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**DECONSTRUCTING SOCIAL ANXIETY: THROUGH GIFS AND THE INSPIRATION
OF ARTISTS' BOOKS**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

PROFESSOR BLASSINGAME

PROFESSOR OGASIAN

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Abstract

My project deconstructs social anxiety through the form of gifs. This is an important issue to address especially now, as it is one the most current stressors for my peers and myself upon returning to school after over a year in quarantine. Although not everyone has had the same experience, there is a large concern for students' mental health and well-being post-pandemic. Learning how to re-navigate socializing after a year in isolation has been exhausting, physically and mentally, adjusting to places and new faces on campus. My work is composed of a series of three digital gifs that depict different perspectives of social anxiety and what one may feel when experiencing it. Inspired by walking throughout campus and taking notes of what I felt and thought while interacting with or observing people in social settings, my work aims to help others who may not experience social anxiety to understand a component of it, as well as help others living with anxiety know that they are not alone.

Introduction

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, social anxiety is defined as an anxiety where fear of embarrassment or negative judgement by others will occur in social situations. My project's target audience includes college students¹; however, it is relatable to people of all ages navigating post-pandemic living and adjusting to a busy and social society. I acknowledge that creating a project on the topic of social anxiety as a pressing issue comes from a place of privilege, myself having been able to gain access to mental health resources as well as coming from a financially sound background and stable living environment.

I was first inspired by artists' books to create my project, which emerged in the 20th century from the Fluxus movement. During this time, some artist books existed as experimental works of art, intentionally unique from traditional books found in the library or at the store.² The form of an experimental narrative depicting social anxiety made sense to me because of its changing nature, similar to anxiety and how it can be triggered suddenly.³ Originally, I wanted to pursue this genre, inspired by book forms from the Fluxus movement made up of various materials and varying sizes and shapes. However, I decided to create a digital project that was better suited to my idea, I had more flexibility in experimenting with technology and confidence in executing my project in a digital format as opposed to a traditional physical form.

¹ Son, Changwon, Sudeep Hegde, Alec Smith, Xiaomei Wang, and Farzan Sasangohar. "Effects of COVID-19 on College Students' Mental Health in the United States: Interview Survey Study." *Journal of medical Internet research*. JMIR Publications, September 3, 2020. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7473764/>.

² "Smithsonian Libraries Artists' Books: Introduction." Smithsonian Libraries, January 1, 1970. <https://library.si.edu/collection/artists-books/introduction>.

³ Holland, Kimberly. "11 Anxiety Triggers and How to Identify and Manage Them." Healthline. Healthline Media, March 28, 2020. <https://www.healthline.com/health/anxiety/anxiety-triggers#triggers>.

My project is an animated series in the form of gifs, documenting social anxiety. I explored various places around campus, choosing three environments where social anxiety could be prevalent. The specific locations are places where I personally experienced social anxiety, however it is meant to be a generalized selection for viewers to possibly relate to. I chose the seating area under Elm Tree lawn, a crosswalk between Scripps and Claremont McKenna near the Kravis Center, and the bookshelves in the Honnold Mudd Library. Each place has its own significance relating to social anxiety, the first one representing the anxiety of having to choose a spot to sit at for meals. The crosswalk speaks to the anxiety one may feel when encountering someone they recognize but don't want to see in the moment and turning another way to avoid the person completely. And the bookshelves in the library represents the thoughts of anxiety that one may have in any situation involving people or the possibility of people present in a space.

