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Facing technology : creative solutions to real-world problems.

Taylor Juanita Beisler
University of Louisville

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FACING TECHNOLOGY:
CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO REAL-WORLD PROBLEMS

By

Taylor Juanita Beisler
B.F.A. Studio Arts and B.A. Humanities, University of Louisville, 2015

A Creative Honors Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation with Honors
for the Degrees of

Bachelor of Fine Arts in Inter-Media Studio Arts and Bachelor of Arts in Humanities

Department of Fine Arts and Department of Humanities
University of Louisville
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ABSTRACT

FACING TECHNOLOGY: CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO REAL-WORLD PROBLEMS

Taylor Juanita Beisler

May 2015

We are shaped by technology. This simple idea has become more familiar to social scientists, technical engineers, and some tech users. The first section of this thesis finds unfavorable consequences of constant social media usage, such as unawareness, behavioral and cogitative modifications, and disconnection as societal ills. The second part of this thesis explains how these social side effects can be best ameliorated by “serious” designers, or those whose work is conceptual with real world applications (McLuhan, 8). The final section proposes a creative expression as it relates to bringing awareness to the social side effects of tech usage, linking the first and second sections by theory put to practice. I propose a designer’s creativity as the technique by which interactions with technology and people should progress. If we proceed as we are, our future ostensibly leans toward virtual realities that have the potential to deconstruct the human element.

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INTRODUCTION

My conversationalist is captured by the blithe light of the cell phone. As she engages the QWERTY keys on the screen, I feel deflated by the abrupt entrance of this alien intruder that has usurped our dialogue. Glancing around to mollify this disturbance, I skim my way through bystanders fiddling with their phones, and out of habit dig through pockets for my flip-phone. *No messages. 12:53 PM.*

A few minutes later, she questions me with: “I’m sorry . . . what were we talking about?” “I have to go,” I say: “I’ll talk to you later.” “Sure . . . text me,” is how it ends.

After this exchange, I kept thinking about the intrusion of a text into a conversation whose lifeline was reality: BING! I’ve arrived—the all-important text message.

On the other hand, it’s a gratifying experience, getting a text. It feels validating.

Why the mixture of associations with this advanced technology I can hold in my hand? I think that this is an interesting question that presents fundamental dilemmas facing our 21st century. This question has become important to me, not only for discovering solutions to problems caused by hyper-connectivity as a part of my artistic work, but also in order to live a fulfilling life in a world promoting “insanity,” to quote the author of *iDisorder* (Rosen, 6).

It’s a long-lived idea that people—we, for the most part—want to exist where we

can make an impact, be heard, and feel validated. As Rabbi Michael Lerner has said:

Recognize that people hunger for a world that has meaning and love; for a sense of aliveness, energy, and authenticity; for a life embedded in a community in which they are valued for who they most deeply are, with all their warts and limitations, and feel genuinely seen and recognized; for a sense of contributing to the good; and for a life that is about something more than just money and accumulating material goods. (Ehrenfeld, 53)

This concept, however, is—as most things—easier printed in a book than “recognized” in near reality. Abstract words like “authenticity” and “valued” have virtually limitless possibilities when dealing with our common era. Debates on authenticity and technology clash in the new millennium. Does the 21st century hold authenticity high on its value list? Can I be authentic while using a communication medium? If I value the person in front of me, what does this value look like when I get a text message while they’re talking? Are there protocols for all this newness? The above questions require more than a yes-or-no, multiple-choice, you fill-in-the-blank answer. This ambiguity is an indicator that an ethical dilemma effloresces behind our screens as we tinker with the new Trivia Crack App while waiting in line. I’m not saying that there’s anything wrong with this type of behavior (waiting in line can be a happen-less happenstance, and some applications can be appealing), but I do think that our relationship with technology deserves a critique. It has become a relationship, after all, and most people agree that communication is vital to any relationship.

In order to begin this harrowing adventure, at Chapter 1, this thesis will traverse back to the land before smartphones. To understand where culture is now and the modern

dilemma, it is important to know how society got here. To engage the riddles of this technological arena, speed-dating the contemporary designers will show if they are valid candidates to bring the necessary improvements to social issues.

In Chapter 2, design aptitudes may give more insight into how to handle technological inventions. Delving into contemporary creative practices, some pragmatic solutions for our aforementioned issue will be addressed.

In Chapter 3, my creative project, *A Face to Face: The I Need You Project*, will be discussed. This project has been influenced by the research henceforth. Expressing the problem (*i.e.* social media perpetuating less social depth) through art in order to cultivate authentic situations, awareness, and dialogue is the goal of this project. (I will explain in outline because this art is meant to be experienced and evoke a dialogic exchange that cannot be reproduced in a paper format.)

In the final chapter, it is concluded that designers, a newly defined person in light of this 21st century discussion, can bring creativity to the 21st century table of values. Designers are capable of starting change.

Beginning dialogue on the topic of current communication technology may seem like the same thing, to use an art metaphor, as drawing a picture of a picture. To communicate about communication and create techniques to navigate the ocean of technology might seem a strange endeavor, but I do promise a few nuggets to chew on throughout the journey.

Two discretionary notes: when “technology” is discussed, it mostly refers to communication technology and entities that have the potential for communication media applications (*i.e.* cell-phones, the Web with its social media sites, et al.). Secondly, this

thesis comes from a standpoint that is uniquely American, which means that many of the statements made are referring to cultures that have incorporated communication media as normative elements in their societies.

Let's get started.

CHAPTER 1
INFORMATION AGE
The Technological Now

One of the most telling artifacts of humanity comes in a package sometimes overlooked in its ubiquity. This artifact is language, wrapped in cultural sounds and technologies, adapting and thriving through utilization, and a part of the material culture of our 21st century.

In the land before smartphones, where business people roamed the earth with large suitcases and mobile phones the size of lava lamps, corporations realized that mobile phones were the way of the future communicator. Upon becoming smaller and less expensive, everyone had one. “Can you hear me now?” from Verizon’s bespectacled ambassador was the funny way to deal with the idea that the signal going from your phone to your friend’s phone had just rocketed into space and back to earth to make the connection possible.

Since then, Verizon’s guy has become the normative backdrop, and we rarely marvel about the way these cell phones work anymore. If they have become a normal part of society, then why am I suggesting that there’s something not so normal about them?

As historiographers James Davidson and Mark Lytle profess, “material culture is

constantly evolving,” thus shaping our individual lives and our social relationships (Davidson and Lytle, 111). As “material culture can lead . . . to larger questions about our collective identities,” it is impossible to ignore the blue light of these omnipresent communication engines (120). We find energetic gadgets salting our present age everywhere we turn. As the 21st century is the “information revolution,” the “larger questions” that come with that are: what does this mean, and is this state beneficial (123)?

Every revolution in history has been an extension of man himself—the scientific revolution, the industrial revolution, the information revolution, ad infinitum. Each of these displays humankind’s creativity and search for knowledge. By looking at the common thread between all of humanity’s revolutions, it seems that in every one, ideologies and philosophies were reevaluated and reformed by the concept standing before the denoted “revolution.” In the scientific revolution, for example, science became the valid way of exploring the world, not to mention, controlling some of nature’s faculties. Science transformed the world from unknowable mechanism into something empirical. We discovered that we did not live in such an ambiguous place. During the industrial revolution, the machine—made possible by science—created new ways of living that built cities and factories with the boom in utilitarian technology. The machine, however, was not withstanding some skeptical critics of the harsh atmosphere it had fabricated (as photographed by Jacob Riis, or countered by the American park and recreation designer, Frederick Olmsted, who may have been inspired by Thoreau’s idea of nature as recreating force versus the harsh industrial milieu). The industrial era proposed a controversy: the machine could do the work of humans, sometimes aiding them in their progress, while other times alienating them from the means to “make a

living.” With these tensions, the industrial revolution provided the information revolution with its very own springboard—the machine.

“Man versus machine” was undoubtedly coined far before our present time. Its usage for the 21st century, however, indulges new curiosities. The Information Age was constructed upon the controversial setup of the industrial revolution, considering man as in relationship with the made gadget—a user of the machine, a receiver of technological products, or even the perpetuator of its designs. Since the controversy over the machine has some roots in the industrial revolution’s dichotomy of a machine’s power to both construct and destroy, this controversial embodiment made its way from one ideology to the next era’s riddle to solve. In the information revolution, man has become a relational being to his/her tool. This relationship to information is, arguably, very similar to other revolutions, but it is also quite unlike its predecessors in its name.

“Information,” unlike “scientific” or “industrial,” is not an adjective. Scientific relates to science, as industrial relates to industry. But, information refers to itself, a noun among scholarly words, which claims to enrapture the innocent surveyor with data and tidbits. Information itself covers more ground than either science or industry combined. Information was what galvanized the scientific revolution. And, information’s science manufactured the industrial age. In our common era, it is interesting that information, that great pursuit of Galileo and Newton, has become *the* revolution, for it predates its revolutionary surname.

It might be helpful to point out that “revolution” itself is an intriguing locution, for it mixes a concoction unexplained by common usage. For, where revolution might mean progression or transformation, its linguistic origins suggest a more convoluted turn. That

is, “revolution” climbs out of Latin linguistics with early underpinnings of *re-* (meaning back or again) and *volvere* (to roll), employed in late Latin as meaning a “turn” (*revolutio*). It is interesting that this word contrives a definition that means both a sort of rebellion toward forward motion and a displacement of the past in favor of turning another direction. Each revolution embodies a giving and taking of ostensibly peremptory structures, which undoubtedly brings about a whiplash of “yes” and “no” stewed in one concomitant cacophony of any culture’s collective cry. Revolution, in its dichotomous ways, and information, in its own ostensible neutrality, come like bickering brothers into the early 21st century.

Information, as the pursuit of a revolution has become embodied by a social medium. Technology, a tool for dissemination, can launch information in pixels, kilo-, and even zetta-bytes, if we want to go big. What is interesting about this information is how it has become an undisputed artifact. It, like language, is everywhere.

Information can define our pursuits, how we reach goals, and even how we view ourselves. If we log onto Facebook, we can sculpt ourselves in the “About Me” section. This tells our viewers where we went to school, what our interests are, our religious affiliation, job, favorite television shows, and more. We have become—forgive the explanation—diluted to our information. I remember going to my first college outing, where the main questions were, “What are you studying? What are you going to do?” In the grand scheme of things, this is only a slice of *who* I am. I am not an answer to the inquiries posed by Whats, but my information can be lined up in its best fashion and transmitted to the questioner’s eardrum by rote. These questions by my peers suggest that the priority of my culture has become more in-tune with gathering information than in

being interested in depth (e.g. “What do you think is the purpose of our life?” Granted, this is usually off-limits for a first-time conversation and requires more *thought* than information.). Gathering information is not a negative thing. What people do with this information might be construed as either good or bad. What is most intriguing about the 21st century information-relationship, for the purpose of this thesis, is how information has become embodied by communication technology and toward what end does this constant influx of data take us.

“The World Wide Web” was brought to life in the late 20th century in order to share information. Simple enough. Computer engineer and theorist, Jaron Lanier writes that this recent creation is a good thing to be “skeptical” about (Lanier, 22). He suggests that the structure of the Web was first suspended with a “haphazard, accidental quality” (22). This means that his confession for computer engineers, “We should have been more thoughtful,” translates into repercussions for us who use informational tools (10).

If an interlinking virtual force was crafted without foresight into its greater meanings, then what happens when a thinking person stumbles into this haphazard Net? It seems ironic, sometimes, that it was even dubbed “the Net.”

When the Internet was just six years old and ambling into the world, History Professor of Technology, Dr. Melvin Kranzberg, posited his “thoughts” on technology (Kranzberg, 544). These thoughts have been called “Kranzberg’s Laws,” which record technology’s “interactions with sociocultural change” (544). His first thought is especially relevant to our discussion:

Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral. By that I mean that technology’s interaction with the social ecology is such that technical

developments frequently have environmental, social, and human consequences that go far beyond the immediate purposes of the technical devices and practices themselves, and the same technology can have quite different results when introduced into different contexts or under different circumstances. Many of our technology-related problems arise because of the unforeseen consequences when apparently benign technologies are employed on a massive scale. Hence many technical applications that seemed a boon to mankind when first introduced became threats when their use became widespread. (545-546)

As technology is not good or bad, and it is not neutral, this means that technology is two things—impartial and active. Technology is an agent. It has effects and impressions upon its users. If a technology was made to disseminate information from one person to another, then the connection of one person's information to another seems harmless from one recognizable person to the next, but “on a massive scale,” does not this information become itself the individual? On a large platform, the individual originator of that information might not have a recognizable face or departure point anymore—what counts is the information. So, what once was a relationship between two people, can at once become a relationship with a medium and a human. *Wikipedia* may be a good example of how this operates—a system of anonymous writers sculpting pools of information.

Philosopher Nicholas Rescher explains that dissatisfaction with technology occurs when technical progress creates hopes faster than it can satisfy those expectations (547). In this instance, the technology in question can be seen as what Elaine Scarry calls an “instance of failed artifice,” when the expectation outweighs satisfaction (Scarry, 319). Kranzberg calls these “unforeseen ‘dis-benefits’,” which come from ostensibly “benign”

technology (Kranzberg, 547). Wanting one thing and having it satisfied are two entities that are bridged only by a large gap. Sometimes this gap is forded by a method seen as beneficial, and yet leaves dissatisfying holes in the process.

To give an example, if I text my friend, “I hated seeing that look on your face,” this leaves multiple ways open to interpretation. This might mean that I was offended by the look on her face. Or, I was emotionally distressed by her expression for her sake. If I had been sitting in front of her and had used my facial expressers and intonations within that sentence, she would have been better equipped to make the distinction between what I meant and what was said. It is known that “60 to 90 percent of the messages we send and receive in face-to-face communication are nonverbal” (Siani, 120). After I send this text-encoded message, a curt one might convulse my buzzing phone in a: “Well I’m sorry.” Now, what does *that* mean? It seems she might have taken my medium the wrong way. As a well-known meme (a meme is an idea or critical assessment usually spread across the Internet) once summarized: “Text messaging: the perfect way to miscommunicate how you feel and misinterpret what other people mean.”

Some might say this example is lax, for what makes texting any different from non-verbal language? Non-verbal language could be anything from a book, a letter, etcetera. A letter, for example, usually takes time on the writer’s part and incorporates the context of other, longer sentences that give context to a phrase like, “I hated seeing that look on your face.” It is true that while non-verbal linguistics as in a letter do not incorporate facial expressions or verbal intonations, non-verbal language of larger proportions than text messages do involve context that can color a particular sentence with deeper meaning. Yes, text messaging may have the context of a longer cyber conversation, but it

does not involve the attention and time put into a letter or a book that holds the intention of giving and receiving a deeper relational message. Arguably, text language and non-verbal language are divided upon the lines of intention and medium.

