Intelligent Design

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INTelligent Design

by

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ABSTRACT

As human beings we are designed and created in a fabric that is profound and complex. We are built with a framework where mind and body work in a concerted effort to maintain our lives automatically. A deep and defining part of our existence as humans is not just the innate desire to live but to live in consistent well-being—emotionally, physically, and mentally. I believe when we incorporate our knowledge of human physiology into our creative process then we allow ourselves a greater opportunity to create an authentic connection with our intended audience. My work during the past three years has been rooted in the study of these philosophical and scientific principles. I created a series of visual experimentations that aim to assist in my understanding of human beings at an emotional and biological level. Armed with a deep desire to understand humanity, my goal is to create work that fosters positive change and has significant impact in the world. My past and present research has been focused on human emotions, the intuitive creative process and the relationship between technology and establishing social identity.
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INTELLIGENT DESIGN

As human beings we are designed and created in a fabric that is profound and complex. We are built with a framework where mind and body work in a concerted effort to maintain our lives automatically. The 16th century philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, states: “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power strives to persevere in its being” and “the striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing” (Damasio 36). A deep and defining part of our existence as humans is not just the innate desire to live but to live in consistent well-being—emotionally, physically, and mentally. I believe the design and biology of humans should serve as a blueprint for how we live and interact with each other and our environments.

As an artist, I believe when we incorporate our knowledge of human physiology into our creative process then we allow ourselves a greater opportunity to create an authentic connection with our intended audience. My work during the past three years has been rooted in the study of these philosophical and scientific principles. I created a series of visual experimentations that aim to assist in my understanding of human beings at an emotional and biological level. Armed with a deep desire to understand humanity, my goal is to create work that fosters positive change and has significant impact in the world. My past and present research has been focused on human emotions, the intuitive creative process and the relationship between technology and establishing social identity.
Human Emotions

In 1632, Baruch Spinoza was born during an intellectually rich time known as Holland’s Golden Age. A short walk from Spinoza’s household in Amsterdam, twenty-three year old Rembrandt Van Rijn was working on the painting, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*, and the leading philosopher of the day was a thirty-two year old named, Descartes (Damasio 16). Both men were on the verge of international fame. Surrounded by burgeoning intellectuals, Spinoza began to lay the philosophical groundwork for what was to become the 18th century Enlightenment. Born two centuries before Sigmund Freud developed his theory on the human drives, Eros (life) and Thanatos (death), Spinoza suggested that drives, motivations, emotions and feelings were a central aspect of humanity and that “the rules that govern our social and personal conduct should be shaped by a deeper knowledge of humanity” (Damasio 8, 13).

Throughout history, philosophy has foreshadowed science. Modern day neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, believes that “science would be well served by recognizing that historical effort” (15). Inspired by Spinoza’s philosophies, he examined how emotions and the subsequent feelings support human preservation. He suggests that emotions allow the brain and mind to evaluate and respond to the environment within and around us. “We process not only the presence of an object but its relation to others and its connection to the past” (54). Emotions that include happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, sympathy, and shame directly support self-preservation by alerting us of dangers or by helping us take advantage of an opportunity. This does not suggest that we are promoting well-being every time we engage an emotion. “The context in which an emotion is engaged
and the intensity of the emotion are important factors in the potential value of an emotion on a specific occasion.” (Damasio 39). Scientifically, Damasio arrived at the same conclusion as Spinoza. He found that an “understanding of the biology of human emotions and feelings is a key to the formulation of principles and policies capable of reducing human distress and enhancing human flourishing” (8).

In an attempt to understand humanity, I am documenting and cataloguing human existence through an on-going series of short video portraits. The intention of each video is to create a portrait of the individual through genuine emotional expression.

![Image: Chad, Moving Portraits Series, Video Still](image)

The process involved in the creation of each video portrait has proven to be invaluable in my attempt to understand human emotions. The process begins with a series of casual conversations with each individual in order to understand them at a deep, emotional level. They tell intriguing stories of life changing experiences that were
significant in their personal growth. After a level of trust is established we determine if there is an emotion or idea that can be seen as a common thread within these experiences.