Theory and History

Inspired by my original idea of making a series of artists' books, my work intends to create an experience for the viewer. *Talking the Boundless Book: Art, Language, & the Book Arts* is a series of essays compiled by Charles Alexander in 1995.⁴ Throughout the book, essays written by Steven Clay, Dick Higgins, and Johanna Drucker reference an artist's book as a transformative experience, something created to invoke a feeling from the reader by reading and interacting with it. Dick Higgins, a member of the Fluxus art movement, described an experience of interacting with an artists' book by recognizing that different horizons have merged in the making of the book. Higgins used the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's metaphor on hermeneutics to explain his approach to viewing an artists' book. Hermeneutics, according to the

⁴ Higgins, Dick, and Charles Alexander. *Talking the Boundless Book: Art, Language, and The Book Arts: Essays from Art & Language: Re-Reading the Boundless Book a Minnesota Center for Book Arts Symposium*. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Center for Book Arts, 1995.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, defined as the study of interpretation⁵, relates to Higgins' point in his essay. In simpler terms, the viewer observes a transformed version of the original work of art, through edits and revisions that the artist and his or her collaborators worked on. If the viewer leaves with a sensible feeling that his or perspective has changed even in a minor way, the artists' book has been successful.⁶ My goal in creating my project was to leave the reader with a similar feeling to encourage thinking about social anxiety in a different lens.

A Soviet documentary filmmaker and director, Dziga Vertov was famously known for his work, *Man with a Movie Camera*, which utilized many perspectives in filming. I explored Vertov's theory of concepts within a film montage. He explained the arrangement of a composition as a blend of light and dark, recording speeds, and motion within frames.⁷ In my work, I did not explore the dynamics of lighting or recording speeds, but focused on the motion within frames, as previously discussed by Vertov. In the manifesto WE, created by the kinoks- a group of Soviet filmmakers coined "cinema-eye men" by Vertov, intervals within a montage describe "the transitions from one movement to another" as opposed to the action of the movement itself.⁸ These transitions in my project similarly exist in the form of layers created on a digital program to make short animations. A time limit exists for each image shown. For

⁵ George, Theodore. "Hermeneutics." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University, December 9, 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/>.

⁶ Higgins, Dick, and Charles Alexander. *Talking the Boundless Book: Art, Language, and The Book Arts: Essays from Art & Language: Re-Reading the Boundless Book a Minnesota Center for Book Arts Symposium*. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Center for Book Arts, 1995, 16-17.

⁷ Michelson, Annette, and Kevin O'Brien. *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1984, xxx.

⁸ Michelson, Annette, and Kevin O'Brien. *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1984, 5-8.

example, in the first gif, the first image plays for 9 seconds, the second image plays for 8 seconds, and the third plays for 7 seconds. Through these intervals, frames capture the motion within.⁹

In the realm of the digital world, numerous examples explain the significance of text playing a role in the narrative of a project. In *Digital Art, Beyond the book: Narrative environments*, author Christiane Paul discusses artist Masaki Fujihata's 1995 *Beyond Pages*¹⁰ work, composed of a digital projection where the viewer interacts with images that resemble physical objects like an apple and a door. The project toys with the idea of the conventional book, made of unmoving objects and images inside such as words and text, and offering a new perspective on what digital art can bring to the art world.¹¹

In another work, *Text Rain* (1999) created by Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv, viewers interact with falling letters of the alphabet by moving their body parts and bodies in relation to their shadows in the projected installation.¹² Interactive digital art has a large impact on crossing the boundaries between the physical space and time. Although my work is not exactly installation based, my inspiration comes from the intersection of interactivity and art. The text in my project appears in a sequential form but is meant for the viewer to read as

⁹ Michelson, Annette, and Kevin O'Brien. *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1984, xxx.

¹⁰ "Masaki Fujihata: Beyond Pages: 1995." ZKM, January 1, 1995.
<https://zkm.de/en/artwork/beyond-pages>.

¹¹ Paul, Christiane. *Digital Art. 3rd Rev. Ed.* Farnborough: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2015, 2257-2262.

¹² Paul, Christiane. *Digital Art. 3rd Rev. Ed.* Farnborough: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2015, 2262-2267.

opposed to interacting with it. Perhaps if I had more time to explore my work, I would experiment with the interactivity of the viewer in the space of my gifs through a wall projection.

