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Too fast, too tight, too loud, too bright

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TOO FAST, TOO TIGHT, TOO LOUD, TOO BRIGHT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by

David Martin Storlie
B.F.A. University of South Florida, 2002
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Abstract

It's difficult to imagine that others do not perceive and react to the cultural stimuli as I do when dealing with everyday sensory situations. Unlike most, I have struggled with many different responses to commonplace sensory events during my life. A recent diagnosis of certain symptoms has helped to explain not only my lifelong reactions to sensory stimuli, but also the resulting environments I have created for myself in which I live and work.

The four terms I use that most fully describe the affects of this condition are; too fast, too tight, too loud and too bright. Although the first, too fast, is not necessarily considered a sense, it results in an internal reaction to an external visual event. The others are directly related to the sense of touch, the sense of hearing and the sense of sight.

I will describe my efforts to construct environments in my Thesis Show where each of these areas of my difficulty are presented to the viewer so that he or she may feel, to a greater or lesser extent, how I perceive my environment.
Introduction

It is difficult to imagine that others do not perceive and react to the cultural stimuli as I do when dealing with everyday sensory situations. Unlike most, I have struggled with many different responses to commonplace sensory events during my life. A recent diagnosis of certain symptoms has helped to explain not only my lifelong reactions to sensory stimuli, but also the environments I have created for myself in which I live and work.

I have been diagnosed with Sensory Defensiveness. This finding has led to my research of the syndrome and its impact on my daily life and art making. While believing that I was suffering alone, I find that fifteen percent of the American population is suspected of being affected by this condition. While my symptoms cover only four major areas, many who suffer are more significantly affected than I am, with a more extreme sensitivity to the stimuli.

The four terms I use that most fully describe the effects of this condition are: too fast, too tight, too loud, and too bright. Although the first, too fast, is not necessarily considered a sense, it results in an internal reaction to an external visual event. The others are directly related to the sense of touch, the sense of hearing, and the sense of sight.

This paper will describe my sensory reactions to the four stimuli. It will describe how I have adapted my environment to compensate for these sensory intrusions into what I consider to be my space. Finally, I will describe my efforts to construct environments in my Thesis Show where each of these areas of my difficulty is presented to the viewer so that he or she may feel, to a greater or lesser extent, how I perceive my environment.
The Pace of Life

I have always enjoyed the sensation of speed while I drive an automobile, ride a bicycle, run, or drive my motorcycle. The exhilaration on my bike, as the scenery flows past, without borders, places me out in the environment without a picture frame. The exception, of course, is in the car where the windshield acts as a picture frame, surrounding all that is viewed.

My sensation of “too fast” is not about physical speed but rather the pace of life, as I perceive it. For as long as I can remember, I have not enjoyed large group gatherings, such as high school or college basketball or football games, fall fests on campus, crowds at county or state fairs, or the crush of shoppers during the holiday seasons. It seems that people need to win at any cost, creating a race of sorts: first in and first out.

Another example presents itself on the highway, while driving, where there are two distinct events occurring. The first, of course, is the speed at which people drive their vehicles in this fast-paced culture. This is troublesome from a safety standpoint, but not as bothersome as the way people conduct themselves while driving at high rates of speed. This behavior refers to how rapidly people change lanes, rush past, or move erratically while negotiating their travels. Having driven a motorcycle in a defensive fashion for many years, I am always looking for multiple escape routes as I try to guess what the drivers around me might attempt. I have noticed lately that there are fewer and fewer alternative escape routes as I drive in the traffic. This method of defensive driving, particularly in the city, is exhausting.

The result of my reactions to these fast-paced environments has caused me to be less likely to accept invitations to large gatherings or participate in group activities. I have altered my driving habits to eliminate as many of these obstacles as possible. This has involved changing the time of day, the area of travel, and the destinations to a large extent. I do not wish
to keep up with those acting in this fashion. I have found there is more to life than increasing its pace.

**External Pressures**

This element of my condition is not about a claustrophobic feeling of confinement in small spaces. It has to do with the proximity of other individuals, particularly nearing or entering what I consider to be my personal space. The numbers of people are important to the intensity of my feelings. Large numbers of people, particularly when they are moving rapidly or milling about, cause me the most distress.

When I was younger I noticed that I felt hemmed in by the people to my immediate left and right when sitting in a pew at church or a bleacher at school. I recall school events in the gymnasium, where the individuals behind me often had their knees in my back and I had mine touching those in front of me. It was not about the confinement as much as it was about the proximity of the individuals. I never felt that I could not escape, just the discomfort of closeness. Going to basketball or football games had so many of the various stimuli in one place, such as yelling and shouting, fast-paced movement, and the closeness of the others that after a few experiences I rarely attended these events. The pushing and shoving involved in getting to a seat or standing in line for refreshments, the noise of the crowd, from the loud cheering to the chants and the crush of the fans wanting to exit after the event, added to the need to flee. All these sensory stimuli at one location were too much.