Because technology “interacts in different ways with different values,” it is not surprising when a miscommunication occurs or a value becomes displaced in that interaction (Kranzberg, 548). Just like when two spiral galaxies collide, over time, one will engulf the other and absorb the whole into its own acceleration. Our technology sends interesting messages to us. There are galaxies of information within our reach. The question remains: can we be wholly or partially absorbed by those messages?

Most people might say that what they value most is family and friends—their connections with them, and their depths of relationships. However, it seems that technology can both connect and disconnect us to/from our values simultaneously. Interestingly, you probably understood that last sentence without a hitch, and it seems that this is because of the very understanding of the word “connect.” “Connect” is a word used for bridging a gap between an item and another item, now used between humans to explain relationships. Acknowledgment of damage occurs when realizing the implications of using a system normally prescribed upon machines for humans. Reparation happens, however, when matching, if only for a moment, a human desire with its fulfillment—that of connection, say. (The irony was intended here, for the understanding is similar if using the phrase, “being validated,” instead of connection.) On the serious side, connection’s Latin root, *connexi*, means to “link” or to “associate.” This is quite different from *conversari*, which, as can be gathered, is related to our English word, “conversation.” *Conversari* means “to live alongside” or “to be familiar with.” If

we were being intellectually honest, which do we really desire?

To illustrate the simultaneous good and bad consequences of mechanical language (those linguistic messages that come and go through the mediation of a device): if I use communication technology to have conversations with someone, and I see those conversations as the only means of “talking,” then is it also possible that I am only having mediated conversations (really: connections) instead of getting deeper? Social media does use the abbreviated form of the word “mediated” for a reason. If we are standing in front of someone, and a text swoops in with bells, what message are we sending to the person in front of us when we interrupt them to answer the text? It is true that sometimes phone calls can be more important, even urgent, but sometimes communication media becomes about immediacy over humanity. I know I feel devalued when someone pulls out his or her phone in front of me while we were having a conversation. I feel this way because I no longer have their validating attention; their attention is divided from me.

It is important to understand that text messaging was not created for talking on a deep level. As Social Scientist, Joni Siani, has found: “Texting . . . was never intended to become a primary form of communication . . . It was supposed to be an alternative to a quick note, yet the human factor altered the intention” (Siani, 219). The human factor is a curious labyrinth. Because humans make and alter things and their own intentions, those things are brought into existence and adapted in response to human desires. If a person feels more comfortable and less anxious while texting, then they might just be prone to text a ten page “quick note” just to share how they are feeling, instead of having a face-to-face interaction. But, as 60 to 90 percent of our language is not in the words, are we

truly sharing something as deep as feelings that can be empathically received in this way?

Kranzberg states that “the function of the technology is its use by human beings—and sometimes, alas, its abuse and misuse” (Kranzberg, 558). It is important to realize that the human is also an agent. Humans have responsibility. When the American Social Contract came into writing, it did not simply say, “do as you wish . . . period.” It, through logical means, discovered a certain boundary when dealing with human desires. If someone tramples on another person’s value, then that action might be deemed inappropriate and punishable by law. Today, there is no law or handbook citing the responsibilities of upholding human value when faced with this novel technology for communicative means. There is value in being able to understand when it is appropriate to delve into technological means of communication and when it is not appropriate.

Engineer and Theorist Barrington writes that technology is becoming the normative way of communicating. Conversation *with* machines “separates thought from feeling” (Nevitt, 226). In High School, I remember being with my friends during a break in soccer practice, and they were messing with a new phone. This was 2008, and it was a big thing for the phone to be able to connect to AskJeeves and Google (online websites). My friend started asking intimate questions to this online database, “Hey, Jeeves, how tall are you? . . . Jeeves, do you like me? . . . Jeeves, are you hot?” I don’t think my friend would have ever asked any of these questions, save the first one, to the guy she liked in High School. Perhaps, conversing with a machine does indeed separate emotions from mindfulness. If this is the case, one cannot go through life using communication technology alone.

There are other implications when dealing with technology that seem to be

revising the human element. Because “people construct their identities . . . by the way they make use of the things around them,” we can use Nevitt’s understanding of how media works to explain the “huge” ripple effects that are transforming society and individuals today (Davidson and Lytle, 120, 123 respectively). Technological media sometimes acts like the “*memoria*” (what Nevitt deems the “instant accessibility”) of the once vocal word (Nevitt, 219). The results of this instant accessibility, like Nevitt explains when urging us to “anticipat[e] the effects of every medium,” sends us a message to expect everything as instant (226). If a person continues opting for technological satisfaction (instantaneous gratification), then real-time interactions might seem to that same person as less engaging. This means that this individual would find more of his or her time spent on virtual media, instead of investigating life skills that take time and energy to develop. There are consequences to instant-gratification. “The violent psychic and social consequences of information traveling at the speed of light via media” exceed the reciprocation of any user, which means that being “on” all the time, being connected constantly, and even responding to every buzz of the phone can lead to remarkable behavior (223).

When Nevitt explains trying to “anticipat[e] the effects of every medium” in a world full of stampeding information, or when we try to “us[e] all our wits and senses logically, analogically, and ecologically” to sort through “every” medium, are we not striving to become more like our technology that sorts through every single thing it is fed (Nevitt, 226)? The human brain seems more fine-tuned to work selectively and for relevance; therefore, anticipating and sorting every piece of information cannot be accomplished. Nevitt also suggests that grapevines (large networks) are becoming the

norm for human interactions (226). Facebook or online forums are good examples of a grapevine. This statement is interesting because human interactions should not take place on large scales all the time. If they did, we would not be able to resolve our need for intimate relationships on a personal level. “I heard it through the grapevine” was the old adage about getting information, and it was normally associated with an anonymous source. Perhaps, a solution for the problem of using communication media too much to connect with others could be found in the practicality of focusing on an individual’s action in relation to communication technology (instead of Nevitt’s collective focus). While we are aware that technology is a medium, it would be beneficial to tweak one of Nevitt’s ideas in light of the 21st century. I propose that Nevitt’s idea, “Today, communication demands not only anticipating the effects of every medium but also using all our wits and senses logically, analogically, and ecologically,” needs a rewrite as: “Today, communication demands [our individual awareness of its various mediating effects, so that we can, as individuals, temper our consumption of information by engaging the world on a personal level when possible and on a collective level when necessary]” (226, creative license mine).

Stripping away the networks, we can realize that we are individuals who make up the systems. Lanier argues that “certain . . . internet designs of the moment—not the internet as a whole—tend to pull us into life patterns that gradually degrade the ways in which each of us exists as an individual” (Lanier, ix-x). Nevitt’s ideas, even though critiqued, are helpful in explaining that the human experience of communication technology is summarized by “*information* and *uncertainty*,” which are unified principles (Nevitt, 222). It is known that information is usually pursued in hopes of clearing up

uncertainties. Discovering that uncertainty is tied to data is a critical explanation of the information revolution, for if we are turning a new page and searching for certainty in information, it seems that this pursuit may not always be fulfilled in this way.

One of the truisms of information can be found in a song called, *Waiting on the World to Change* by John Mayer. He calls out, “When they own the information, they can bend it all they want” (*Continuum*, Mayer). Sometimes, it is uncertain who actually owns particular information when faced with an endless system of it. For instance, a quote can be perpetuated across the Internet, and it is not necessarily true that a certain person quoted that phrase. This is why there are now websites dedicated to debunking false information (*e.g.* Snopes.com), or those dedicated to perpetuating false information (*e.g.* Theonion.com). Information, falsifiable *and* verifiable, it seems, is suited to “inform” at the basic level, but even more, to shape. This is curious, and I’d like to go back to my Latin 101 class to excavate this idea. “*Informare*,” meaning “to shape” or “to form,” ideologically or physically, is the basis of English words, “inform” and “information.” Lanier describes information as inanimate, “alienated experience” (Lanier, 28). Information, then, is separate from our own experiences *until* that information is itself experienced by us. To “mean something,” Lanier explains, the information must be personal (29). It is important to understand that information itself is not alive, but it has the capacity to shape or influence things. Just as fire is not “alive,” only assigned such a name by its flickering likeness of animation, a thing does not have to be alive in order to have influence, as in burning or heating. There is a line between the human type of aliveness and the created-thing’s type of aliveness. We create things in our own image, even information, but that does not mean that information continues to perpetuate our

own self-image, or even captures the whole of our own image.

Information has the capacity to shape its originators. Carr summarizes that “[media] supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought . . . and what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation” (Carr, 6). Contemplation is the ability to think deeply. That is fundamental to being human, as Descartes so eloquently instructed. Nietzsche too suggested that the equipment we use affects the form of our thoughts (19).

These thoughts inform (yes, shape) our values. Nevitt uses a description of “how the interplay of a medium and its program achieves an intended *effect* with its ‘public’” by creating a “public to suit its purpose” (Nevitt, 222, italics in original). For instance, in a Capitalist society (i.e. America), the desire for capital drives a great deal of enterprises, including those that are technological. It is not a foreign concept that businesses are built on the demands of its culture. It seems that technological functions can “create a public” by utilizing an individual’s emotional need (human connection, say) in order to market a product. When we look at the advertising market in America, there are some images and commercials using the implicit propaganda: “You need this new device to stay connected.” Are certain technologies truly for our own good, or for the good of the companies? Perhaps consumers trade values (e.g. depth in relationships) for a commodity without realizing it. To take another angle, it says something to the consumers if the Communication Executive of Google or the CEOs of some technological businesses won’t let their own children use a product that their firms create (Siani, 148). This means that those who work closely with these products realize that there is something not entirely benign about them.

As the “introduction of new communication media” can quickly transform cultures, it is important to recognize how a transformation curve can bend so acutely (Nevitt, 223). Nevitt explains that “the new science of communication is of percepts rather than concepts,” for in the age of instant information, it is crucial for users, if they want to stay abreast the times, to adapt to the present tense of perception (223). To perceive overrides conceptualization in an age of information. To invent something original in the mind by *using* information requires conceptual generation. Perception, however, can be to experience through the senses, not necessarily with reflection or thought-provocation. Percepts *can* lead to thoughtful processes, but if the objects of perception (*e.g.* technology) have already formed habitual thoughts (*e.g.* “In order to ask my friend how his day was, I’ll text him”), then thought is no longer required to use the object. Perception requires the present tense, the immediacy that media provides. Conception, however, requires reflection and time to bring the mind into the current situation. Today, the brain’s critical analysis skills, those of conception and depth of thought, are influenced by the influx of information.

Nicholas Carr, writer of *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* cites Patricia Greenfield, Doctor of Psychology and specialist concerning the children of the Information Age and their relationships with technology:

[Patricia Greenfield] concluded that ‘every medium develops some cognitive skills at the expense of others.’ Our growing use of the Net and other screen-based technologies has led to the ‘widespread and sophisticated development of visual-spatial skills.’ We can, for example, rotate objects in our minds better than we used to be able to. But our ‘new strengths in visual-spatial intelligence’ go

hand in hand with a weakening of our capacities for the kind of ‘deep processing’ that underpins ‘mindful knowledge acquisition, inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination, and reflection.’ (Carr, 137)

Some things get lost in translation. When information is expected to “inform” in the sense of keeping us “updated” or “in-the-know,” it can now, as discussed, be seen holding hands and kissing with uncertainty, even weakening the depths we can dive inside our own minds. Two things strike me in Greenfield’s list of woes—“mindful knowledge acquisition” and “imagination.” To be mindful of the knowledge that comes into our heads is a discipline. Else, we could be absorbing things like sponges without discretion. As already critiqued, Nevitt’s model of anticipating every medium in all ways cannot hold all the waters of information out there. Without a mindful acquirement of knowledge, our minds may bounce around and take in whatever it perceives without reflection. This is no better than a mirror’s surface capabilities.

Carr realizes that “our ability to learn suffers, and our understanding remains shallow” when the information flying into our cognitive load exceeds the mind’s capacity to process that information (125). Usually, a high cognitive load (a constant inundation of advertisements and data) equals a more distracted person. It is at this point of constant saturation with information that “we become mindless consumers of data” (125). I have often heard a relative explain, “You know—there’s this extraneous information that is just sitting in my brain,” which takes a stand every once in a while when Jeopardy comes on Television. This extraneous information that we have gathered like the super-computers our *brains* are always analogized with is the surface of the iceberg that is the *mind*.

The external expressions of our mental processes are also impressionable by tech use. Our conversations are different than they were thirty years ago. Two things have happened here—our language is acted upon by technological references, and the transmitter for the conversations is new.

Firstly, the changing landscape of language must be noticed. “I have three gigs of data on my Android,” someone might say. In 1910, this sentence would have been confusing. Our language now uses technological jargon, and rightly so, as we both use technology and language to communicate. Just hear us talk: “I’d like to help you get *connected* to their larger *network* of Business Majors,” or “I need to *recharge* my body’s *battery*,” or even: “our brains are *hardwired* differently.” Our descriptive language is plastic to the shapings of technology. Scientists first started describing the human brain in terms of a “thinking machine” in the early twentieth century, around the same time as the rise of computers (23). There seems something uncanny about this analogy. The brain came before the accounts of it being hardwired. The technology came because of the thinking brain. There is something disembodied in comparing the human element to a mechanism that is inanimate and purely fabricated by human hands. Technology also reverses its technical language when users engage its interface. We call them “smart” phones; we give them names; we carry out a conversation with Siri; and, so on. It seems that we are attempting to human-ify our technology. It appears that we try to mechanize, or categorize, our humanity, in like kind with the operations of machines that categorize information.

Secondly, the transmitter of language is also influenced by the technical. As Nietzsche’s friend, Koselitz explained, there is a difference between writing and typing

(18). There is also a difference between talking and “talking.” *Have you talked to him*, one asks. *Yeah*, she says. *I mean—like, in real life?* the first adds. *Oh, no, just—* as she gestures a texting motion instead. This has become the norm, and the hand gestures with thumbs flailing for “text me” have usurped the last generation’s “call me,” which broke down the “I’ll see you tomorrow” conversation our grandparents had while holding hands on a walk. Siani explains that “we’re cultivating an entire society that believes that we don’t *have* to talk anymore, or who believe that posting and texting *are* the same as talking verbally” (Siani, 112, italics in original). What’s the difference? Obviously, the mechanics of talking verbally and texting/posting are completely different, and our thoughts, as described, respond to that difference.