In the foreword of *Sequences: Contemporary Chronophotography and Experimental Digital Art* edited by Paul St Geroge, Michael Mazière writes that “perception, like art, is an interpretive process in which the subject is not a viewer but an active participant”.¹³ This idea of perception is present in the technique of chronophotography, or in simpler terms, moving pictures.¹⁴ Developed for studying animal behavior and movements in the Victorian era, chronophotography captured a succession of movements through the camera. The purpose of the technique was to further examine the motion of the subject photographed.

I used a method similar to this technique to create my project, filming my friend as the supporting character in my second gif about avoiding a person. However, I did not take chronological photos of the succession of my friend’s movements. Instead, I took a video of her crossing the street, pausing and screenshotting each frame I wanted to capture of her movement. This resulted in a series of photographs compiled from the video. My intention was to create a perception of depth for the viewer as the main character in my animated gifs, having the secondary figure walking towards the frame, while having the viewer, or the main character, appear to be drawing nearer and farther away from the walking figure depending on the frame succession.

¹³ George, Paul St, ed. *Sequences: Contemporary Chronophotography and Experimental Digital Art*. London: Wallflower, 2009, vii.

¹⁴ George, Paul St, ed. *Sequences: Contemporary Chronophotography and Experimental Digital Art*. London: Wallflower, 2009, vii.

In chronophotography, frame rates and spacing affect the movement of an object in motion. The faster the frame rate, the smaller the spacing between each image, creating an illusion of continuity within the image.¹⁵ Eadweard Muybridge, an English photographer who emigrated in 1851 to America, represented an early form of chronophotography in his work.¹⁶ In 1872, Leland Stanford, horse owner and president of the Central Pacific Railroad¹⁷, hired Muybridge to photograph horses, although Muybridge was known for landscape photography. Stanford was interested in solving the mystery behind horses' trots and whether or not horses were suspended in the air for a brief moment. After Muybridge conducted a series of photographs, they concluded that due to the technological credibility of the camera, the horses were suspended in the air, however some still doubted the accuracy of the conclusion.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Muybridge paved the path for moving pictures and many people were inspired by his photographs expanding the idea of time.

I experimented with the idea of differing frame rates through my project, exploring different spacings between each frame in my gifs to create a more disjointed perception of movement as opposed to a continuous one. I wanted to emphasize the nature of anxiety as a concept that is not smooth but instead fragmented with elements of surprise. The medium of chronophotography influenced my artistic decision in creating many frames within each gif I

¹⁵ George, Paul St, ed. *Sequences: Contemporary Chronophotography and Experimental Digital Art*. London: Wallflower, 2009, 12-13.

¹⁶ George, Paul St, ed. *Sequences: Contemporary Chronophotography and Experimental Digital Art*. London: Wallflower, 2009, 25-27.

¹⁷ Solnit, Rebecca. *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003, 5, 45, 59.

¹⁸ George, Paul St, ed. *Sequences: Contemporary Chronophotography and Experimental Digital Art*. London: Wallflower, 2009, 25-27.

created and plays a significant role throughout my project. Drawing back to Dziga Vertov's theory about intervals within a montage¹⁹, my project explores the idea of movement through the succession of images, represented as layers in my post-production process.

Paul Strand, an American photographer and filmmaker, explored the idea of fragmented perception in his work *Manhatta* (1921). Working together with Charles Sheeler in directing the film, Strand and Sheeler captured "visual interest through dynamic compositional force".²⁰ They were able to succeed with this idea by using a variety of basic geometric shapes to create an illusion of intense perspectives, using technical attributes of photography such as creating shots with very high or low angles.²¹ Similarly, in my work, I experimented with the idea of using angles to create movement and interest in my gifs. In the first gif, I created layers of tables appearing on top of each other, the largest ones in the front and the smallest in the back. I played around with the idea of perspective through the size of the tables, however, my work is not as extreme or profound as Strand and Sheeler's piece. In the third gif, I experimented with changing the angle from looking down a row of bookshelves on either side, to slanting the bookshelves for viewing purposes from the right side. My work is similar in using basic geometric shapes like rectangles, circles, and squares to convey somewhat of an altered perspective for the viewer.