After this process of emotional discovery, a concept is developed for the video portrait. Collaboratively, the individual and I form a visual scene that would allow the desired emotion to be captured. While the emotion may be universal,—i.e., happiness, loneliness, or heartache—the method in which the emotion invoked is deeply personal to each individual. This ensures every portrait to be unique.

Figure 2: *Joy*, Moving Portraits Series, Video Still

The portrait is crafted through focused attention to detail during the video recording and editing process. This process is an intimate and delicate affair. Hours are spent watching every detailed movement and inflection on the individual’s face and body. I
search for that perfect sequence in the video footage where physical expression captures pure, raw emotion. Once discovered, I minimally apply editing techniques such as time remapping and fades in order to enhance the authenticity of the expressed emotion. Through this process I discovered that simply slowing down facial movements could have a profound effect. Subtle inflections that would normally go unnoticed in real-time are brought to focus. Details such as the pulsing of the throat when someone is laughing, the slow formation of sweat that forms through physical exhaustion, or the split-second glance down that reveals an insecurity become a starring role in an emotional performance.

Figure 3: Ashley, Moving Portraits Series, Video Still
Several of the participating individuals professed that this creative process has proven to be therapeutic. A non-judgmental environment allowed them to identify the emotions that have been difficult to understand. This proclamation is the heart of the series. By identifying the root cause of an emotion—called “stimuli” by Damasio—we can control our exposure to the objects that bring on the reactions. Through practice and patience, we can learn the techniques necessary to avoid or increase our interaction with such stimuli. By doing this we are exerting control over our life process and “leading ourselves into greater or lesser harmony” (52). My hope for each participating individual is that this experience will have positive impact in their personal growth.
Intuitive Creative Process

We are in a time where global information can be accessed in the blink of an eye and innovation generally denotes faster, more efficient processes and products. While the automaticity of life seems to be moving perpetually faster, I believe there must be a point in all processes where time allows attention to detail and reflection before moving forward. I cannot control the actions of others, but I can control what I create. By creating video portraits that engage the viewer to focus on the emotions of others, in turn, I can effect the emotions of the viewer. Each video portrait encourages the viewer to stand still for several minutes. During this time, breathing becomes regulated and the heartbeat slows—promoting a calm emotional state. Crafting a participatory experience that allows the viewer a time for reflection is an important aspect of my installation art. I believe my installations can have greater impact if the experience is insightful and innovative. I believe that embracing the role of insight within the creative process will allow me to produce innovative ideas that can have significant impact.