A screen instead of a face makes a large part of the distinction. Carr proposes this idea: “In the long run a medium’s content matters less than the medium itself in influencing how we think and act” (Carr, 3). The medium matters. It sounds like Marshall McLuhan has found his progeny. Marshall McLuhan, philosopher of communication theory, came up with a phrase in 1964 that has remained a *caveat* to the *emptor* ever since: “The medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1). McLuhan explains that blindness occurs from focusing too much on the content of our communication technologies and not enough on the actual mediating message of the things themselves (2). “The ‘content’ of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind,” says McLuhan (8). We all have a watchdog that can test content before it enters. However, if we are so “distracted” by the content of a message that we forget that the message has been mediated in the first place, that mediation tool has entered into our mental landscapes without having been strip-searched by our watchdogs. To disassemble

such a distraction, being aware of the message's mediation is crucial. To be mediated, a message is extended over a transmitter that gives a particular impression (even if an unconscious one) of the sender.

Elaine Scarry, author of *A Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, explains that “a made object is a projection of the human body” (Scarry, 281). A made object can be as simple as a hammer or as complex as a cell phone. Within communication technology, the projection of the human body is a psychological desire for certainty, for information, for togetherness, for relationship, and other things. Software designers for the Net and social networking tools admit to making up “extensions to your being . . . These become the structures by which you connect to the world and other people” (Lanier, 5-6). In a similar way, social media is like the extension of mental processes. As we know, communication on a face-to-face level is convoluted with the transmitter, receiver, and distractions around the interaction. To add communication media, most times without facial codes, intonation cues, and even empathic possibilities creates a new stage of conversation that loses some of these human elements.

For instance, when I create a Facebook page as my profile on the World Wide Web, then I am letting it be a “me” substitute in the digital arena. While myself is not physically or mentally present, “myself” is digitally present to whomever will be at whims to view it. Creating myself as a technological entity is an interesting concept, and Scarry brings to bear the idea that in creating an object, our interaction with that object “remakes the makers” (Scarry, 307).

When an object is first imagined (or, more properly said, if a desire is first

recognized), then “projection of sentient *desire*” foments (284, italics in original). An object is created (*e.g.* technology) in order to aid the human desire in meeting its satisfaction. As is often the case, when the process continues, the technology becomes more advanced. The element of humanness, though, can get lost in advancements. In example, at an early stage, the phone might have been seen an extension of the ear and mouth, for speaking and listening. Now, the cell phone has become an extension of our hands, which are not normally used for speaking, unless by the eloquence of sign language, and even less for listening. Each of these advancements on the phone and the Web was at first an extension of our thoughts. Each advancement, though, while housing human capabilities, is further away from its principal creator, or as Scarry proposes: “the path of reciprocity has contracted back from its human source” (Scarry, 260). This means that, as receivers on the end of technological ingenuity, what we are receiving is less human, less original than before. Scarry’s point here is profound:

In [the objects’] tendency to give rise to successively sublimated versions of themselves they systematically eliminate from their interior the picture of the human body, [and] make progressively more unrecognizable their resemblance to the site of their own creation (325).

When a made thing diminishes the humanity behind its construction, it can become a natural aspect of a culture full of artificial things (325). It can then be said of this native entity that, “if we use it enough, it changes who we are, as individuals and as a society” (Carr, 3). This change is like a revolution—complex with multifarious turns of goods and bads together.

Any technical introduction into society has the capacity to change life habits,

thought patterns, and values (McLuhan, 11-12). How we use these devices makes a difference for our values, and for ourselves. For instance, when I post pictures of myself on Facebook, I don't want pictures that appear unflattering; I un-tag myself in those. I want pictures that make me look beautiful because enough "likes" can help my self-esteem. Now, if someone else sees just these good images, then they would be hard-pressed not to think that my life looked wonderful. Behind the scenes, though, my life is a life that is lived in the non-virtual spaces, prone to trip-ups and blemishes and hard things. I probably don't post much of that on Facebook, though. We have a whole generation that can keep up appearances and are champions of making themselves out of pieces (*i.e.* the good angles). It seems that authenticity takes a hit here. Only parts of us are communicating.

I think that it is important to be aware of the parts of us, the particular media, which communicate. The Facebook example creates more questions: Do we value authenticity? Do we value creating something better than our reality? Both are excellent things, but when our projection of creating something better than our reality becomes our reciprocation (the thing we receive consistently and out of balance with the other—authenticity), then we seem to lose something by getting further from our first aim of betterment *with* candor. The whole person (*i.e.* authentic person) sometimes gets separated from authenticity in the translation of crafting something better than reality. When this is the case, the relationship with technology becomes as Carr says:

Even when I was away from my computer, I yearned to check e-mail, click links, do some Googling. I wanted to be connected. Just as Microsoft Word had turned

me into a flesh-and-blood word processor, the Internet, I sensed, was turning me into something like a high-speed data-processing machine. (Carr, 16)

Authenticity becomes defined by technology, that is: authenticity becomes pseudo-authenticity, or the highest authenticity that can be provided by a machine.

Mechanical “authenticity”—that is, being true to the form of mechanical procedures—is distant from human authenticity. As Scarry admits, when “sentience and self-extension . . . split apart,” it is as if the “two locations of self have begun to work against one another” (Scarry, 263). As aforementioned, when I use Facebook as my virtual substitute when I am not mentally and physically present, my virtual self is in competition with my real self in the physical present. This might account for why I feel the need to check my Facebook account and see how my virtual profile is faring. Consciousness of our media’s consequences (good or bad) and the knowledge that our made objects are supposed extensions of ourselves must be jointly recognized in order to, ultimately, not work against our real world selves.

To be split, as Scarry defines, or recreating ourselves and living only half-lives seems a tale fit for dystopian novels. Technology, at its simplest and finest, is man’s tool. Technology has the capacity to give temporary validation; it can act as a learning tool; it can help those of us who are introverted express our feelings; and, it can serve as extensions of ourselves when our present capacity cannot meet the needs of the moment. Technology has also been imagined as a destructive weapon. No one needs to look further than the H-bomb to recognize this principal fact. Technology can be both tool and weapon in its agency.

This weapon may itself be modified into a tool, or the tool back into a weapon,

and it is the identity of the two, as well as the profound mental distance separating them, that must for a moment be held steadily visible. The weapon and the tool seem at moments indistinguishable, for they may each reside in a single physical object . . . and may be quickly transformed back and forth, now into the one, now into the other. At the same time, however, a gulf of meaning, intention, connotation, and tone separates them. (173)

A weapon deconstructs humanity, and still, to connect one person to another is a great tool. This can be confusing. To go back to the designer of technological programs again, Lanier says: “The Net doesn’t design itself. We design it . . . The point should never be the glorification of the tool” (Lanier, 55, 59). Glorification of a tool is when the tool has the potential to become a weapon. If I idolize my cell phone, then I won’t hesitate to pull it out every time it goes off in order to answer *whatever* bings, even if a human being is in mid-conversation with me. This sends a message louder than a text. McLuhan’s explanation of this is poignant:

For those parts of ourselves that we thrust out in the form of new invention are attempts to counter or neutralize collective pressures and irritations. But the counter-irritant usually proves a greater plague than the initial irritant, like a drug habit . . . And a technological extension of our bodies designed to alleviate physical stress can bring on psychic stress that may be much worse. (McLuhan, 14)

In order to be connected and be in-the-know, we created social media. But, in order to get connected, sometimes this leads to disconnecting from reality. Siani’s research has shown that spending more time with a screen (*i.e.* McLuhan’s technology that can bring

“psychic stress”) can separate us from the “authenticity of our raw human interactions,” and by so doing, “diminish the actual human experience and the growth potential of intimacy, character, sensitivity, empathy, understanding, patience, and fulfillment” (Siani, 225). Empathy is a large part of social life, and to diminish that connecting agent seems to diminish the human being. Lanier explains: “when we ask people to live their lives through our models, we are potentially reducing life itself” (Lanier, 70). Life’s point is not to reduce itself but to experience fully what richness it holds.

In example: scanning the radio one day, I heard the words, “Invisible girlfriend.” There is an Internet business called Invisiblegirlfriend.com (which now accommodates Invisibleboyfriend.com). Now, before the description is read, realize that this is an extreme example of “reducing life itself” (70). However, it is also important to understand that this business is made possible because of mass communication media. This business is used by individuals who desire to make up a relationship in order to fool other people (those pesky relatives, who continually ask about getting that girl/boyfriend) or, as I like to believe, to fool themselves. The website explains: “The idea picked up traction at a Startup Weekend and we decided to run with it, creating a website, prototype, and business model in just a few short days” (*Invisible Girlfriend*). Two things are noteworthy here: “we decided to run with it,” and “in just a few short days.” This is a good example of Lanier’s earlier statement about the consequences of a “haphazard, accidental” design that does not exercise foresight (Lanier, 22). *Invisible Girlfriend*’s catch-phrase is: “Finally. A girlfriend your family can believe in. Invisible Girlfriend gives you real-world and social proof that you’re in a relationship – even if you’re not – so you can get back to living life on your own terms” (*Invisible Girlfriend*). This business

lets users choose the pictures of their potential significant other, create the stories behind the fabricated personality (which the users also create), and even exchange text messages and pictures with an anonymous employee (the employee does not have to be the same person; the employee just needs to have the same script with the same pictures in order to please the paying customer). As “the service is meant to simulate a real relationship,” the FAQs page attempts to answer questions like why anyone would “need” this; the answer, it seems, is that “an Invisible Girlfriend can help you manage real-world distractions” (*Invisible Girlfriend*). Funny, however, that one of the questions not posed is: “What happens when my friends want to meet her?” There is no basis for this relationship in reality, except for the capital exchange—an invisible relationship for money. As Scarry tells it, the return for a perpetually advanced technology “has contracted back from its human source . . . its referential powers” now referring to entities “either absent from or only marginally participating in its actual creation” (Scarry, 260). The tool has gone from connecting information to exchanging fees for services. Relationships are usually great enterprises, but the relationship is not what is being sold here. It is a “service,” a paid exchange, where it “seems a bit far-fetched” that someone might fall in love with this virtual exchange (*Invisible Girlfriend*). However, Siani has said that we form bonds (emotional ones) with inanimate objects (Siani, 57). So, if this virtual exchange “simulates” human experience and is built on human principles of interaction, then what does this mean for the psyche of the user? Arguably, the individual’s emotions and psyche are exploited for his/her money value. I will go ahead to invoke Siani, who says,

The philosophy is to look at the world we’re in, to understand that our digital devices are here to stay, and to incorporate technological advances in the

*connection economy in a way that serves authentic human values. In other words, **people first**. We also need to empower ourselves to reject new technologies that do not serve us well. (Siani, 162, bold in original)*

Short and sweet—let us value humanness.

In a less extreme, more commonplace example, social media sites can also mediate experience and give less than a full picture of reality. Lanier finds a crucial illustration in the idea of “friends” on a social networking site. He explains:

Am I accusing all those hundreds of millions of users of social networking sites of reducing themselves in order to be able to use the services? Well, yes, I am. I know quite a few people, mostly young adults but not all, who are proud to say that they have accumulated thousands of friends on Facebook. Obviously, this statement can only be true if the idea of friendship is reduced. A real friendship ought to introduce each person to unexpected weirdness in the other. Each acquaintance is an alien, a well of unexplored difference in the experience of life that cannot be imagined or accessed in any way but through genuine interaction. The idea of friendship in database-filtered social networks is certainly reduced from that. (Lanier, 53)

A medium might condense real interactions into less-than-life statuses, further capable or reducing the actual person into a mechanical form.

Larry Rosen, researcher and author of *iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming Its Hold on Us*, explains the reduction this way:

We are, according to the signs and symptoms in the current American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV-TR), suffering from

several clinical and personality disorders along what are known as Axis I, or mood disorders (e.g., depression, ADHD, schizophrenia), and Axis II, or personality disorders (e.g., antisocial personality disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, obsessive-compulsive personality disorder). (Rosen, 5)

Using technology incessantly can cause observable disturbances in any individual. Rosen explains that there are a few reasons why communication technology can shape our personalities and compel us to act differently:

- 1. They are simple and easy to use.*
- 2. They exploit our senses by drawing us toward their appealing and entrancing brilliant visual displays and crystal clear sounds.*
- 3. They make us feel as though we are anonymous since nobody can see us.*
- 4. They exploit the fact that any communication without physical cues allows us to feel unencumbered and unconcerned about the impact we are having on the human being receiving our message.*
- 5. They are always available through many devices. (9)*

Exploitation, anonymity, simplicity, and constant availability are the big words Carr uses. Anonymity, as it turns out, has led to forms of online bullying. Called “trolls,” these individuals can get on media sites or connect to a target’s cell phone and send hateful messages (Lanier, 60). This has led to destructive behavior by the receiver of these messages, such as, but not limited to, suicide (60). Seemingly neutral constructs like cell phones are bringing about salient formations.

Whether it carries the gravity of suicide, or the less-intense distractedness aforementioned, technology is affective. To quote Carr: “The Net’s interactivity gives us

powerful new tools for finding information, expressing ourselves, and conversing with others. It also turns us into lab rats constantly pressing levers to get tiny pellets of social or intellectual nourishment” (Carr, 117). Social nourishment is that feeling of satisfaction when connecting to another person. When you get a validating response from them, it’s a great pick-me-up. The desire for more of the good things in life has never been a foreigner to the human condition. In terms of the neural stimulation having to do with compulsive behavior, “research shows that this constant checking, this looking for a quick hit of dopamine (the brain chemical that makes us feel good), is behavior as compulsive as a gambler being unable to walk away from a slot machine” (Siani, 126). Some of us might say, “Hey, I’m good without my phone,” but the majority of my peers (college-age) are nervous without being attached to this “lifeline.” As this “inability to be away from [our technology]” for some of us is actual, it is important to investigate this reality (Rosen, 15).

For the first time, technology has showed that Internet addicts have the same brain chemistry as drug and alcohol addicts . . . Chinese researchers found abnormal white matter in the brains of those who admitted they feel addicted to technology. It looked like the same physiological characteristics as people who had a clinical addiction to alcohol. The study states, ‘IAD (Internet Addiction Disorder) may share psychological and neural mechanisms with other types of substance addiction and impulse control disorders. (Siani, 99)

Put basically, the things we use can form the actual material of our brains. It is no myth that what we listen to and what we watch can shape us, and maybe even desensitize us to realities like destruction (if we love high-action movies) or drugs and alcohol (if we enjoy

certain rap music), for instances. The mind, the extra-corporeal substance housed in the brain, can also be “rewired,” to use more self-aware jargon from the Information Age. As Rosen suggests:

Overreliance on gadgets and websites has created an enmeshed relationship with technology [and] this relationship can cause significant problems in our psyche, what I call an iDisorder . . . we are being compelled to use technologies that are so user friendly that the very use fosters our obsessions, dependence, and stress reactions . . . Our dependence on technology and our inability to be away from it for even a few minutes is just one clear indicator that we are not functioning at our best level. If our minds are always worrying about what we are missing then how can we focus attention on what we are getting? (Rosen, 4-5, 15)

If we become over-reliant on a person, then we might be described as lacking in autonomy. A similar situation can be said of overdependence upon technology—one who relies too heavily upon technological means of communicating and operating on a day-to-day basis just might miss real-time and its affluent riches for real-life situations. Scarry explains that “the issue of reciprocity between persons is a complex and important subject . . . Whatever its characteristics, they cannot be derived from the model of the relation between persons and objects” (Scarry, 318). Life in the real world differs from life mediated by machine, albeit machines can be useful for real world applications.