¹⁹ Michelson, Annette, and Kevin O'Brien. *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1984, xxx.

²⁰ Horak, Jan-Christopher. *Making Images Move: Photographers and Avant-Garde Cinema*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, 88.

²¹ Horak, Jan-Christopher. *Making Images Move: Photographers and Avant-Garde Cinema*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, 88.

Robert Breer, an American abstract painter, filmmaker, and experimental animator, explored the idea of animation through a multitude of various images. He experimented with the concept of cinema he defined as “single images one after another in quick succession fusing into motion” in a statement in April 1959.²² Breer had the idea of keeping images in their concrete form while changing them through altering time, specifically allowing the viewer to see the image for 1/24 of a second.²³ His work *Fist Fight*, made in 1964, conveys the idea of rapid successions of movement while switching from image to image.²⁴ Through Breer’s work, a new concept of continuous images emerged as an experimental form of animation. At the end of his statement, he mentions that if images are “pushed to extremes the resulting vibration brings about an almost static image on the screen”.²⁵ This is similar to my project in which I experimented with the rapid succession of images layering on top of each other to create one solid color.

Although slightly different, my idea of layering images on top of each other relates to Breer’s concept of altering time to create an almost singular image composed of many different moving images. The purpose of having different images was to keep the viewer invested in the

²² Russett, Robert, and Cecile Starr. In *Experimental Animation: Origins of a New Art*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1988, 134.

²³ Russett, Robert, and Cecile Starr. In *Experimental Animation: Origins of a New Art*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1988, 134.

²⁴ Russett, Robert, and Cecile Starr. In *Experimental Animation: Origins of a New Art*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1988, 135.

²⁵ Russett, Robert, and Cecile Starr. In *Experimental Animation: Origins of a New Art*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1988, 135.

work and intrigued in each new image he or she could see.²⁶ In the gif about feeling trapped in my own thoughts, I created multiple layers of bookshelves on top of each other. Though my image layers are transparent so they overlap, the idea is similar to Breer's experimentation with the animated form. However, my project is different in the sense that I intend each image to flow into the next, similar to traditional animation as opposed to the idea of having the viewer experience a different sensation with each image, as explained by Breer.²⁷

I would argue that my work falls into the category of an experimental narrative, through the medium of the gif. In *Foundation Flash 8*, the animated gif is defined as "a collection of static images that play one after another at a specified speed".²⁸ This definition is similar to Robert Breer's definition of cinema²⁹, as well as the concept of chronophotography³⁰. My work conveys the idea of a succession of images, through the layers of photographs derived from video content in my process of creating the gifs. Though not as intense, my work aligns with Breer's concept of images moving so rapidly that the entire image becomes one.³¹

²⁶ Russett, Robert, and Cecile Starr. In *Experimental Animation: Origins of a New Art*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1988, 134-135.

²⁷ Russett, Robert, and Cecile Starr. In *Experimental Animation: Origins of a New Art*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1988, 135.

²⁸ Bhangal, Sham, Amanda Farr, and Patrick Rey. *Foundation Flash 5*. Birmingham: Friends of, 2000, 161.

²⁹ Russett, Robert, and Cecile Starr. In *Experimental Animation: Origins of a New Art*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1988, 134.

³⁰ George, Paul St, ed. *Sequences: Contemporary Chronophotography and Experimental Digital Art*. London: Wallflower, 2009, 12-13.

³¹ Russett, Robert, and Cecile Starr. In *Experimental Animation: Origins of a New Art*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1988, 135.