As Spinoza and Damasio propose, the human body is designed to maintain life automatically. However, the beauty of mind and body working together is that it enables us to exert control over certain life processes. We condition our minds and bodies to adapt to our surroundings by what we allow ourselves to come in contact with every day. Many of these adaptations develop into habits. Edward De Bono, a leading authority in the field of creative thinking, suggests that these habits are a product of the mind as a patternmaking system. The mind’s ability to create, store and recognize patterns is effective in how we interact with each other and our environments (De Bono 22). The most familiar and useful
patterns—selected by our emotions—become instinctual or learned behavior. Through repetitious use, we acquire the capability of executing these behaviors while on “automatic pilot”—i.e., driving, speaking in correct grammar, or tying shoelaces. While these behaviors are advantageous for basic human functionality, there are definite disadvantages. Patterns and behaviors are extremely difficult to change once they have become established. It can be especially dangerous if we allow these established patterns to control our creative process. De Bono believes these established patterns—which he also calls assumptions—must be challenged during the creative process in order to generate innovative ideas. In 1967, he introduced a new concept called lateral thinking, which provides a means to challenge our assumptions. Before his introduction of lateral thinking, the standard method of thought was known as traditional vertical thinking. Vertical thinking is a step-by-step approach that follows the most likely path towards a solution—a necessity in mathematics. “With lateral thinking one tries to look for the least obvious paths” (De Bono 31). The entrance to an unlikely pathway may indicate that it is not worth exploring, yet it may lead to something useful. It is the willingness to explore the least likely pathways that is the essence of lateral thinking because often there appears to be no reason for exploring other pathways. Lateral and vertical thinking must be seen as complementary and not antagonistic in order to be most effective (De Bono 35). While lateral thinking is useful for generating ideas and approaches, vertical thinking is necessary for developing them. De Bono provides us with the simple analogy: “You cannot dig a hole in a different place by digging the same hole deeper. Vertical thinking is used to dig the same hole deeper. Lateral thinking is used to dig a hole in a different place” (10).
Many believe that insight and creativity are gifts of talent that are only attainable through “lucky” genes. However, “instead of just hoping for insight and creativity one can use lateral thinking in a deliberate and practical manner” (De Bono 10) during the creative process to allow for the generation of new ideas. In 1926, Graham Wallas presented one of the first models of the creative process in his book titled, *The Art of Thought*. He proposed that the creative process consists of four stages: preparation, incubation, illumination or insight, and verification. The incubation period allows the unconscious mind to restructure thought patterns that are stimulated through conscious work during a period in time, resulting in the point of illumination or insight. Lateral thinking provides the unconscious mind the means to reach illumination or insight.

This “flash of illumination” (Metcalfe 239) is a key element in producing breakthrough ideas and is the only effective way of changing ideas when information cannot be evaluated objectively (De Bono 7). The esteemed psychologist, Robert Sternberg, also emphasizes the importance of insight in the creative process by stating that “significant and exceptional intellectual accomplishment--for example, major scientific discoveries, new and important inventions, and new and significant understandings of major literary, philosophical, and similar work--almost always involve [sic] major intellectual insights” (282).

It is not by accident or sheer luck that many people claim to find the answer to a lingering problem while driving, in the shower, or during REM sleep. These actions have the ability to produce an incubation period since the conscious part of the mind is occupied allowing the subconscious mind to search for solutions. Inspired by the role of intuition in
the creative process, I created a video installation that is an abstract recreation of my own incubation period titled, Drive. My best solutions or innovative ideas tend to surface from the depths of my mind while I am driving my car. The installation aims to capture the essence of my driving experience.

Figure 5: Drive, Video Still

If I close my eyes and re-imagine my total driving experience into one visual scene, I see only glimpses of images and movements that align themselves to the beat of an arbitrary song. I see flashes of reflective light with the surrounding environment rushing by. I see repetitions of color and blurred shapes providing a dream-like environment. In combination, these elements provide a visual concert that puts my mind into a state of meditation.
To recreate my incubation period visually, I recorded video of the environment within and outside of my vehicle while driving. During the editing process, I rebuilt the experience from memory—flashes of light, blurred shapes, repetitious lines. I displayed the video on three separate video screens, each with a different musical soundtrack with the intention of creating three unique experiences.
The installation was my first attempt to study the role of music and its effect on human emotions. Ayn Rand suggests that music has the capability of allowing “subconscious material to flow because no single image can capture the meaning of the musical experience, the mind needs a succession of images, it is groping for that which they have in common, i.e., for an emotional abstraction” (42). I believe the addition of music to the installation enhances the effectiveness of the video to recreate an incubation period.

By gaining experience in a subject we give our unconscious a much larger memory capacity to draw insightful solutions. This can speed the process in arriving at an insightful, creative idea. However, we should be wary of trusting superficial experience over veritable experience. Bergson states: “Were all the photographs of a town, taken from all possible
points of view, to go on indefinitely completing one another, they would never be equivalent to the solid town in which we walk about” (4).