**Sound Intensity**

Too loud encompasses many forms of what I consider to be audible intrusions. The sounds created by boom box stereos, loud cars, crowds at sports events, live concerts, car security systems chirping, honking, or going into alarm, cell phones ringing, and even
whispering behind you in a classroom or theater environment form part of the litany of auricular disturbances. Any of these noises cause the present focus to become secondary, lost in the distraction caused by the noise.

Often, worse than the noise itself, is my anticipation of the fact that once heard, there will be further maddening noise. These distractions remove the joy from many situations for me. A barking neighborhood dog, as an example, may howl once, putting me on edge for a considerable time following the event. I am often on guard, and anger is in the wings awaiting further intrusions. Noise has become a significant part of our culture, and I am unable to mitigate the disturbances.

One example of sensory overload is the classroom, where the whispering around me is such a distraction that I am unable to concentrate or make sense of the discussion by the instructor in front of me. My sensory system, the connection between the ear and the brain, causes the background noise to disrupt or overpower the sounds of interest. Another example of a place that has multiple levels of audio stimuli is the present-day movie theater. Here you have the ear-shattering sounds from the acoustic system, interspersed with the whispered, and not so whispered, conversations of some members of the audience. Cell phones too, on a regular basis, interrupt those events that are intended to entertain. When I go to a theater I must wear earplugs to minimize not only the conversations around me but also the painfully loud soundtrack, often losing much of the dialogue of the movie as a result.

Finally, living arrangements are always a major concern. Due to the lifestyle of a student, apartment living has been the only answer for the last ten years. The less expensive apartments are usually located in the less desirable parts of any town and bring their own share of problems with noise. Loud music, paper-thin walls, a culture of taxi cab transportation with
its inherent beeping of horns at all hours, and domestic problems, lead to a frustrating existence. In these cases I try to mitigate the chances of this sort of intrusion by locating in a place that is not likely to have those tenants or owners nearby. I do not impose my noise on others and wish to be treated the same.

Visual Overload

Born and raised in Minnesota, I first became aware of the pain in my eyes and temples while looking out over white expanses of snow on a sunny winter day. This brightness caused headaches that could last for hours after escaping from the blinding scene. I began to wear sunglasses at an early age and have continued to purchase the most opaque lenses possible. There has been one major benefit of the sunglasses: unlike all other members of my nuclear family, I wear no corrective glasses. Nonetheless, there are many visual situations in this culture that cannot be solved with tinted glasses.

 Screens of televisions and computers have improved to such an extent that many are extremely uncomfortable for me to watch. I watch little, if any, television these days and my computer screen is a liquid crystal display set to very low brightness. These are a few of the visually bright sources I am able to control in my life. There are many others that I need to live and deal with.

 Some of the creations of this culture are high-powered incandescent and high output fluorescent lights. The automobile lamp manufacturers have invested in new gas technology in bulb designs to achieve incredible amounts of light from very tiny sources. These lamps are now used as headlights, running lights, and foul-weather lamps. In unison, these sources of light, in the daylight, but more particularly at night, are as blinding to me as a snowy bright winter day. I could use sunglasses to mitigate snow glare, but not at night. I am forced to raise my palm to
shield my eyes from the oncoming traffic. Either that or look away which is not recommended when driving a car. The day-night rearview mirror helps some, but the outside mirrors cannot be treated the same. The pinpoints of light seem to pierce my very brain.

These extreme lighting or brightness situations that I have described have occurred in the outside world. Today, light is used to attract your attention in a world of competing marketers. Flashing xenon strobe lamps, racetrack lamps that appear to be running in a circular path, and ranks of bright spotlights that illuminate a billboard to be seen at a quarter of a mile are just a few of the intrusions that make for discomfort at least, and usually physical pain.
The Installation

The installation is about perception, not about objects. The physical layout, as the viewer enters the gallery, is sequenced in a fashion similar to the order of the descriptions of the symptoms described in the title. Upon entry, the audience is presented with the title of the Thesis show, “Too Fast, Too Tight, Too Loud, Too Bright,” applied in tri-letter transfers to the right front panel of “Too Bright.” Title Wall is presented to the viewer upon entry into the gallery.

The room is divided into four distinct spaces, defined by two self-contained structures in opposite corners. These structures consist of uniform studio flats, built in a tongue-and-groove configuration. All the panels are the same size and nest with each other to form walls. Baseboard assemblies contain the bottoms of the studio flats. The upper ends of the panels are secured to each other with metal brackets, angle brackets, and corner posts.