Process

My project consists of three animated gifs depicting specific moments of social anxiety when one is experiencing it. I created it by taking videos of myself walking through spaces and taking note of what I felt and experienced in relation to seeing other people and feeling anxious as a result. I then exported the video and took screenshots of each frame I wanted to focus on, importing the files to Procreate and tracing the outline of the main objects in the scene, such as environmental scenery or physical objects. Then, I duplicated some parts of the scene depending on what I wanted to convey in each gif. For example, I duplicated the tables in the first gif to convey a feeling of being overwhelmed, and the crosswalk in the second scene to depict walking towards someone, and then turning away to avoid them. For the third scene, I duplicated one section of a bookshelf and multiplied it to convey a sense of being trapped in a space. Some of the places I explored to reach my final three scenes were the basement of Honnold Library, the intersection between Scripps and Claremont McKenna, walking up the stairs of the library, Elm Tree Lawn at Scripps, a classroom in the Humanities building, and the walkway outside my dorm.

My process did not go as expected. However, I learned many things while creating this project, including time management, organizing my schedule of when to work, as well as not being afraid to reach out to my professors when I needed help. Earlier in the semester, my intent was to create a tunnel book. I wanted to depict social anxiety in multiple layers, inspired by the idea of deconstructing social anxiety through the physical separation of layers. I took a photo of a walkway near my dorm room, to convey the idea of deconstructing a space that helped me be calm, as opposed to stressed, and importing the image into Photoshop. I outlined the trees into separate layers and printed those images out so I could hand-cut paper with an exacto knife. I

made several copies of these cutouts so I could experiment with the layers. My intent was to create a project that could be compared to a physical environment, in which the viewer could compartmentalize the specific surrounding and de-construct possible anxieties within the numerous panels created throughout the three books. Though the form of the project changed, the idea of deconstructing layers of anxiety remained the same in the final iteration of my work, in the duration of each frame.

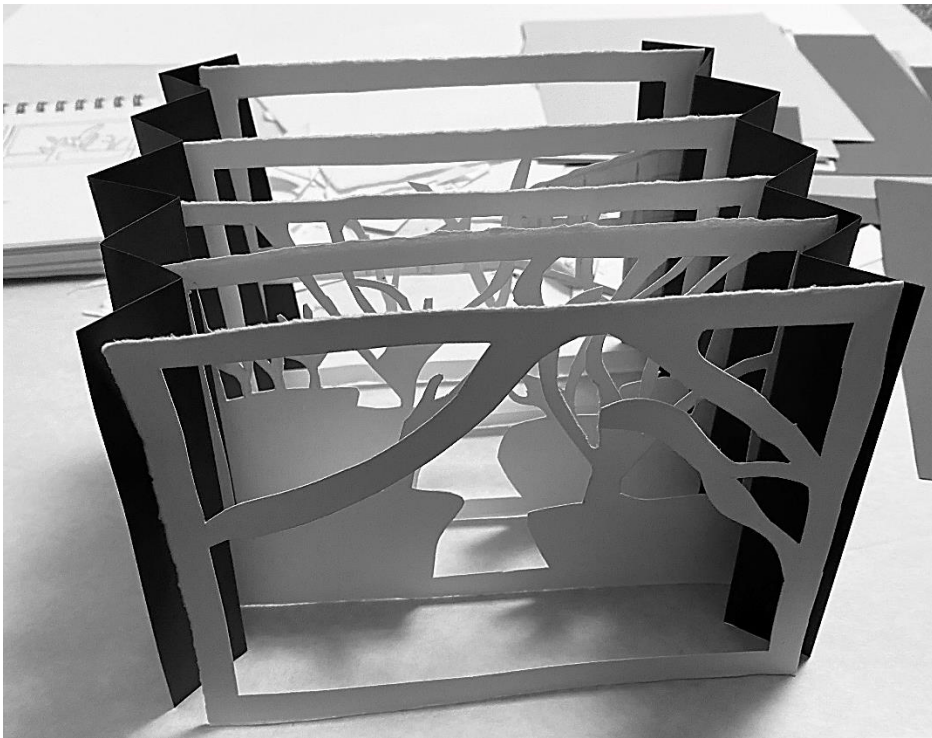


Figure 1: Tunnel book experimentation

During the first walk-through, the feedback I received was to experiment with different materials, such as balsa wood, as well as creating multiple books to end up with a series of books that would convey my idea of different spaces on campus that brought about feelings of social anxiety. In addition, a suggestion was to use the method of using a laser cutter to create my book. I tried experimenting with the laser cutter at the Makerspace at Harvey Mudd but was not as excited to see that the laser was very powerful and left a significant trace of burnt paper as well

as wood. I liked how the laser cutter was simple and efficient, however I wanted to create a project using techniques that I had already learned and could create with pre-existing knowledge.