So, why not use technology to solve technological issues? That’s an excellent question. But, before technology can even be born, there is something that precedes its existence. It is what Scarry calls, “imagining” (324). For, “if [objects of desire] are not themselves sensorially present to vision, they will present themselves to the imagination,

and will motivate either a search (an alteration in the ground of the world) or an act of material invention (an introduction of a new object onto the ground of the world)” (167, parenthetical in original). Making begins with conceptualizing, not perceiving.

Technology, as a man-made thing, began with the idea. So, why not tackle this problem from a new angle—from its origins? Communication technology was born from the pursuit of information, and as a preoccupation with that information, but as noted, “information underrepresents reality” (Lanier, 69). We live in reality, so something other than information needs to bring light to this phenomenon. Something that goes further back than information, then, is conceptualization, and its processes. The processes of conceptualization are equally abstract and yet possess concrete applications. To be effective in the solution of real-world problems, imagination incorporates creativity and invention by the artistic impulse—that is, by design.

For this, McLuhan can give us a starting point:

The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance.

The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception. (McLuhan,

8)

The “serious artist,” is the designer who is capable of countering social ills by using imaginative finesse. Artists may be the designers of the future.

The Artist

Who is an artist? According to McLuhan, the artist is an individual, “in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time. He is the man of integral awareness” (McLuhan, 13). The artist understands what the medium’s message is; that is, the true (“serious”) artist can understand how a system of new information operates and what this means for the future. He or she can navigate the waters of the Information Age by using the acuties of the mind. The artist conceptualizes and then sends this concept into the social sphere. This concept made concrete (in the real world) then creates a new beginning by engaging another’s mental inquisitions. This process of conceptual exchange continues by creating bigger formations than first imagined by the artists themselves. As a side effect (or direct effect), this engagement is able to join an individual experiencer back to his or her mental processes when other means have failed.

At the simplest level, the artist is a thinker. McLuhan gives the artist two sobriquets: the “serious” and the “dedicated” (8, 17). In order to be a “serious artist,” one must first be thoughtful. In order to be a “dedicated artist,” one must be determined and passionate. McLuhan realizes that the “serious artist” works with his or her intellect. For the rest of this discussion, we will adopt McLuhan’s phraseology of the “serious artist.” A serious artist is a person equipped to create a form that can match a concept, which itself has been through various rounds of wash and wear in the crucible of the mind. The artist is someone who possesses intelligence, creativity, awareness, and the skills for real-world applications of these entities. Art, as in essence conceptual, comes to the world in a real form, whether that is found in the drippy action painting of Jackson Pollock, the

beautiful realities represented by Henry Ossawa Tanner, or the unique brushwork of Ren Xiong. Art has various forms, but it is always extant from the idea.

Art is the execution of original thought to encourage individual thought. As defined by a dictionary, art is the “expression or application of human creative skill and imagination” . . . esteemed for its “emotional power,” and expressing “important ideas and feelings” (*Merriam-Webster*). Art is both an abstract and concrete entity. Art has a theoretical angle as well as a real-world application through its processes. For instance, if I desire to design a creature with three wings, a head resembling a feathery dragon, and so the imagination goes on, that thought takes up space in reality when I make it real by physical execution (*i.e.* a drawing of the imagining).

Art is valuable in both its conceptions and applications. McLuhan creates an interesting definition of art when he says, “I am curious to know what would happen if art were suddenly seen for what it is, namely, exact information of how to rearrange one’s psyche in order to anticipate the next blow from our own extended faculties” (McLuhan, 14). This means that art can be the shield to extinguish the harms of new technologies because art has within itself the “exact information,” the faithful facts, of how to deal with the novelties around us by thinking creatively. In a sense, it seems that art does use information to tackle information. Art’s information, though, is imaginatively shaped, which means that it becomes meaningful by adding the individual’s experience, or thoughts, to the data. This experience, or thought, is packaged by the elements of an art piece.

It is known that the hyper-use of technology can create in us disorders and displacements of our values that now refer to other values (*i.e.* capital, recognition for

recognition's sake, and more). When *The Iron Lady* was in movie theatres, there was an inspiring scene when the late Margaret Thatcher was listening to a young lady. The young lady explained that it was because of Thatcher that she herself was inspired to *be* someone and strive for an official position in the British government. Thatcher was pensive for a moment before she calmly explained to the lady, "It used to be about trying to *do* something. Now it's about trying to *be* someone" (*The Iron Lady*). The point is: if we have in our world so many people who are striving to be someone, then what becomes of the world? The world has less of the stuff of transformation and more of the "getting ahead" mindset that leaves the rest of humanity behind. The world would no longer be about humanity; it would only be about the self. Rosen has already explained that narcissism is one of the byproducts of too much reliance upon technology. It makes sense that in searching to *be* someone rather than doing something powered by a great idea demeans thought and promotes ascendance to the highest tier of societally-assigned value, no matter how fluctuant that tower's topmost level may be (*i.e.* name, money, station, etcetera). This displacement that is taking place needs a practice capable of foresight in order to develop good social consequences from technology.

No society has ever known enough about its actions to have developed immunity to its new extensions or technologies. Today we have begun to sense that art may be able to provide such immunity. (McLuhan, 13)

McLuhan addresses the artist as the only one in historical example who has catalyzed "a conscious adjustment of the various factors of personal and social life to new extensions" (13). How can this be so? Can't others be transforming agents as well? It is easy to forget what a "serious" artist is in the context of the 21st century. The serious artist means more

than merely one with the stereotypical paintbrush and beret. The serious artist is the person of vision, the thinker and the doer wrapped in one. McLuhan explains:

The artist picks up the message of cultural and technological challenge decades before its transforming impact occurs. For in the electric age there is no longer any sense in talking about the artist's being ahead of his time. Our technology is, also, ahead of its time, if we reckon by the ability to recognize it for what it is. To prevent undue wreckage in society, the artist tends now to move from the ivory tower to the control tower of society. Just as higher education is no longer a frill or luxury but a stark need of production and operational design in the electric age, so the artist is indispensable in the shaping and analysis and understanding of the life of forms, and structures created by electric technology. (13)

The artist, by being thought-initiator, is able to aid the understanding of his or her audience, or “co-creative[s],” who are able to take up the thread of dialogue begun by the artist and make reparations to their culture through use of the original mind each one possesses (Sanders and Stappers, 5).

Skepticism on the subject of artist as social change agent is a usual visitor to these notions, so we will not pretend to brush the criticism under the rug:

The percussed victims of the new technology have invariably muttered clichés about the impracticality of artists and their fanciful preferences. But in the past century it has come to be generally acknowledged that, in the words of Wyndham Lewis, ‘The artist is always engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he is the only person aware of the nature of the present.’ Knowledge of this simple fact is now needed for human survival. The ability of the artist to

sidestep the bully blow of new technology of any age, and to parry such violence with full awareness, is age-old. Equally age-old is the inability of the percussed victims, who cannot sidestep the new violence, to recognize their need of the artist. (13)

Two things are happening in the age of information: firstly, serious artists are sometimes viewed as impractical and unnecessary; and secondly, serious artists *are* practical and necessary. Because artists are seen as impractical, or as a cliché might put it: with their “heads in the clouds,” then the culture that requires the artist does not see its yawning need for fear of becoming, perhaps, primitive (just as science had incorrectly deemed the right side of the brain, from which the artist works most, as inferior to the logical, left hemisphere {Pink, 14}). However, it is interesting that without the artist, society and its individuals become prone to more problems, for the thinker has been cast from the vision. As artists are crucial to solving real problems and have the capacity to recognize issues before they appear, it is odd that society has placed them, sometimes, at the end of a totem pole of professions, “blind[ed]” to the value of the serious thinker (McLuhan, 2). But, how can this be? Don’t people say that artists don’t make much; they don’t contribute practical solutions to societal problems; they are the dreamers without a foot on the ground?

To the first question, it can easily be said that the same system that might not pay the artist much value is the same system that requires much for the next best device. To this, we can say: How many times have we gotten a new device and been disappointed? “I hate this phone,” my friend said the other day. “Why’s that?” I responded. “It just . . . doesn’t do what I want it to do,” he set the phone down. And, as if for the first time, I

think, my friend saw regular people who were preoccupied by phones without a consciousness for the world around them. People were together but not together. Their bodies were present, but they were not fully there. The point is—as Scarry has explained—there are some extensions of human beings that are dissatisfactory because they create more of an expectation than a satisfaction, *and* companies desiring profit more than anything else are selling this “next best thing” (Scarry, 319). Lanier makes a great point that three different failures can occur within the technological sphere when humans are not the main concern: firstly, there is a “spiritual failure,” where an individual’s experiences are no longer seen as valid and faith or “hope” in gadgets usurp faith in people; secondly, “behavioral” failure occurs when people feel devalued whilst participating in technological formats, acting in direct response to this indifference by taking on indifference themselves; thirdly, an “economic” failure ensues (Lanier, 75). The economic concern with profit overrides the concern for human beings sometimes. It is not hard to see this in other things in this world. The point of the artist is to display that dissatisfaction as it is and turn hopes for reparations, as my friend illustrated, toward the human element. In his dissatisfaction with the phone, my friend looked up to the surrounding people. There is much to be found in looking up sometimes. Here is the broader point: the same society that is making a profit from the sell of social technologies that may or may not “serve us well” by connection or distraction is the same society making the value call on artists (Siani, 162). To put it another way, “if money is flowing to advertising instead of musicians, journalists and artists, then a society is more concerned with manipulation than truth or beauty” (Lanier, 83). (It seems apparent that while sometimes society can sculpt wonderful values and uphold them well, some things

are deprived of their sense values when weighed on a societal scale.) The thinker is an admirable character, for instance, but in the real world with manifold people, the system for change oftentimes overlooks them in its age-old structures that may feed inertia or the status quo. Serious artists, however, are valuable because they are serious thinkers *and* innovators. Siani says, “The creative process, whether it’s in the arts or sciences, cannot be stifled” (Siani, 126). Something that cannot be stifled is arguably resilient and stronger than a place-value set upon its shoulders. When a serious artist is seen as he or she really is, then this is the start of a beautiful friendship between practical solutions and creative innovations. We’ll get to this soon, in Chapter 2.

For now, the skeptic might still see that artists with practical solutions are scarce. While this may be true, there are various places starting to utilize artists and designers. Artists and designers, in this thesis, are sometimes synonymous. Both, when denoting the “serious artist” as a designer, recognize the capacity for imaginative inventiveness that can create true solutions for social issues. Not every artist is a designer because there are those who use their creativity not for ameliorative social purposes, but every designer is arguably an artist whose practice reaches into the social realm for dialogic and transformative purposes; this artist, then, is the “serious” one (McLuhan, 8).

While I was on hold with my doctor’s office last week, I heard, “Many patients complain about ‘chemo-brain,’” and as I listened, I realized that this was a creative advertisement. A hospital was utilizing a serious artistic idea in order to ameliorate a harsh side effect. The electronic voice told me that on such-and-such a date, people were gathering at what’s-it and participating in “mindful doodling,” which has been proven to stimulate focus and aid concentration that is diminished by chemo. The best part about

it—“No artistic talent necessary.” Someone had to think about how drawing, a creative activity, could help a harmful side effect. Plus this, transformation designers and social change artists are contributing to real change around the globe (more to come on these guys in Chapter 2). The Design Council from the UK, artists in Vancouver, Canada, and even Washington in the United States of America, are doing some of the heavy lifting when it comes to transforming society for the better through design. Are artists dreamers that need a wake-up call? The dreamer part is absolutely true; however, the serious artist is usually up before dawn or awake after the sun falls to sleep, purposefully at work.

As serious artists and designers create expressions from their ideas, it is sometimes hard to understand exactly what they do. Jill Bennett, writer of *Empathic Vision*, an exposition on artistic theories, explains that it is more important to ask what art *does* than what it means, as there are miscellaneous meanings behind various presentiments (Bennett, 130). Bennett suggests that visual arts “might be understood as *constitutive* theoretical discourses,” which is significant to say because art usually comes to theory as its descendant, not its origin (150, italics in original). Bennett expresses the idea, at the birth of the new millennium, that a “radical rethinking of the relationship of art to thought” is beginning, one that allows theory to be derived from art itself (150). Art is coming to present a theoretical discourse of its own. The serious artist’s work is not just in making “pretty” pictures, but also in activating his or her own time by challenging the assumed ideologies.

Dick Higgins, author of *Modernism Since Postmodernism*, refers to the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times that artists are usually eager to expose (Higgins, 6). Higgins makes a note that art “*usually does* reflect its time,” which means regardless of period, the art

within that age will echo its era (6, italics in original). The artist is the one who can effectively hold the mirror to the world and go, “Look at yourself. How does that make you feel?”

Not to get too psychiatric, but emotions are important parts of a human being. There is an old idea suggesting that change occurs when a moral crisis happens. This moral crisis happens when the conscience twists and finds itself uncomfortable in a situation deemed wrong. Truly, the devaluing of humans and humanness is a wrong that can be brought into the light by thoughtful expression. In some cases our technology seems to have a “numbing or narcotic effect” that cleaves thought from emotion (McLuhan, 11). If our technology can separate thought from feeling, and can bring about numbing effects to the ills of society, the part of art that is most important is the emotive aspect (Nevitt, 226). For, art has, then, the capacity to reintroduce thought to emotion and to create the opposite of anesthesia (the loss of sensation), if used properly, with aesthetics.

Bennett explains that “feeling is a catalyst for critical inquiry or deep thought” (Bennett, 7). Emotion is an “effective trigger for profound thought” because it guides an involuntary engagement (7). In other words, art that produces emotion has the potential to pull the witness away from distractions in order to focus on a profound, relational idea. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze explains that: “more important than thought there is ‘what leads to thought’ . . . expressions which force us to think” (7). Social theorist and philosopher, Brian Massumi calls this expression “a shock to thought” (11). When faced with emotions that exist due to viewing a picture can lead to contemplative consequences. Like an AED machine, the expression of the serious artist/designer can be employed to

shock the mind back to “‘deep processing’ that underpins ‘mindful knowledge acquisition, inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination, and reflection’” (Carr, 137). These things, as aforementioned by Patricia Greenfield, are things numbed by the hyper-use of technology.