I believe that understanding the role of insight in the creative process gives us the ability to produce intuitive and innovative ideas and opens the door to an infinite amount of possibilities. New ideas combined with possibility are “the stuff of change and progress in every field from science to art, from politics to personal happiness” (De Bono 9). To put it best De Bono states:

More and more creativity is coming to be valued as the essential ingredient in change and progress. It is coming to be valued above knowledge and above technique since both of these are becoming so accessible. In order to be able to use creativity one must rid it of this aura of mystique and regard it as a way of using the mind - a way of handling information. This is what lateral thinking is about - the generation of new ideas (8-9).

Technology and Social Identity

Twentieth century philosopher, Hannah Arendt, states that “living beings, men and animals, are not just in the world, they are of the world, and this is precisely because they are subjects and objects—perceiving and being perceived—at the same time” (20). Our impulse to propagate an outward appearance is driven by the same impulse that is concerned with our very survival. This is because: “whatever can see wants to be seen, whatever can hear calls out to be heard, whatever can touch presents itself to be touched” (Arendt 29). Humans are social creatures who depend on each other to validate their
existence in the world. Arendt states: “Just as an actor depends upon stage, fellow-actors, and spectators, to make his entrance, every living thing depends upon a world that solidly appears as the location for its own appearance, on fellow-creatures to play with, and on spectators to acknowledge and recognize its existence” (21-22).

Living in a constant state of perception manifests our desire for self-presentation which is the foundation of formulating an identity. The subject of personal identity has been widely discussed and studied among scientists and philosophers. The philosophical discourse—having prefigured scientific study—on identity began with Descartes, who authored the famous mantra: “I think, therefore I am.” Many notable scientists and thinkers such as, Freud, Locke, and Nietzsche, were also pioneers on the subject of identity. In respect to the vast amount of research concerning personal identity, I will not delve into the complexities of the developmental stages of identity. Instead, my research focuses on how current technology assists in establishing personal and social identity.

As Spinoza suggested, we rely on our drives, motivations, emotions, and feelings to help us gravitate toward individuals and groups we find beneficial to our existence and well-being. Our association with these groups and their subsequent approval or disapproval of our actions assists in cultivating our identity (Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert 229). Current technology, such as social networking sites, provides the tools for creating and testing multiple semblances of ourselves.

Facebook, arguably the most popular online social networking site to date, has grown to over 500 million active users (Facebook, nd)—almost twice the current population of the United States and 10% of the global population (U.S. Census Bureau, nd).
Given the vast amount of potential spectators, Facebook provides a unique opportunity to formulate and showcase one’s identity by providing a platform for users to interact with peers and gather instant feedback. "In general, communication is facilitated through information posted in the profile (i.e., the user’s personal page), which often includes a photograph of the member and personal information describing his or her interests, both of which provide information about an identity” (Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert 236). In addition to traditional identity markers—religion, political ideology, and work—recent research has shown that media preferences such as favorite music, movies, and books have also been found to be important in formulating one’s identity (Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert 236). By disclosing specific personal information and interests, users have the ability to craft a new identity based solely on how they want to be perceived by their peers—similar to the way adolescents change their style of clothing to fit a stereotype. The rapid dissemination of information on Facebook allows a carefully crafted identity to be validated by appearing instantaneously to their peers. Furthermore, a user can easily change their personal information and interests based on peer feedback and their desire for acceptance into a specific group.

Twitter is another popular social networking tool that currently has 175 million registered users. In comparison to Facebook, Twitter only allows a limited amount of personal information that includes name, location, a small photograph, a Web site, and a brief written biography. The core use of Twitter is to provide an open exchange of information between its users. Communication is facilitated through small bursts of information called Tweets, which are limited to 140 alphanumeric characters. Tweets can
be viewed as a personal headline announcing information a user deems noteworthy. In contrast to Facebook, Twitter users establish identity by only the information they share, rather than what is displayed on their profile page. This allows Twitter to act as prime resource for establishing social identity. Recent research suggests that users form communities within Twitter based on the information they provide and seek (Java et al., par. 4). Users gain “followers” if other members find the nature of their updates to be of value. These large groups of followers are the foundation of communities based on a shared interest. Subsequently, users can play different roles in multiple communities by being an information source and a seeker simultaneously (Java et al., par. 4). This allows users to potentially maintain multiple identities at once. When one gains a multitude of followers—which could reach the millions—a certain level of positive self-esteem is established and one’s role of importance and identity in a community is validated.