My second idea within the project consisted of tracing an image and creating multiple layers in Procreate to create a gif. I still wanted to create a physical book, so I tried making a flip book to convey my idea. I felt confident that this form would be best suited for my project, but while experimenting with the form, I realized that I couldn't see all of the images that I had hoped the viewer would see while flipping through the book. I tried printing out many pages to create a better flow of the flipbook, but unfortunately it did not turn out the way I hoped.

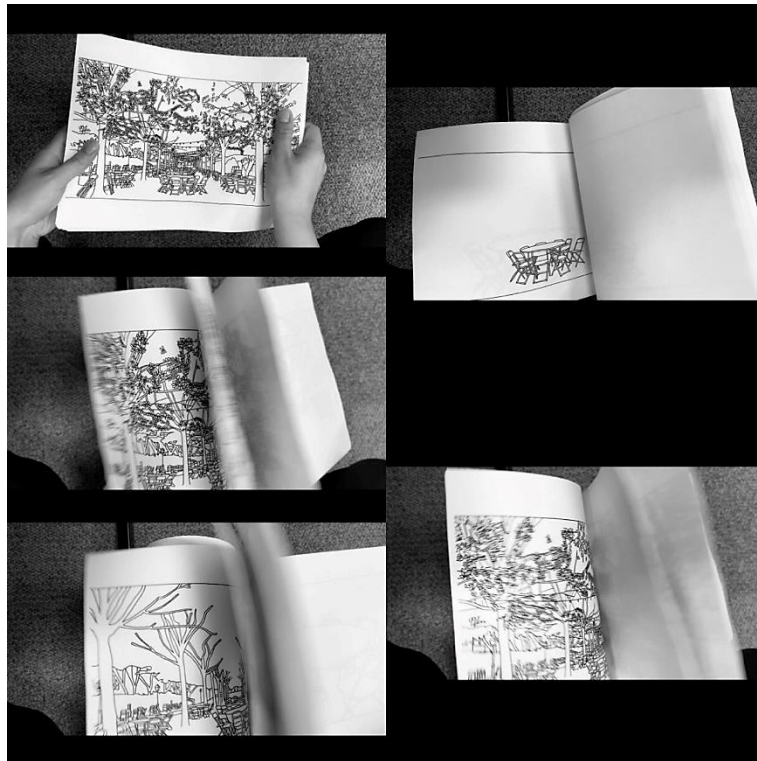


Figure 2: Flipbook experimentation

Next, I experimented with cutting out the tables in the first scene, to depict the feeling of being overwhelmed with many different sized tables. However, it was suggested that the physical form of the animation I was making was not conveying my idea clearly. With the help of feedback from my professors, I decided to stick to a digital format for my project because it

was a stronger form that still conveyed my idea of social anxiety with numerous layers deconstructing the moment I chose for my gifs.