The designer does not shy away from the things that seem like “dis-benefits” to society; he or she takes these into account, perhaps works with them, and finds an expression to situate the dis-benefit in view of those who are exposed to its influence (Kranzberg, 547). The situation created here by the artist is philosophical in nature, comprising rhetoric—and I hope you forgive me in my critique of philosophical rhetoric—but as a more *useful* persuasion and an *aesthetic* that leads to *exchange*, which finally forms a *practical solution* by way of continually constructing a novel ideology to be carried out. Constructing a new ideology in which to place living, breathing human beings requires hard-hitting concepts by way of critiquing those already in place and presenting a solution (this is the first rule of business, Siani instructs; that is: never critique a problem without then offering a solution {Siani, 30}).

Concepts are the roots of solutions. Scarry calls this the “problem solving strategies of imagining” (Scarry, 324). She says:

By transporting pain out onto the external world, that external environment is deprived of its immunity to, unmindfulness of, and indifference toward the problems of sentience. (285)

It seems, at least for our topic, that societies driven by hyper-technology can be “immune” to the “problems of sentience.” This means that if the mind were to be “shock[ed] to thought,” it might be found mulling over the fact that something both

damaging and beneficial relates to technology (Bennett, 11). To be conscious of a problem is the first step to solving that problem. The serious artist, then, can create by conceptualization and formal innovation a work that resists the mindless acceptance of information by the viewer but innovates interaction by starting a conversation. This sort of art can be a call-and-response. By transporting “pain”—that is, a desire not met—out onto the visible canvas of the world, the world then begins to find itself conscious of the pain caused by that unmet desire. For Bennett, “The artist does not merely *describe* an inner experience but allows such experience to fold back into the world in a manner that can inform” (56, italics in original). That is, the serious artist does not describe or render by representation only but lets information, which has found “meaning” by being experiential to them, strut into the world in a way that can shape its environment by being contemplated by another (Lanier, 29).

This contemplation by another sets up another relationship that is intrinsically important to our discussion—empathy. Art has the capacity to invoke empathy. This relational feeling is a large part of what makes us human. The ability to be involved with another human being with different experiences and to validate or be validated by that other person is an incredible human phenomenon. Empathy in the creative arts stems from the humanness behind the piece—“Empathy as a mode of seeing . . . argues for the capacity of art to transform perception,” which means that art as it should be is a fundamentally relational substance (Bennett, 10-12).

As technology does indeed have a human behind its designs, that human is sometimes untraceable, and thereby unrecognizable as the creator of such a design; in this instance, the relationship between user and human is out of reach, and the technology and

the human begin to relate. The relationship between person and person can be, sometimes, recreated and even created by a piece of empathic art. This can also be said of technology. However, a caveat needs to be made with this comparison—technology as a medium was intended for transmitting information at its beginnings. This creates a different type of interaction than between art and human viewer. Empathic art is created for the purpose of relating to a human being on a thought-provoking level. Technology and art have different intentions, and still the same origin—thought. Each, too, has different effects.

In example, Lanier explains that technology can deal informatively in a realm where human creativity and understanding is treated as “worthless” (Lanier, 99). This may seem harsh, yet he explains this in the way social media sites and text messages display information in the same, generic format. He posits that social media can remove the “risk of creativity” because the design format allows projections of the self in the same uniformity across the spectrum (*i.e.* choose-your-answer data-collecting systems; *i.e.* Facebook, with its equation of profile picture on the left, data below, etcetera) (99). If a system uses sorting methods in order to create a network, then that system does not usually incorporate the autonomous designs of the individual partaking in the system. I cannot effectively create a whole new design of my Facebook page because the design is already setup for me and similar to everyone else’s; no uniqueness can exist in the format. The designs I might have cannot be implemented in this set system. All the system needs is for me to submit my information, not my imagination. This is the surface level of any human being—their information. If our lives are merely inputs of information into gadgets, then we are truly missing big parts of life.

Lanier explains that “any gadget . . . gets boring after a while. But a deepening of meaning is the most intense potential kind of adventure available to us” (192). How do we get a deepening of meaning? This is a very creative question because it requires original mental processes that are not programmable through machines. Creative questions are the basis for creating social change. For Lanier, who has dealt with machines on a wide range and for a long time, explains: “For me, the prospect of an entirely different notion of communication is more thrilling” than the average day using communication technology (192).

The serious artist’s proposition for deeper meaning is authentic dialogue. This artist’s work, which intends to make waves upon the face of the social scene, can be defined as “*unthought knowledge*” (Bennett, 152, italics in original). This “unthought knowledge” is exactly what information is made of. Knowledge that is not yet internalized by an individual human being is simply information. As Lanier has explained, information cannot be meaningful until it is internalized and experienced by the person (Lanier, 29). This meaningful experience that gives rise to conversations with *thought knowledge* explains the artistic situation. When a creative expression arises out of the “*pre-thought* or *already thought*” concept of the individual artist, then this thought provides an expression through which to engage thought, which was previously *unthought* by the audience (Bennett, 152, italics in original). To put it another way, the artist can mine what is absent from the visible world by exposing that it is essential to that visible world. Thought is invisible, but it is crucial to human originality. So too, the artist: he or she is essential to society, but he or she may not be directly seen as that valuable because of the invisible nature of his or her craft (which generates in the mind).

There are various influences upon our mental processes today. The artist is important as one of the influential voices that can bring us to what matters. A focusing agent, the artist can aid mental processes that weaken through the hyper-use of technology. Art that “shocks to thought” can open up a “critical reading” of our culture, by which we can come to solutions (Bennett, 56). Society informs the serious artist, and this artist can shape society. Technology and serious artists both possess agency—neither is neutral. What happens when the two collide?

CHAPTER 2
SYNTHETIC CREATIVITY

Confessions of a Skeptic

To be honest, my career as an artist began with personal skepticism. I had switched from aspirations in aeronautical engineering or physics, and just about everyone looked at me like I was crazy. “So, what are you studying?” And with wide-eyes I would explain, “Well, I was *going* to go into physics, but now I’m studying art.” I felt the need to pronounce to the world the competence of my brain, and the no, I did not just fall four storeys and hit my head on a rock.

As McLuhan has informed, artists haven’t been privy to the valuable camp. And, sometimes, I can understand why. There are various people who go into creative work and then find themselves unable to continue. Two of my favorite cartoon characters, Calvin and Hobbes, can shine a little light on why art is important, regardless of the bad wrap it can get through its practitioners. Calvin is walking along, with his eyes on the sky, and he says to Hobbes, “If people sat outside and looked at the stars each night, I’ll bet they’d live a lot differently.” Hobbes looks at his pal and asks, “How so?” Calvin replies, “Well, when you look into Infinity, you realize that there are more important things than what people do all day” (Bill Watterson, *Calvin and Hobbes*).

This comic example wears big shoes; there *are* more important things. That’s a bold statement. There is more to existence than material pursuits and jobs. There is the

seeking out of life for the Infinite, for meaning.

I think creativity is the “giant leap for mankind” that needs to occur in order to get our man past the atmospheric data that can clutter the real view.

Creative Mechanics

I love physics. The way it looks like common sense wrapped in mathematics early in the morning. Truth be told, I was going to be good at this. And, I still am, because I use it to do my creative functions. “Creative functions” sound like disjointed mathematic formulas strangled by arts and crafts, but it’s more of a way of thinking that gets the imaginative juices flowing over a cultural issue.

To illustrate: when I was younger, I visited Disney World and was absolutely fascinated with the realm of “Imagineering” (imagination as the fuel of engineering); for me, everything fits together this way. Each room on the Imagineering floor housed different technical tools that swiveled, lit up, or allowed each of us to create music, art, or original compositions come-to-life in each space. Every door was labeled with the name of an animator and the little script underneath that read, “*Thought Engineer.*” What, exactly, was a thought engineer?

A thought engineer works first with their imagination, and then expands into the real world by engineering from that thought. An engineer is known to design or build based on logical parameters and an idea. To build upon the brain is exactly the artist’s position as well.

The brain is made of two hemispheres—the left and the right. If we, to invoke

Hegel, use the left side as our thesis (the side most normally designated by linear and systematic thinking), and the right (the side normally known as creative and holistic {not inferior}) as the antithesis, together these operate synthetically (Pink, 14). This is how logic works, or how it *should* work. This, too, is how creativity should function.

To take another view on this, David Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind*, asks us to consider the idea that we are entering into the “Conceptual Age” (2). He explains that the future “belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind” (1). This “different kind of mind” uses both the right and left hemispheres to navigate through the 21st century. The person with the aptitude to use both will be the most successful. This requires the artist to be present in more than just the artistic sphere. This also requires the left-brain engineers to be more imaginative. Pink explains that:

A seismic—though as yet undetected—shift now under way in much of the advanced world . . . [is] moving from an economy and a society built on the logical, linear, computerlike capabilities of the Information Age to an economy and a society built on the inventive, empathic, big-picture capabilities of what’s rising in its place, the Conceptual Age . . . Today, the defining skills of the previous era—the ‘left brain’ capabilities that powered the Information Age—are necessary but no longer sufficient. And the capabilities we once disdained or thought frivolous—the ‘right-brain’ qualities of inventiveness, empathy, joyfulness, and meaning—increasingly will determine who flourishes and who flounders. (2-3)

This hearkens to McLuhan’s call for artists, who are called frivolous but are truly important. In order to flourish in this world of technology and abundance, the artist can be a mainstay for finding satisfaction by delving into the deeper questions. Pink realizes

that the acknowledgment of this shift is going to throw a lot of wrenches into various systems, so he begins by explaining to the skeptic how this shift is occurring: in cultures like America, the UK, and others, who have the Information Age down to a science, there are three forces at work: “material abundance that is deepening our nonmaterial yearnings,” globalization that exports and imports technical professions across the world, and “powerful technologies that are eliminating certain kinds of work altogether” (2). These are a part of why design is taking such a high stand in the marketplace. For, why would people want a regular any old thing when they could have a thing that aesthetically pleases, works just as well, and is the same price? Design, by an original person, makes a thing stand out from other things. With the globalization of technical work, and with a chunk of this technical work being eliminated by computers, the emphasis on original designs and the inimitable human element is being explored more thoroughly.

The total human can never be reduced down to a program. Things like creativity and original design, things that are only accessible by the human mind, are indispensable. High-conceptual skills will be necessary to find deeper meaning in the logical aptitudes, and vice versa; logic will have to enter into the realm of concept in order to exercise foresight in its designs. This is how “creative functions” work. A whole brain approach to current issues requires the artist to be logical and requires the “knowledge worker” (a.k.a. the technical worker) to be creative (2).

Real Holistic Solutions

To use all of our brain is a human approach. This may be an obvious statement, but it is rarely executed. If we think about the mind versus a computer, the computer is a purely logical and informational entity. The mind, however, has more than just logic with its inventiveness, intuition, original ideas, etcetera. Logic and inventiveness together can create amazing things. With these, there are practical, creative solutions that can promote humanness in this age.

Lanier suggests that the “prohuman” approach be given serious thought (Lanier, ix). Lanier gives ideas on “things you can do to be a person instead of a source of fragments to be exploited by others” in his “What is a Person” chapter (21). These are practical ways of being human in relation to technology. For example: “Create a website that expresses something about who you are that won’t fit into the template available to you on a social networking site,” or, “If you are twittering, innovate in order to find a way to describe your internal state instead of trivial external events, to avoid the creeping danger of believing that objectively described events define you, as they would define a machine” (21). In other words, humanness cannot be diluted down and processed through a digital program, so why conform to the digital assumption that life is information? His words, “create” and “innovate,” are the components needed to steer through hyper-information and hyper-mediacy.

When more “humanistic alternatives” are taken “whenever possible,” one is likely to receive a more successful experience in conversing and being validated as a living, individual person (22). Lanier explains that “deemphasizing personhood, and the intrinsic value of an individual’s unique internal experience and creativity, leads to all sorts of maladies” (x). As this is true, the artist in the 21st century has an opportunity to

emphasize the parts of humanity (*i.e.* creativity, originality) that have been discounted in the Information Age.

Another creative example to combat the technical “dis-benefits” is the Siani System, which informs us about the media we use and what messages they send (Kranzberg, 574). For instance, the most personal message is a face-to-face interaction, which requires “focused attention . . . vulnerability, emotions, real-time feedback,” etcetera (Siani, 210). A phone call and Skype are a step below this due to the nature of not being physically present, yet having the ability to hear the personal voice, or see his or her face. Social media is at the bottom of the spectrum as it was programmed for speaking to large crowds, but it can also be used to speak to one person, albeit less-personally due to the format of the digital realm, as already discussed. Texting is just a step above social media. This should tell us something. The Siani System is an original conception that uses “the will to be exceedingly informed and aware,” in the sense of seeing the whole system for what it’s worth (McLuhan, 17). Awareness is the serious artist’s skill. By looking at the whole picture and connecting the dots from the medium to its message, we are effectively using our right brain to shape the logical steps developed by the left side. Holistic approaches, such as the Siani System, have been developed by using the right side of the brain: the empathic, meaning-solving, pattern-deducing, joy-seeking hemisphere (Pink, 3). If we go to the bottom of Siani’s spectrum, we can understand that texting and social media, if used to connect with others the most, dystrophies right brain aspects, for it is this hemisphere that can interpret emotions, nonverbal expressions, and the meaning of face-to-face encounters (14). It has been noted in nearly every scientific journal that we have mirror neurons, which interpret emotions,

gestures, and that sixty to ninety percent of an interaction left unsaid. If we don't engage face-to-face, then it seems we lose a greater aptitude for which our brains were designed. As Pink states, the right side of the brain "helps make us human," so why not cater to these human elements that various individuals advise us are missing in social media (15)?

As an artist, I am interested in discovering ways where my work can be useful here. There are several opportunities to make one's way through the 21st century by employing creative concepts to meet these challenges. As "the high-concept abilities of an artist are often more valuable than the easily replicated L-Directed [left brain] skills of an entry-level business graduate," it seems that the paradigm, which values technical proficiencies over and above all else, needs reworking (55). Both aptitudes—the left and right hemispheric skills—are intrinsic to making the whole mind work effectively. This being said, the artistic side has been often defaced of its value, and it should be noticed that the cultural attitudes toward this assumption have been disproven by scientific evidence (no less), and this proof needs time to pass for its weight to be felt upon cultural values. As of right now, the truth being known, that the human element and the creative component galvanize all extensions of the self (as in technology), it is valuable to look into what occurs in the present field of creativity—that is, Art and Design.

"Today we must all be designers," Pink requisitions both interested and disinterested parties (69). Elizabeth Sanders and Pieter Stappers, design researchers, explain: "It is also difficult for many people to believe that they are creative and to behave accordingly" (Sanders and Stappers, 6). Creativity is the job description of the designer/artist. So, it might behoove us to define exactly what we are calling creative.