The path for any electrical wiring necessary is provided by voids in the corner posts. All circuits have connectors and mates installed for ease of installation and removal. The overhead gallery electrical lighting grid provides the source of power for the lighting and audio-visual equipment. The installation walls, along with the gallery walls, provide the mounting surface for the projectors, video players, speakers, and compact disc players.
After the initial entry into the back gallery the viewer is presented with the *Title Wall*, “Too Fast, Too Tight, Too Loud, Too Bright,” applied on the right front panel of one of the constructed walls. After entry into the space, the intention is to direct the viewer to the right and then in a counter-clockwise direction for viewing each of the elements. This path, of course, is strictly up to the viewer. The first structure creates an aisle that suggests that the viewer travel to the right. From this direction the viewers are confronted with each of the four elements.

**Too Fast**

This element of the installation is in the far right corner of the gallery. The viewer approaches this space after turning right at the entrance to the back gallery. This part of the installation consists of two digital video disc players and liquid crystal display projectors applying images on adjacent walls. The projectors have been mounted on shelves secured to the walls near the ceiling. The liquid crystal display projectors and digital videodisc players have remote controls and are playing the same digital video disc in a repeat, or loop fashion. The video provided by each digital videodisc is the same, just staggered so that it appears to conflict with the image on the adjacent wall. The *Video Walls* image shows the relationship of the projected images in the gallery. The content of the videos are scenes from commercial movies that portray crowds hustling and bustling in an urban environment. The clips were changed to black and white and then

*Video Walls*
defocused. The sound tracks were removed so that the activity is the only thing to capture the viewer’s attention. The transitions between clips are subtle so that as one is fading from view as the other is emerging.

The audience will become involved as they approach the two adjacent walls, which have become the screens. The viewer’s very crisp silhouettes will interrupt the indistinct visual images of the crowds. If the viewer steps back from the screens, their silhouettes disappear and they are confronted with frenetic activity on two walls without their participation. Without sound to complement the visual, the only sense stimulated is the visual. *Shadow* shows the human scale of a viewer casting a shadow on the video projection. Standing still, even in front of the projector, removes the presence of the physical body and leaves only the viewer’s senses to be stimulated.

The spaces were designed such that as the viewer proceeds counter clockwise it is not possible to be fully influenced by the previous element when proceeding to the next. As an example, when the viewer turns to leave the element called “Too Fast,” the visual activity of the projection is disconnected as the back is turned. The next component of the installation is the rear wall of “Too Bright” on the left, “Too Fast” on the right, “Too Tight” straight ahead, and an aisle way or space leading into “Too Loud.”
**Too Tight**

The installation component “Too Tight” presents two openings to the left and right as the viewer approaches the entrance. This element is situated in the corner opposite of the first construction. This consists of two sets of walls, one nested within the other, the exterior structure is ten feet wide and ten feet long, the interior walls are four feet by four feet. These four-foot walls, along with the exterior walls, form the entrance of “Too Tight.” The *Tight Left* and *Tight Right* images present the entrance installation view of this element.

The separation of the walls of the two constructions forms two aisles on either side of the interior walls. These aisles are sixteen inches wide and four feet long. The intention is to condition the viewer, as he or she is entering the space, to a position of restriction.

Upon entering “Too Tight,” the viewer is presented with a room of walls covered with mirrors. The space is illuminated from overhead with a narrow-focused spotlight. The light floods the head and shoulders of the participant, leaving the lower figure in shadows. This lighting emphasizes the upper extremities and causes reflections that create the impression of a multitude from the reflections of...
one individual. When more people participate, the effect is amplified. As more viewers enter the space, the number of individuals in the “crowd” is increased. The intent is to arrive at a point where the viewer is overwhelmed by the sheer number of “people” that are reflected, thus, “Too Tight.”

*Crowd of One* shows a viewer and the multiple reflections. Upon leaving the “Too Tight” space, one feels a sense of expansion of the space from narrow confines to large open spaces. The viewer is exposed to an open area that is titled “Too Loud.” This environment is to the right as “Too Tight” is exited.

**Too Loud**

This room is created through a combination of the gallery walls and the fabricated walls of the other environments described. The open space is an area where the motion of the audience will trigger various sounds, depending on the direction of travel. Three separate recordings are isolated from each other, on compact disc format in stereo. The compact disc players are mounted on a shelf near the ceiling of the gallery and are controlled with a remote.

The content of the first compact disc is a series of audio clips of male and female voices of various national origins, speaking in their native languages. The male voices are on one track and the female voices are on the other. This sound track is the first to be played as the viewer enters the area from the “Too Tight” construction. A motion of the viewer causes an electronic switch to turn the continuously playing compact disc audio output on, to be passed on to the
stereo speakers on the left and right walls of the “Too Loud” environment. An image of two of the speakers and the compact disc shelf is presented in *Sound Wall*.