Celebrities are a major user base who utilizes Twitter to address their legion of fans or “followers”. This two-way relationship simultaneously validates the celebrity’s popular identity while justifying a fan’s admiration. As part of my research into the role of technology in establishing an identity, I became a follower of 140 different celebrities on Twitter. I compared the information they provided through their Tweets with other media, such as videos and photographs, they posted of themselves on other social networking and personal Web sites. What I discovered was an interesting case of multiple identities.

I created a video art series titled, Status Check, to illustrate how technology provides the means to facilitate and maintain multiple identities. In the videos, I expose different facets of a celebrity’s personality based on the information provided through their social
networking activities. By combining two—sometimes hypocritical—identities, I craft a new portrait of the celebrity.

![Figure 8: Status Check: Heidi Montag, Video Still](Image)

Heidi Montag is a reality television star with aspirations to be a singer. In *Status Check: Heidi Montag*, text-to-speech digital technology is used to create audio versions of her Tweets. I then combined the audio with video footage taken from her music video to create a portrait that feels, at times, hypocritical. Her Tweets consist of proclamations of her Christian faith by exclaiming, “Thank you God for every precious moment of life. Thank you God for making dreams come true. Anything and everything is possible with Jesus!” In contrast, the music video exhibits Montag using body language that implies a sexual demeanor that is normally not associated with conservative Christian faith. In regards to hypocrisy and identity, Arendt notes that “self-preservation is distinguished from self-
display by the active and conscious choice of the image shown” (36). While self-display concerns itself with the act of simply appearing without choice, self-presentation relies on a degree of self-awareness which opens itself to hypocrisy and pretense. As humans, we are designed with the mental capacity to control our identities and how we appear in this world. Current technologies allow us to “try on” different identities by providing a venue to present ourselves in many ways. However, Socrates warns, “Be as you wish to seem.” This implies that our identity should be the same regardless if we have an audience or not because, in the end, truth and reality will prevail because of the inability of what is make-believe to endure and remain consistent (Arendt 36).

Conclusion

Arendt states: “To be alive means to live in a world that precedes one’s own arrival and will survive one’s own departure” (20). This fundamental truth is my motivation to create art that becomes a testament of human existence during my lifetime. Artists, past and present, have served as visual historians. Their works are invaluable in our understanding of the state of humanity during their time on earth—from Massacio, Michelangelo, and Velázquez to Monet, Van Gogh, and Cézanne to Matisse, Picasso, and Duchamp. History has been largely documented by literature and static visual imagery until technological advances introduced the motion picture in the late 19th century. I wish to combine innovative thinking and current technology to continue the tradition of documenting human existence. I find it fascinating that we are no two alike. I would like to
create *Moving Portraits* of thousands of people in my lifetime with the intention of illustrating the inherently beautiful architecture of human beings.

Ayn Rand believes that art fulfills a man's profound need to confirm “his view of existence—a confirmation, not in the sense of resolving cognitive doubts, but in the sense of permitting him to contemplate his abstractions outside his own mind, in the form of existential concretes” (28). I believe my art work is valuable because it validates the existence of every person in my portraits and provides them a form of immortality. I create art with the intention that future generations will use my work to gain a better understanding of humanity. I believe that we, as artists, should recognize our role throughout history and move forward knowing that what we leave behind for future generations is all that they have to learn from. Furthermore, I believe that artists play a vital role in the evolution of humanity because “art is inextricably tied to man’s survival—not to his physical survival, but to that on which his physical survival depends: to the preservation and survival of his consciousness” (Rand 5).
LIST OF REFERENCES