Nearly everything around us has been designed. This means that a human being

and their personal thoughts are behind every aspect of our lives. What happens, then, if we get into this fundamental aptitude in order to better our society? A large part of actually transforming our present to create a better future is the “capacity to imagine a possible and better future. Designers are generally appreciated for their capacity to think out of the box by providing new visions for the future” (Sangiorgi, 36). As this originality can be lost in a hi-tech society, to “imagine” is to be using one’s own thoughts, to be original, and in its finale, to be creative, which is something every human is capable of being. But, to “think out of the box” and to provide “new visions” is something unique to those singular designers/artists that have been trained to see the world in a way beheld by right brain techniques as well as left (the point is—not just logically, systemically, or linearly, but also intuitively, thoughtfully, and inventively).

In example, CHAD, the Charter High School for Architecture and Design in Philadelphia, uses a design format to teach academic subjects. This means that their students learn by visual experiences (by building, drawing, etcetera) how something works (*i.e.* biological systems, mathematic equations, and so on). This allows for the original inventiveness and unique inputs of the individual student in the curriculum. It is noteworthy to say that the attendance rate at CHAD is 95 percent versus the other schools in Philadelphia with 20 percent less of their overall students coming to school every day (Pink, 73). This means that things like the switch toward a more holistic, design approach in pedagogy can transform education. More High Schoolers *want* to learn here; imagine what can happen if more schools like this, or like those in Miami, New York, and Washington D.C., implemented design techniques into educational systems (74)? As Claire Gallagher, an architect who served as the supervisor of curriculum at CHAD,

explained that the students learn to “bring things together to a solution. That’s what designers do . . . We’re producing people who can think holistically” (72). As Lanier has solved, it would be beneficial to society to “inspire the phenomenon of individual intelligence,” which breeds things like originality, new ideas, and new solutions to the world (Lanier, 5). Individual intelligence can promote positive change. “To be a designer is to be an agent of change,” seems to be CHAD’s mantra (Pink, 73). This does not mean that every person who comes out of this school is a designer (as in lay terms), but it does mean that every person who comes out of this school has the capabilities to perform at a higher creative and innovative level than those who do not get this type of schooling. To me, design makes sense as an invaluable resource to our society. What, in fact, was Leonardo da Vinci? He was a designer/artist, not just in drawing, but moreso in his innovative tendencies. What would our world be like if we encouraged such thought-leaders?

In the realm of real-world art, there is a design discipline that is rapidly expanding because it is recognizably valuable to many organizations and individuals. This is where serious art and design intersect—in the applicability to social phenomena through creativity. Emergent fields of creative design, such as “service design,” “user design,” “participatory design,” or, the more novel of these—“transformation design”—identify cultural needs and issues, and then begin to create solutions from a team of interdisciplinary participants and researchers (Burns, 7). As transformation design is the newest field, we will discuss this discipline. (Keep in mind that this design discipline is a relative to the other three, yet more innovative in its approaches.) Transformation design, due to its newness, can be a difficult thing to define in its entirety, so it is valuable to

proceed by breaking down the design technique and understanding its applications.

Colin Burns, Hilary Cottam, Chris Vanstone, and Jennie Winhall, transformation designers of the organization named “RED,” state that their design network is “a ‘do tank’ that develops innovative thinking and practice on social and economic problems through design innovation” as they challenge cultural ideologies (2). At RED, their design method is a “highly creative approach to problem-solving that leads to practical, everyday solutions” (9). This is exactly what the world is calling for today:

Transformation design asks designers to shape behaviour – of people, systems and organisations – as well as form. Because of this, its practice demands a high level of ‘systems thinking’: an ability to consider an issue holistically rather than reductively, understand relationships as well as components, and to synthesize complex sets of information and constraints in order to frame the problem. (21)

RED explain that “innovation is required to re-connect public services to people and the everyday problems that they face,” which is good news for social media because public services can currently bring more everyday problems if not equipped with the imaginative reach of thoughtful designs (2). Transformation design allows the *individual* to play a part in the solutions of cultural problems, and by doing so, allows that person to be able to continue carrying on original innovations by the tools equipped from the design team. If large scale transformation is to actually occur for any issue (not just technical dissatisfactions), transformation design would be a crucial method, for by empowering an individual’s originality to empower other individuals, it is much like lighting a candle by the light of another candle; pretty soon, the whole place could be lit.

Transformation design takes creative thinking and applies its solutions to real world issues. This creative thinking is the right-brained way of bringing the whole picture together before working out a solution (*i.e.* bringing the individual's whole brain and various external disciplines {*i.e.* sociology, economics, etc.} to an intersection). "Modern problems" are currently "complex," which means that they are "messier and more ambiguous in nature [than a "complicated" problem]; they are more connected to other problems; more likely to react in unpredictable non-linear ways; and more likely to produce unintended consequences" (8). Non-linear, complex problems need to be matched by non-linear thinkers, which means that to be able to attack a complex problem, one must first be familiar with the "right" way of thinking about the problem. That is—the right side of the brain aids non-linear, holistic thinking, which can also correlate two unlike things to come to a connective tissue between those problems. A complex problem that "produces unintended consequences," sounds like Lanier's confession of the unthoughtful designs of the Internet, or like McLuhan's ideas on technical media employed on a large scale (no longer being benign). While good intentions can bring good inventions, sometimes they can start harmful effects if not tested by conceptual foresight. Burns and company note that "designers are uniquely placed to help solve complex social and economic problems, and the beginnings of a new design discipline are emerging" (11). This new discipline is specific to designing practical solutions to hard issues today.

Transformation design employs the human aspects of material culture in order to ameliorate cultural problems. As Burns and his colleagues put it, "Good design creates products, services, spaces, interactions and experiences that not only satisfy a function or solve a problem, but that are also desirable, aspirational, compelling and delightful" (9).

There are aesthetically pleasing things that work exceptionally well. As current General Motors executive, Bob Lutz, would explain, his business is “more right brain. . . . I see us being in the art business. Art . . . which, coincidentally, also happens to provide transportation” (Pink, 53). He has been intensely successful at selling an automotive vision to various corporations. That vision, it seems, is priceless.

As Pink says, “Design in a high-concept aptitude that is difficult to outsource or automate” (86). The mind is a limitless laboratory that can create countless opportunities when given room to roam in the real world. A designer using holistic thought processes, understanding relationships and patterns, and capable of synthesizing complex components is transformative. This is creativity at its best—solving cultural problems and designing informative solutions that can alter the fabric of our world.

Change is a substance housing two things—inertia and transformation. As Daniela Sangiorgi, a researcher in the field of Service (and Transformation) Design, understands: “transformational change has the capacity to adjust entities in a given system, while also providing a change to the dominant paradigms as well as perceptions of value within a given paradigm” (Sangiorgi, 31). Designers are not only sculpting models that work to bring solutions to problems, but they are coming from a standpoint of reacting to the human being—the human mind—when designing any element. As an artist, it is easy to say that one of my main concerns is the audience’s reading of my work. This means that before making a piece, I have the audience in mind. This, in fact, is a designer’s relationship with his or her product. That is, the designer imagines his or her own relationship, mentally, physically, emotionally, with the end product before it is even in the material realm. Design, in line with goals of transformation, relies on

research, collaboration of disciplines, the people who use it (knowing that social sciences are more-than-ever contributing to design spheres {Sanders and Stappers, 13}), and finally the autonomy and agency of the individual (Sangiorgi, 33). As Lanier has explicated, “crucial arguments about the human relationship with technology should take place between developers and users” in order for a more beneficial relationship to ensue (Lanier, 6). Co-design and cooperation between person and design is a method used in the operations of this transformative technique. Transformation design, design that works for the goal of transforming and solving problems, works as a “means for supporting the emergence of a more collaborative, sustainable and creative society and economy” (Sangiorgi, 29).

Transformation design works for the purpose of “experiencing, emotion, interacting, sustainability, serving, transforming,” etcetera (Sanders and Stappers, 7). In this quote, it is important to reference the antithesis: “What is not sustainable is living life on high alert, 24 hours a day, seven days a week” (Siani, 201). The product designed in order to connect information from one person to another has become an unsustainable entity when the individual abuses its informative means in order to attempt fabrication of experience in a realm that did not intend serving such a weighty thing. Sanders and Stappers remind us that designs for transformation are designs for people’s purposes instead of merely designing products for production’s sake. Experience, as we have seen, seems a valuable part of human nature, but one that seems demoted in the Information Age due to the nature of the “mindless” usage of information and gadgets (Carr, 125). Transformation design, on the other hand, requires the thought of both creator and experiencer:

Participatory thinking is antithetical to consumerism . . . Unfortunately, it will still take years for the culture to shift away from consumerism toward the consumptive/creative balance that people seek. (Sanders and Stappers, 6)

Putting thought and creative thought, at that, into the things we push into the world requires a humanism far greater than that perpetuated (or diminished) by the technical gadgets we hold.

Sanders and Stappers conclude: “Designers will be in demand as the usefulness of *design thinking* is acknowledged in mankind’s drive to address the challenges of global, systemic issues” (12, emphasis mine). Design is a novel thought process. Design with a relational and transformational methodology has the potential to “arrest the escalating problems of the man-made world” (5). “Design thinking” is tapped in the right hemisphere of the brain. It is generative. Creative engagement and creative dialogue are the keys. Creativity can see into the future, and what is more—it can get us there.

Things like transformation design and its creative *modus operandi* (*mode of operation*, or more appropriately—*modus cogitandi*—*mode of thinking*) have similarities for the serious artist within his or her practice of cooperative, public, and even new genre art. These realms, like those within the design sphere, are interrelated and design-oriented due to their social change purposes. The serious artists in these fields are designers in that they have the same design aptitudes. They generate thought snowballs and roll them down hills of exchange. Tom Finkelpearl, the current commissioner of New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs, explains that cooperative art reflects the *Zeitgeist* of the time, where individuals are wanting to be a part of something bigger than themselves, yet also stand out in individually fulfilling ways (Finkelpearl, 48). To call an artist’s work

cooperative means to situate the “practice in the intellectual zone of human cooperation” (6). The cooperative intellectual zone is a place where more than one person’s thoughts relate on an issue. This can be the place of generating solutions. “Many hands make light work,” right?

Public art is a close cousin of cooperative art. Dr. Cameron Cartiere, public artist in Canada and the United States and co-author of *The Practice of Public Art*, explains the meaning of this:

Public art contributes to the ongoing desire to identify who we are, beautifies, contributes to social change, shocks, excites, challenges social conventions, has meaning, educates, inspires, celebrates and remembers, draws us together, envisions new paradigms and crosses disciplines, and is a catalyst for change.

(Cartiere and Willis, 2)

Public art expresses human desire for depth within interaction, change, and in thought within its unique frame. Nato Thompsom, current Chief Curator of Creative Time, an organization that commissions and creates ambitious public art projects across the globe, explains that technology and its deeper implications have presented a clear opportunity for artists to jump into the social sphere and do their work:

Perhaps in reaction to the steady state of mediated two-dimensional cultural production, or a reaction to the alienation effects of spectacle, artists, activists, citizens, and advertisers alike are rushing headlong into methods of working that allow genuine interpersonal human relationships to develop. The call for art into life at this particular moment in history implies both an urgency to matter as well as a privileging of the lived experience. (Thompson, 21)

Thompson understands that artists are effective “change makers,” especially in the current milieu (8). The 21st century is a “media-rich world,” which has become more a “spectacle,” and less experiential (29). This is similar to putting parts of us into the cyber world for view. If I am tweeting that I am eating a bagel for breakfast, am I truly enjoying the bagel, or am I more concerned about who is going to like the camera angle at which the bagel was shot? Thus, the artist, because of his or her ability to create and diagnose forms in everyday life, can provide an inquisitive outlet for testing what this spectacle of a life means.

Put another way, Thompson writes that “as art enters life, it creates the basis for asking the question: ‘what is life?’” (33). Is it defined by real world experiences or otherwise? As Siani explains, “if we’re living our lives in order to document them, is that in fact actually *living*” (Siani, 226)? This is a question that serious art/design can help answer because these are natural *Zeitgeist* harnessers. Public art’s call-and-responsive form occurs at the crux of “dialogic art,” which engages fundamental, hard questions (Thompson, 25). Grant Kester, who coined the phrase, explains that this art sparks “conversation as a mode of action” (25). Arguably, *conversari* is the result of serious art that really changes issues.

New genre art is another umbrella term that extends an artistic hand to its social sphere. New genre art is a fancy phrase for that art which uses nontraditional and traditional media to engage culturally relevant issues with the interaction of its public (Lacy, 19). This work, like transformation design, intends to “affect and transform” through its “relevance” and “collaborative methodology” (21, 25). Genre public art is known to focus “critical investigation” of cultural issues in order to get to the nitty gritty

of life's meaning and concomitantly expresses dialogic steps toward a solution (25, 26). Here, the artist is known most as a communicator, one who is trained to "add a developed sensibility about audience, social strategy, and effectiveness that is unique to visual art as we know it today" (20). New genre art explains itself most as a "social intervention" (19).

This phrase, "social intervention" is a curious one. It can mean things like Nietzsche's philosophy on the artist being some sort of mediator, who expresses the higher values to his or her society. Or, it can mean something near to getting messy in the social exchange between problems and real people. Maybe a little of both is true. Nicolas Bourriaud, writer of *Relational Aesthetics*, delves deep into the decision on art as effective social change agent. He explains that art as "social interstice" is a novelty that cannot be overlooked (Bourriaud, 14). As social interstice, art is becoming something different than what tradition has defined:

Possibility of a relational art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art. To sketch a sociology of this, this evolution stems essentially from the birth of a world-wide urban culture. (14, parenthetical in original)

He calls art an experiment, which grows from having its roots soaked in urban technoculture (15). This experiment can be relational because of our *now*. The focus is on mass media, getting ourselves out there, connecting. Thus, what is art going to be about? As an essential rule, Higgins has told us, art reflects the *Zeitgeist*. Art is going to be about connections, social media, technology, conversations, and if these are valid forms of life.

Art, if affecting change, will be critical in order to start dialogue. And, this art will not be the usual “hang it on a wall and admire it for its beauty” type of art. It will be a thought generator, and it will change things, if done correctly. Art is becoming a “founding principle of dialogue,” which means that it will “generate *bond*” (15). To bond is greater than a connection; it is deep and relational. It requires vulnerability and an exchange in real-time. It is immediate to the relational (*im-mediate*: not mediated). It requires us to look at our life and scrutinize it as our own personal entity that we are privileged to be curious about.

Relational art is the direction of the serious artistic current. Personal encounters are more important nowadays. Bourriaud suggests that there are spaces that are being mechanized, which make human interactions an option, albeit the “road less traveled.” For instance, the self-check out in the grocery store is a prime example. Really, what Bourriaud is trying to explain through all of these words is that art is a “state of encounter” (18). It lets us get at those things deep inside us, the questions we ask about something being right, and even the expressions of ethics and higher pursuits that sculpt our worldviews. “Unlike other activities,” Bourriaud says, art, as a human activity, retains its humanness because “*its sole function is to be exposed to this commerce*” of values (18, italics in original). Art makes values visible. If values are to come into the visible realm, then we can make judgment calls and steps toward making problems within those values visible as well as solvable.

