded by a series of images. Composed of partial glimpses relating to the outer circle, this area of the installation represents the inner workings of the mind. Surrounded by a series of repeating images of a soundless screaming face, the viewer becomes a part of the imagery with reflective areas of the design surrounding them. Adjoining these visuals are several smaller images that reference the outer circle images. The intent is for the viewer to scrutinize other views of the same imagery on the outside of the circle. In addition, the inner circle combines recorded voices that repeat over and over, reinforcing the emotional struggles of the mind and reflecting the fears of how people with SAD feel they are being perceived.

After viewers have experienced the installation, a sign directs them to exit the gallery towards the back corner. This established pathway accomplishes two goals: (1) to better control how people enter and exit gallery door at the same time, and (2) to present the viewer with one last visual experience. Separated from the rest of the installation, the left wall of the exit pathway is lined with a series of large-scale punch labels that represent different negative connotations. Building in number and size, these labels represent the growing fear and anxiety felt in social and emotional situations. As the progression of labels ends, they lead the viewer's eyes to a poem printed on several layers of transparencies at the end of the pathway. Reflecting upon the loneliness and solitude SAD can cause, the poem states, "Your thoughts invade me, I cannot escape. I want to avoid you; how much more can I take? I wish I could stop it, believe me I do. For if the thoughts escaped me and you truly get to know me, I would no longer be misunderstood." The separation of the poem over several transparencies creates an unstable feeling as the lines of text visually shift left and right, creating a feeling of anxiousness. This last statement acts as a reminder for the viewers to consider how being

isolated and misunderstood feels, and that by reaching out to those who seem shy or socially

anxious we can gain a better understanding of who they are as individuals.

Conclusion

Passive Interactivity is not about trying to derive a "cool effect," but about bringing the audience into the work in order to provide a new perspective. This process evolved from a series of successes and failures. I spent a significant amount of time in the initial phases of my work researching materials. Balancing the practical, logistical, and economical aspects proved to be very challenging. Often I was faced with a decision that required a new design because of service bureaus that could not accommodate alternative production methods. This motivated me to acquire all the materials and handle most of the production on my own. While this involved some uncertainty and experimentation on my behalf, I found that having control over the quality of the output was beneficial.

The use of Social Anxiety Disorder as a subject matter exemplified the benefits of this technique by providing a different view of this disorder. It is my hope that others will be able to build upon this technique of Passive Interactivity and use it to spark discussion and to question life's perspectives. It is only through questioning these perspectives that we seek a better understanding between reality and perceived reality.

Bibliography

Stein, Murray B., and John R. Walker. *Triumph Over Shyness: Conquering Shyness and Social Anxiety.* McGraw Hill, 2002.

"Statistics and Facts About Anxiety Disorders." <u>ADAA.org</u>. Anxiety Disorders Association of America. 19 Jan. 2007 <http://www.adaa.org/AboutADAA/PressRoom/Stats&Facts.asp>.

Appendix: Images

Figure 1 - Gallery Layout

Figure 2 - Outside Circle

Figure 3 - Outside Circle

Figure 4 - Outside Circle

Figure 5 - Outside Circle

Figure 6 - Outside Circle

Figure 7 - Outside Circle
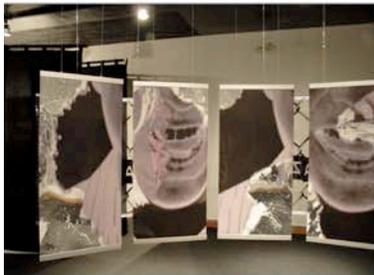
Figure 8 - Outside Circle
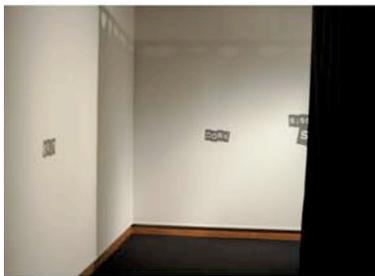
Figure 9 - Inside Circle

Figure 10 - Wall of Words

Figure 11 - Poem

Vita

Kevin Andrew Hagan was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in March of 1977. The son of a nuclear engineer and a Christian educator, Kevin graduated from Vestavia Hills High School in 1996. Upon graduation, Kevin enrolled at Mississippi State University to pursue an undergraduate degree in graphic design, and hoped to continue on into their master's program in computer animation. Unsatisfied with his freshman year experience at Mississippi State, Kevin transferred to Auburn University in the fall of 1997 to continue his undergraduate degree in graphic design. After a year of hard work, Kevin was admitted to the design program, where he found a great passion and appreciation for typography. Graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in May of 2001, Kevin accepted a job as the graphic designer for the Media Production Group at Auburn University. It was during his employment that he met his wife, Alise Chabaud, who was completing her master's degree in technical and professional communication at Auburn. In April of 2004, Alise and Kevin were married and soon after moved to Louisiana so that Kevin could pursue his master's degree in graphic design at Louisiana State University. In May of 2007, Kevin will humbly accept his degree with the hope of sharing his passion and knowledge of graphic design through teaching.