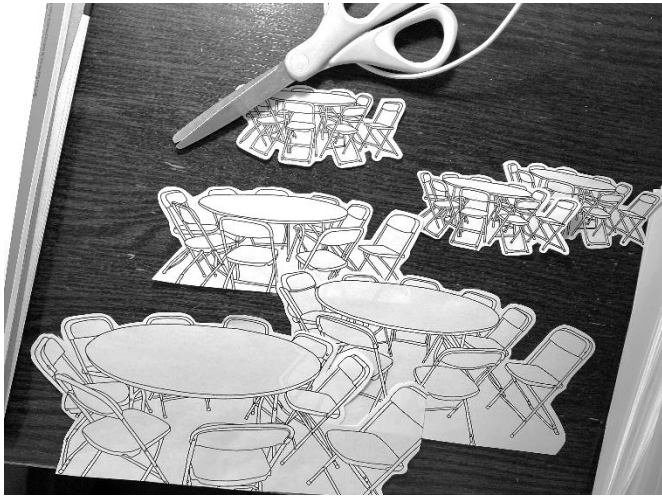


Figure 3: Cutting out tables

When I was thinking about creating a flipbook, I also wanted to incorporate a stress meter that would help me gauge the anxiety level I felt in each scene, to create a project that would be more in tune with reality and the anxiety of a specific situation. Tiffany Barber, the visiting lecturer, suggested that I focus on the stress meter itself, made up of colored construction paper. I had created a sliding scale using a small piece of paper and red, yellow, orange and green paper accompanying varying levels of potential stress from high to low. The idea was to take surveys of people experiencing social anxiety in the scenes I created, and to poll the data together to create a project surrounding the data collected. If I had more time, I would have experimented more with this idea, however due to the short amount of time I had left, I decided to stick with the material I already created, which were the different scenes. Perhaps I will continue to explore the idea of polling social anxiety stress levels in my future projects.

One surprise that stuck out to me while creating my project was deciding the medium for the project. I kept trying to avoid making a digital project, because going into the semester, I was fed up with online classes through zoom and having all my work be digital. For some reason, I really wanted to make a physical project, specifically in the form of a book of some sort. I had the idea since freshman year and wanted to compile the things that I learned over the years into a concrete form. However, I realized that the digital medium was one that I was the most comfortable with throughout the process of creating my thesis, and I was surprised that I kept avoiding it and trying to turn to other mediums in order to create something that would be physically tangible. I remembered I was a digital art major after all, and couldn't avoid the medium I had the most experience in. I finally decided on choosing the medium of the gif because I wanted to convey the feeling of social anxiety, and the format of multiple loops in a gif aligned with my idea of focusing on the idea of repeating pattern of thoughts within anxiety.

One of my friends watched the different videos of the gifs and gave me helpful feedback for each one. In the Overwhelmed scene, she suggested to add the moment in which I found the table to sit at, and to focus in on that particular table. This was similar to what one my readers suggested to me as well. In the Avoiding scene, I mentioned adding a physical object to clarify the start and end of the crosswalk, and she agreed that it would help make the scene more obvious to the viewer. For the last scene, Trapped, a suggestion was to incorporate something that would let the viewer know that the books in the scene represented anxious thoughts in my head. I took the suggestions and feedback I received from my professors and friends and incorporated some of their ideas into my project.

In the last walk-through, the main suggestion was to experiment more with the timing of the gifs. Some scenes were too rushed for the viewers, so I edited my gifs to convey intentional

time spent on specific frames. For example, in the third gif Trapped, I slowed down the succession of titles appearing on the spines of the books on the shelves so the reader could understand the scene more clearly. In the second gif Avoiding, I experimented with cutting up the sequence of the repeating loops to convey a disjointed feeling of social anxiety. I ended up slowing down parts of the gif to convey clearer movements between the frames.

Conclusion

Making this project helped me understand how to piece together a project with sources to back up my ideas, as well as breaking apart my own social anxieties to better understand myself and how I interact with the spaces around me. I learned throughout this whole process that I am hesitant to accept change and end up sticking to the concepts and techniques that I am familiar with. However, ironically, I am also stubborn in trying to figure out things my own way, and often end up sidetracked before I find the thing I really want to focus on, which is usually one of my first ideas. I learned that I am open to experimentation, but it takes me a while to accept the new idea or perspective in approaching my projects. I am grateful to my professors and readers for helping me throughout the process of creating my thesis project. There were many steps along the way that brought me to my current project, and even through the trials and errors, I found some successes.

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