The recorded voices are male and female Mandarin Chinese, Brazilian and European Portuguese, German, French, Spanish and English. Initially, there will be a single voice on one channel progressing to a second voice on the other. Those voices are then repeated and a second set is overlaid in the same fashion. This continues until there is a cacophony of voices, originally whispering, but the additive nature ultimately brings the sound to a significant level. These outputs last between ten and fifteen seconds after which a timer then turns the audio outputs of the voices off.

The next zone is set up in the same fashion, with a motion sensor triggering the output to a separate set of speakers mounted as described earlier. The content of this compact disc is a series of cell phone rings, automobile security system chirps, klaxons, sirens, honking horns and alarms. They are at a low level, starting initially with one sound and then progressing as more sounds are overlaid. These outputs also last between ten and fifteen seconds after which a timer then turns the audio outputs of the sounds off.

The final zone plays a compact disc whose content is a low level output of bar conversations, receptions, and crowded rooms with multiple conversations occurring. These outputs will be at such a low level that even additively they will not disturb others in the next
gallery. As with the other zones, the duration is between ten and fifteen seconds. The zones are determined by the placement of motion sensors overhead. It is possible to walk slowly enough to hear only one zone at a time. However, it is expected that at a normal pace, all the zones will be turned on as a viewer passes through. This will create a sound environment that is intended to be disturbing in the area of this part of the installation. With many viewers passing through the sound will remain. If one stops moving the sounds will stop. This reinforces my views as I attempt to mitigate the external stimuli through a slower pace.

**Too Bright**

Finally, the last component of the installation is encountered upon leaving the “Too Loud” area. The “Too Bright” element of the installation is a twelve by twelve foot room, eight feet in height. The space is created with four by eight foot interlocking panels that connect together via the tongue and groove method. At the baseboard and cove are fluorescent lights exposed directly to the viewer. The ceiling is covered with stretched white canvas. Mounted on the ceiling are four eight-foot, high output fluorescent fixtures. *Into the Light* shows the entrance of self-closing doors.

When the viewer moves toward the center of the room the high output fixtures are turned on and the viewer is exposed to very bright light in an already-bright space. The double, self-closing doors and the opaque overhead canvas prevent the light from the interior escaping into
the gallery and changing the mood of the rest of the installation. *Bright Interior* shows the brightness encountered by the viewer.

The object of this element is to expose the viewers to high levels of brightness, far beyond what I consider to be comfortable. This room is not about the number of lights, the type of light or fixture or any other physical characteristic. It reminds me of the Minnesota snow scenes or the late night automobile lights that cause me to squint and look away. Since it is a contained area, there is no looking away - one must leave to escape the brightness.
Conclusion

Coming to the realization that I am affected by sensory stimuli and react in an unusual fashion, compared to most others, has helped me explain my social and artistic paths. The diagnosis has enlightened me as to the whys and wherefores of the environments I have created for myself in which I live and work. I believe the four terms selected encompass the stimuli and the constructions of this installation, for my purposes, evoke the responses as if I were in the real world experiencing each of these sources. My hope is that the audience is able to share a small part of my experience as the view the various elements of the installation.
Bibliography


Vita

David Martin Storlie was born in Spring Grove, Minnesota. From the small-town farming country of southeastern Minnesota, he moved to Minneapolis for a time, and then on to Golden Valley, where he spent his youth. He graduated from Hopkins High School.

Within a year of graduation from high school he enlisted for a four-year tour in the Air Force. In mid-tour he changed career fields from electronics to air operations. With a year of remaining active duty, he volunteered for Viet Nam service. He arrived in-country during the Tet Offensive, where his duty stations in Air Commando Squadrons included Tuy Hoa, Nha Trang and Pleiku. After his final year in the Air Force and Viet Nam, he returned to the States.

The military training in electronics led to a career in engineering in the defense industry. After a rewarding career an unusual string of events presented themselves, offering the opportunity to make choices and changes. He returned to college with the intention of beginning another technical career. At South Florida Community College in Avon Park, Florida, he had an epiphany during his first year of studies and found art to be his life-long desire. During these early studies he was awarded one of only twenty positions on the USA Today's All Florida Academic First Team. He obtained an Associate in Arts degree, Summa Cum Laude.

He enrolled in both the College of Fine Arts and the Honors College at the University of South Florida, in Tampa. After touching clay for the first time he knew that, “this was it.” He explored figurative metal work, ceramics and many other materials during his investigations. He earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in sculpture, Magna Cum Laude, with honors.

Louisiana State University was his choice for the Master of Fine Arts. He completed his studies, concentrating on figurative bronze and aluminum casting, and earned the Master of Fine Arts degree, Cum Laude, in 2005.