CHAPTER 3

A FACE TO FACE

Conceptual Art

My own art comes together by observing the dissatisfactions within my digital age. I noticed, as Siani says, that “today’s generation of young adults are about 40% *less* empathic than those of the 1980s and 1990s” (Siani, 130, bold and italics in original). We can be seen avoiding eye contact by opting for phone contact. We are bombarded by information, unnecessary data, and we have this “FOMO” thing happening and “nomophobia” too (FOMO is the “fear of missing out,” where “nomophobia” is the “no mobile phobia,” or the fear of being without one’s phone) (105, 44 respectively). If we look back to previous generations and ask, “What were their fears,” these may have been things like, “Not being able to make ends meet,” or “losing my job,” or “keeping my family safe,” or “my son coming home alive and without shell shock from war.” Today, we are scared of being out of the loop, of being away from our mobile devices. This can tell us much about our social milieu that is unsettling. Our fears can tell us about our values. Is information important? Is authenticity? Is a deep relationship important?

As an artist, I want to understand what it means to have an authentic relationship in this digital age and how technology either aids or inhibits this pursuit. It turns out: social media does both. As Siani’s research has shown, there is dissatisfaction, which is directly related to social media usage. There are various effects, mentioned in Siani’s list:

. . . *stress, lack of mental energy, demanding expectations, lack of privacy, lack of down time, increased distraction, public humiliation, erosion of self-esteem, identity issues, anxiety, moments of feeling violated through social media, confusion, fear of being out of the loop or missing out, wondering whether to stay on or get off Facebook and why they feel the need to have their Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram tabs up all the time . . .* (42)

This dissatisfaction has led to an overall “**increase** in loneliness” in our young adults (43, bold and italics in original). In a world that aspires to provide hyper-connectivity, “there is a growing feeling of being disconnected” (43). This is strange. Results have not measured up to intentions.

Delving into what makes us feel “connected,” or more accurately—validated—I thought about myself. Being heard and actively listened to make *me* feel validated, so I wondered if I could employ such things through the use of a technological design. I created *A Face to Face: The I Need You Project* (Fig. 1), which employs the usage of authenticity, stories, empathy, design, *and* technology to make deeper connections.

The logo consists of two lines of text. The top line, 'A Face to Face', is rendered in a light blue, thin, sans-serif font with a subtle drop shadow. The bottom line, 'The I Need You Project', is written in a vibrant, multi-colored script font, transitioning from blue to purple to pink.

Fig. 1: Logo Design, TJB, 2014

It works like this: www.ineedyouproject.com offers the individual an outlet for his or her story of challenge and what this has meant to them. Challenges affect every

human being, and these experience that I am asking for are not mechanical—that is, they are original experiences that take *thought* by the individual to exchange them. When such a story is sent to the artist (myself), I create an image to match it. Pretty simple stuff. I don't know what the individual looks like. I don't know their name. All I know is their words, their experience, this huge slice of who they are, and where they're going. This is a big deal and a big responsibility. Responsibility is something I think we all share with one another. We each have the ability to respond or the ability to check out mentally.

Desiring to be the serious artist in the social sphere, making dialogic and empathic art, the correct handling of responsibility is key. As such, my ethics are outlined on the website. But, as full-disclosure is pertinent to all art and thesis operations, it is important to understand what exactly this exchange entails. Essentially, let's be as clear as possible. The script of ethics is printed in this manner:

Index for my Common Rule (the Protection of the Human Subject Ethics)

- 1) What is the research/practice? (Possible Risks in Participating/Informed Consent)*
- 2) Basic ethical principles and promises. (Respect for your Autonomous Agency and Voluntary Willingness/Equality/Beneficence/Anonymity)*
- 3) Assessment of Risks and Benefits*
- 4) SO WHAT? (Your Options)*
- 5) Questions?*

1) What is the research? (Possible Risks in Participating/Informed Consent)

I am researching empathy, specifically mirror neurons and how we engage with one another on a deeper level when entrenched in an age of digital media that has the potential of depersonalization. In practice, I am taking stories and crafting (from sublime sentences and word-imagery) life-size portraits that stare out at the viewer in order to understand how the juxtaposition of a story and a visualization affects the viewer (possibly—I will find that a face-to-face engagement affects people greatly, and I will understand more fully how to carry on social practice conducive to creating face-to-face engagements that garner more authenticity). On top of these drawings, I will either project the complete, original story that you send me by using a program called “Keynote,” which I use to create animation of your story (this looks like the words are being typed over the drawing in sequences). Or, I will print out the story and hang it near the drawing, so that both the words and the visual can be seen together.

Possible risks in participating include psychological harm. I do not want you to participate in this research if it is going to invoke psychological harm in the recounting of your story. Sometimes going back into our memories can bring unwanted emotions, and if you do not desire to enter into an exchange where that is the possible case, then please do not participate. Keep in mind: All of this is your decision. Please take into account yourself—as this project is about you. What I mean by “please take into account yourself” is that I want to make sure you protect your emotions; if recounting your story is going to bring you emotional harm, then please do not participate.

2) Basic ethical principles and promises. (Respect for your Autonomous Agency and Voluntary Willingness/Equality/Beneficence/Anonymity)

Respect for your autonomous agency entails my acknowledgement that you are an individual capable of deliberation about personal goals and of acting under the direction of such deliberation. If you are uncertain about this capacity, please consult an intermediary who is able to tell your story capably, if you desire to participate.

Voluntary Willingness—By submitting your story, you are telling me that you are volunteering without hesitation. Thank you for your voice.

Equality—Each piece receives equal treatment. I put equal amounts of time and effort into each piece without partiality.

Anonymity—Complete anonymity includes: your name is not asked for, nor known. You as an individual are completely unknown to the audience, unless otherwise specified by you. In doing this, I am desiring to protect you from discrimination/uncomfortable situations/judgments/etcetera. Anonymity might even make it easier for you to tell your story honestly and authentically. Anonymity may also become an element in further research, depending on its ability to enhance or diminish authenticity. Obviously, since I can't see you, and since you aren't submitting photographs but stories, I will not be drawing you; this too is another form of anonymity. I am using solely my imagination for these drawings in order to practice empathy as an artistic pursuit; in order to draw from your words, I must put myself into your situation to understand what your facial

expression must have been because of what was happening, etcetera. If you have an issue with anonymity, there are options (see #4).

3) Assessment of Risks and Benefits.

Risks: 1) Psychological Harm. 2) I create a drawing you do not care for (and if that is the case, as you will be able to see and follow on the blog, then you can ask me to remove it and not use it for research, gallery set-ups, or digital databases).

Benefits: 1) Your voice gets a visualization. 2) Your visualized story might inspire someone else. 3) You are contributing to a greater understanding of what it means to connect on a deeper level in a hyper-digitalized society. 4) You are contributing to a greater understanding of empathy. 5) The practice of telling your true story can be cathartic. 6) You are contributing to a social change project that will be continuing in the community in order to foster greater, authentic (and fulfilling) connections with other people.

4) SO WHAT? (Your Options)

The point? To inspire others to go deeper. This means that when someone sees a face, they might think about the story that goes behind it, even imagining about that person in order to engage empathic conversation. Empathic conversation is simply caring about the real person next to us, not taking his/her bodily existence for granted (and not resorting to screen time when face time is a possibility). This might be a, “What has your

day been like?” Or, a question from us to another that requires active and curious listening on our parts.

If you feel as if writing your story in the submission box is not enough, there is also a blog where you can share, so that others may freely see and comment. Another option is to write out your story and email the handwritten story (if this seems more acceptable to you). If you want to record it and send your story in an mp3 file, that is great too, as your voice is a great communicator and will be used (if you specify) in the project itself. These are all different options (you may think of something else you'd like to do—great!). I'm listening to you. My response is the drawing and the research I put into this, which is an on-going social change experiment.

5) Questions?

If you have any questions, please go to the questions page before submitting your story—I want to make sure everything is crystal clear for you.

In the end: thank you immensely for your time and your story. You are influential. So, be authentic, be individual, be you. That's always the motivating force for everything and anything that ever changes the way this world works. I think we have a story worth telling here. Either tell it in the blank on the next page, or email it to ineedyouproject01@gmail.com.

The complete disclosure of how this artistic exchange operates is important for the participants to understand because their stories are essential and intimate, not to be taken

lightly. This thought-experiment has brought revealing results, as the questions posed on the site, “What is a challenge that you’ve met with? What has it meant to you?” have brought similar responses every time. Each recounting out of a now healthy stack of responses presents stories that have trials but struggle for some sort of meaning.

This resolution to every story so far tells me that there is a search for meaning in the hardest things, and in the dissatisfying things. In my opinion, this search is a clue that something deeper exists underneath the word shells we send. It tells me that there is a search going on behind the words that reveals the shift, which Pink was describing: the search for a greater concept, the search for originality in the middle of digital data and anonymity. The desire to be original humans whose mental aspects are inimitable has been proven to me in these stories that explain:

“This is a story I rarely tell anyone. Mostly because I don’t know how to tell it.” – Story II

“Warning: This is a very personal and true account of my battle with depression. I wanted to share because I know that other people battle this too and I have learned that it is something we shouldn't be afraid of. Not talking about it only makes it worse.” – Story XIII

“I only hope that others read this and realize that they should talk about their feelings to someone.” – Story IX

“The internalization of these pains leads to this loss of connection.” – Story III

“Acknowledgement and attention can be one of the simplest forms of respect a person can offer.” – Story III

“Despite everything that I have been through, I still feel the desire to be the best possible person I can be, to succeed and most of all, to express the nature of mental illness to those who may or may not understand it.” – Story X

“I’ve heard that when listening to stories one should try to relate instead of discount. That eventually one will hear their story told by someone else and that will help give them a sense of belonging. It will show that they are not alone, that others have gone through similar experiences and come out with grace. I hope that happens here. . . . Sometimes anonymity is a powerful tool. It can allow one to be completely honest without fear of scrutiny or fear of how their information will damage others.” – Story XI

“I’m not responsible for what was done to me, but I am responsible for what I do with it.”
– Story XII

“It’s usually these hardships that help define us as individuals and help us become better people.” – Story XVII

When given the opportunity, an individual can speak volumes about meaning. It takes time and the ability to engage that person in order to draw up the depths of that conversation. But, I have found it worth the while.

I have received a sizable stack of stories thus far. Reading these stories of adversity, it is interesting how many have said that they know they are not alone and others have similar experiences. Adversity is something that most humans experience. What an incredible connecting agent. Depth and vulnerability come when talking about adversity. As Siani says, “In order to create fulfilling relationships, we have to be brave enough to be vulnerable” (Siani, 117). I have found this to be true.

When faced with the serious vulnerability of another human being, I believe that it is hard not to engage and discover something about our very selves. This is empathic experience at its finest, for it engages another person far beyond a surface level. And, where do we look when we are getting to know someone? Their eyes. This is why I design each piece with the represented human subject using direct eye with the viewer. Eye contact makes us feel like we’re being watched, and it makes us watch back. This is an intensely human element. The eyes are the place we associate with the soul. It’s hard not to look. Eye contact is one of the formal staples in the vocabulary of every work in this project. Other aspects that are the same to every work in this project are the use of the hands and facial emotions to make internal references to the real story’s expressions; graphite (pencil) that communicates the malleability of each drawing, for pencil is both flexible and precise, hard and soft, able to be moved, much like the dichotomy that exists within the human, who is ever changing, but of the same essence ever through the growing process (we call this identity); the life-size format of each piece, which proposes

that these representations come from real people and are investigable as such; the white space surrounding the figure (even *Fig. 3*, who is encompassed about by people and then white space, as if in a metaphorical box), which gives entrance to the viewer and focus to the drawing, allowing space for the viewer to breathe, or to think around the figure. All these are extremely familiar to each piece and a part of the process of creating a situation with which the viewer might engage. Each piece is an artistic representation, a creative design that took from mine and others' imaginative processes. I will outline three pieces that I have represented thus far due to the nature of their stories and the aspects of the drawings that make the aims of this project clear.

In *Fig. 2*, I chose to represent Story II having a sort of shielded eye-contact with the viewer due to the nature of her story. During the course of reading her story, I found the phrase, "I wanted to shower for a thousand years," which struck me as a visceral line that necessitated an image. In order to draw her face, dripping with both tears (I supposed) and the water from the shower, I began to imagine what this face would look like, how it would express its desire to stay in this uncomfortable space (the shower) that is made for naked bodies and a transient task. But, she wanted to stay there for a thousand years, which would require her to be both exhausted with her present circumstance and fraught with anguish from her experience. To add, there were expressions of guilt, of doubt, of questioning, of sadness in her words that made me furrow this brow and wipe lines of mascara under her eyes. Her earrings still sit in her ears, bracelets on her wrist, but the rest is naked in the shower, modest by the placement of her arm wrapping around her and her leg pulled to her chest as she is actively in the process of getting as comfortable as one can in the seated position in the shower (which is uncomfortable—

I've tried for the purpose of this project). I made the decision to keep her earring and bracelets visible because of the context she gave me: there was an outing before the event depicted, and I kept thinking that if what she said had happened to me, then I wouldn't have bothered getting off the little things in order to jump into the shower to try to get clean. The presence of these little details adds to the odd juxtaposition of naked body, once not so naked, and the feeling of being out of place. Her eyes looking back out at the viewer then express that she is struggling to own her place, to own her body.



Fig. 2: Story II, TJB, graphite, Life-size, 2015

(detail)

If I had kept eye contact out of the picture, then this would have been the story of a victim, someone that is seen but who could not lift her eyes to the viewer's gaze. This story, however, is not the story of a victim but of one who is "still healing," and who is now doing better. She says that she is "no longer the girl who cries in the shower." Eye

contact is a deep connecting agent that informs beyond words; in order to understand her expression, I must look inside myself and find experiences to match her facial gesture.

When we are engaged in really *seeing* another person, we can reach an understanding that spans far beyond the words of any conversation. I use the word “seeing” here to evoke that colloquialism, “I see you,” which means, “I *get* you”—a most notable expression of understanding, of validation. There is a curious aspect of relating with someone through the eyes. For instance, my mother has always been fascinated by our innate ability to find a person’s eyes, no matter how far they are from us (within reasonable parameters). When someone is looking at me, I *feel* it on my face. Could this be that we are searching to be seen, as in understood on a deeper level, and we are searching to look deeper as well? To experiment, it is easy to see how this works when driving your car past another vehicle that is going the same speed but in the opposite direction, on the opposite side of the road. Their eyes find yours. There’s a connection; it seems it was made to happen, and life goes on. What is happening, then, when a generation opts out of eye contact because it can be uncomfortable?

Eye contact with another person leads to validation and vulnerability in both participants. By looking into someone else’s eyes, their mental window, we share ours as well. With the situation I have created with the drawings of individuals making eye contact with the viewer, their stories add context to the gaze, but the works of visual art can stand alone as well. They are representations of *real* people. And, as such, the representation of the reality of the person creates a face-to-face encounter that requires the viewer to stand there for a few moments and locate the facial expression in their own world of emotional experiences, effectively transposing the viewer into the empathizer,

who is trying to understand (possibly not even by conscious decision). For, the physiology behind our connections with people when we look into their eyes and at their faces happen without our telling them to. Mirror neurons, as aforementioned, effectively engage another human's external expressions by searching internally in our own wells of emotional and mental experience. If left only to connecting with others through digital devices, our mirror neurons are left entirely out of the picture; we cannot interpret facial expression or even depth sometimes when faced with a faceless screen. This project is meant to bridge the gap between a face (a real personal story that is described by a representational face) and another facial connection (the viewer). This project is meant to introduce the idea that people are more than the bodily existences, more than their digital projections, having real lives and stories that can only be engaged when one person takes the time to do so. This takes understanding and investigation, as well as face-to-face interactions to make it complete. I am trying to engage the real world instead of virtual realities, and I think this can be done without and with social media, when used properly. As this project uses social media to gather the stories, I designed by original website construction a social media tool in order to get a deeper response. This required awareness and some thought engineering on my part in order to effectively retrieve depth from an engine that can trade ersatz conversations for intimacy. This awareness is what I want people to think about—what medium are we using and what does that mean in itself?

In terms of the difference between virtual Net and the real world, in real-time we are not privy to the edits digital places provide. This is real life. It can be uncomfortable because it's not screened. As Siani has said, "When we are digitally somewhere else, we

are simply not in the real world” (166). In order to actively engage in another’s space, we have to be present in all our faculties. If I am texting while someone speaks with me, there is no way I can *effectively* do both. This project is an empathic step outside of our “comfort zones,” or what we might call, our “digi-zones.” By directly engaging the pieces of art that actively reach out with eye contact, the person is compelled to look deep, to be present, and to validate that experience by simply *being* there. There is a lot of taking in information (Nevitt’s active “percepts”) and less of the reflection and simply being present with someone that requires original thinking skills. Being present is the first step to deeper engagement.

In the making of this project, and even in the preliminary stages, there is the imaginative aspect that makes all of this richer for my own creative experience. By this I mean that I am enriched by imagining these real people’s faces, their expressions, their gestures. It makes me think about the depth of the person I might not otherwise have thought about. I realize that there is a story behind every visage I walk past in the coffee shop or in the hall. It helps me imagine an outlet to reach those individuals I see everyday. There is more behind the face that I should face.

Below, in *Fig. 3*, I had to imagine many faces, sculpt their bone structures, place little details, like the nose ring on the girl immediately behind the guy in focus, or the iPod earbud subtly poking out of the character-with-dreads’ ear. Each, to me, has a life on the page, a reason why they wear the things they do, but especially the gentleman in the middle. His story is one of feeling alone in the crowd, and it seems this is one of the most pertinent examples of social media’s negative consequences today. We feel more alone when we’re with people sometimes because they are not present. In the piece, each of the

others looks away from him, moving dynamically about like ghost trails (that is why they are so light and not “finished” in comparison to him). He stands still, unmoving, focused on the viewer, as if asking if they too are going to move without looking, or if they will stay a while. His hair is a-mess, and this was another artistic license because I wanted to express the clutter going on inside his mind. He feels anxious, unsettled, even frustrated with his surroundings. His hands clutch his jacket, keeping himself away from the others that move about, as he explains to me that he had a hard time opening up to people because he has been ignored and hurt by them. But, as his story continues, his gaze does indeed find the viewer, and just as *Fig. 2* suggests with her eye contact, this gentleman owns his space, even overcomes his space in that he is the only one present, standing in front of the viewer, aware, and asking for validation, even as he gives it.



Fig. 3: Story III, TJB, graphite, Life-size, 2015 (detail, in process)

Another aspect of this project is its use of technical media in its final stage (in its presentation to the viewers in a gallery setting). As Lanier has said, “The most important thing to ask about any technology is how it changes people” (Lanier, 36). With many of these drawings, I am using technical overlays, which add and detract something from the drawings. These overlays are projections of the stories animated by the application, “Keynote.” The words look as if they are being typed out in sequences atop the drawing, and when I post the finished pieces to the website for the individual participants and others to see, a movie file with the projection atop the drawing *and* a .jpeg of the visual piece alone are both posted. With a projection addition, the work becomes well lit and has complete context.

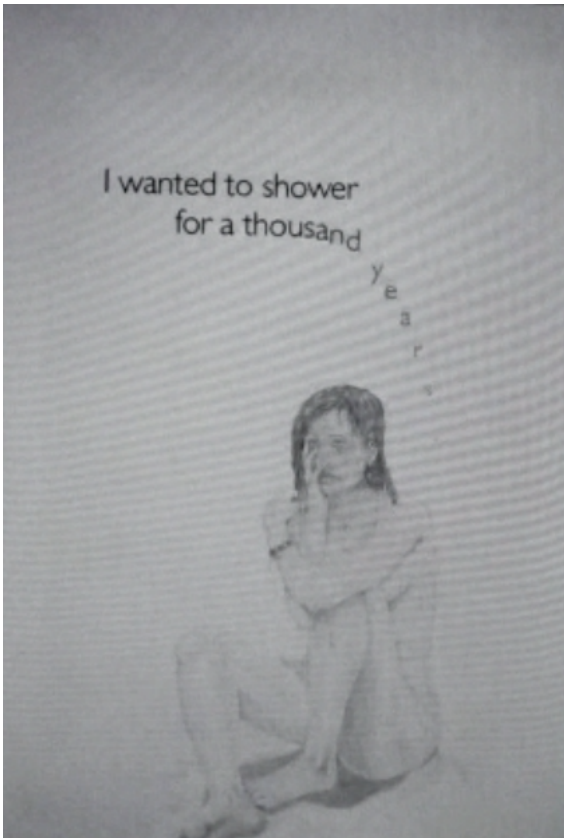


Fig. 4: Story II, TJB, with partial story animation (projection)

But, I have observed that when the drawings are lit by a projection, then people no longer desire to come up to them as closely as they would without the projected overlay (as in

Fig. 4). The animation creates a pixilated film over the drawing, becoming fuzzy; the drawing becomes secondary to the words. I see this as a critique of the distancing effects that social media can have. For instance, if I take out my device and get onto a social media site, I am mentally elsewhere, distanced from any person who would be in front of me. The person in front of me might feel like they are (in effect) disconnected from me and unable to bring me back to the immediate time, place, and context of our conversation. In the same way, when the projection/animation of story words are projected overtop the drawings, people stand back. They lack closeness and even the ability to see the facial expressions of the drawings clearly. When the projection/animation is turned off, then people more readily engage the drawings up close (the projection is on a timed setting, where it has a set amount of time to stay off and then turn back on and go into the animation sequences again). I feel like the issue of the distancing effects of social media needs to be further evaluated in order to more effectively respond by being present and aware of what we are doing when we are engaging technology before our real-time situations. I also think that more human-centered alternatives, as discussed beforehand, are beneficial tools to solving some of the harms already growing in our societies. More human-centered alternatives expand upon the artistic and imaginative aspects of ourselves that cannot be imitated by machines. This requires curiosity and awareness.

In *Fig. 5*, this is my own story. I became a subject for this project as well, and to draw myself required a great deal of self-awareness and honesty.

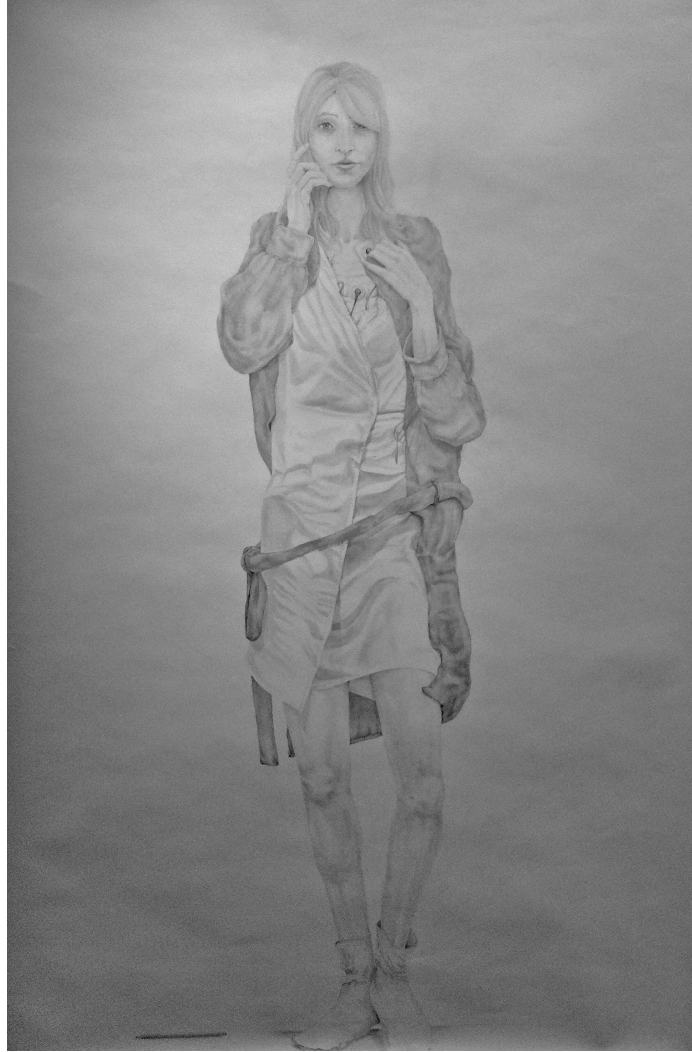


Fig. 5: Story I, TJB, graphite, Life-size, 2014

It required a delve into deeper investigations of what I am doing as an artist and who I am in regards to my own challenges. The imaginative situation in *Fig. 5* is one that poses me as both curious and vulnerable. My right hand poses on my face as if to say, “I’m curious about you,” as I look out of the paper and into the viewer’s space. My left hand pulls my hospital robe to uncovers the leads on my chest. There is an encounter of both revealing and anticipating a response that is solidified in this formal representation. A pencil lies on the ground, a subtle remark as to who I am, making art out of challenging things.

This project is meant to be a starting point, eventually to be displayed in a gallery and exhibited as a tool to begin dialogue on the subject of social media and its effects. It is beautiful to me, getting to know the people I am working with (either empathically and anonymously, or those who continue carrying on conversation with me during the process). I have received emails from individuals not involved and those involved. And, one in particular who was involved and remains to my knowledge anonymous has said that seeing their story drawn out and respected has been a cathartic experience. Starting a conversation, that richness full of “familiar” ground, living in the present, with experiences-to-be-shared, is a powerful thing. This dialogic situation is what I want to create.

CHAPTER 4

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

There are benefits and “dis-benefits” of living in our current age (Kranzberg, 547). The best way to navigate the dis-benefits is to be aware. This requires being creative about our responses when using social media and being creative when using our “human apps” (Siani, 10). Lanier says it beautifully: “Each acquaintance is an alien, a well of unexplored difference in the experience of life that cannot be imagined or accessed in any way but through genuine interaction” (Lanier, 53). A “genuine interaction” is the only thing that fits the bill. This quote is that much more intriguing in its profundity because it came from a computer software designer. To interact with another person face-to-face requires creativity. There is no script. There is no waiting for five minutes to figure out exactly what we want to say, editing it before we send it, or evaluating the potential cost and effect of our sentences before they are said. Face-to-face is real-time life, made of things like originality that take intention and innovation to find that fulfilling element of *conversari* that we seek. The project that I have designed came from the idea of desiring a deeper connection and being aware of the things that get in the way of this sometimes. I have always believed that people are like walking stories, waiting to be unraveled, and I get a sort of high from figuring out what makes them who they are. I think this passion comes from feeling validated in the process of discovering their stories; I am active in participating in my daily space, of simply engaging the

persons next to me, whoever they are today. They see me seeing them, and I get a story out of my day. “How was your day?” my husband will ask. “It was good. Took a test. Then, guess what? I talked to Jim today, and see what you think of this . . .” and the conversation goes on. Conversations can start conversations and then, eventually (and hopefully), they create actions.

This creative project has been a way of engaging the world around me on a deeper level, and finding out if social media can be used as a beneficial tool in this exchange. Sometimes it can be. Other times, it does not work or do what we want. Through this project, I have discovered the distancing effects of being together but not together (mentally elsewhere). The beneficial effects of validation go beyond the social media sphere by bringing it (the social media stories) into the real world (by a physical drawing). I have found that people engage with a picture of a person because we, humans, see ourselves in 2-dimensional planes (mirrors, windows).

As Henry David Thoreau put it, “Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes” (Thoreau, 6)? Empathy. This is something I desire. I desire to be understood, to be heard, to be validated. I desire to “connect” with another person on the level of understanding that helps me be a part of something other than myself. Life is greater than information. In magnitude and in phenomena, life is far deeper than information can aspire to capture. And, “if it’s important to find the edge of mystery, to ponder the things that can’t quite be defined—or rendered into a digital standard—then we will have to perpetually seek out entirely new ideas and objects, abandoning old ones” (Lanier, 10). If life is weighed and found more important than “being in the know,” or handling devices, then it might be time to put down the devices

and experience reality. There is a time and a place for technology. There is also a time and a place for being without technology. If we can learn the appropriateness of both, this may be a great starting place.

Another important thing to chew on is serious creativity. What if we tapped into our creative “human apps” (Siani, 10)? We are, after all, “hardwired” to think. Thought is crafted in the mind, so too, art is forged. The value of imagination and conceptual designs is mind-boggling. Paola Antonelli, one of the current curators at the Museum of Modern Art says, “Good design is a renaissance attitude that combines technology, cognitive science, human need, and beauty to produce something that the world didn’t know it was missing” (Pink, 72). Just *think* about it. What is the one non-essential that people will continue to buy, even in the midst of a depression? Books, good entertainment, things which lift the spirit. This is not a coincidence. Partially for escapism, and partially for feeding the soul, the individual needs more than just material to live a satisfying life. Pink has explained that “the wealth of nations and the well-being of individuals now depend on having artists in the room” (69). Serious artists/designers have the potential to create thoughtful designs that can better the world.

As for the rest of us who are still doubtful of our original, creative potentials, I would like to say to those stick-figure drawers: You mustn’t think that creativity begins and ends at the tip of a pencil. It begins in the mind. Engaging the inventive experimentalisms, the query, “what-if things could be better,” the relational aspects of your mind, and far deeper, can be invaluable to the future of living a fulfilling life.

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