The Void Between Us

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Abstract

My interactive thesis installation, *The Void Between Us*, addresses the topic of human connection in relationship to the body. The human body marks a physical barrier between one’s self and others. While we exist in the same physical sphere as one another, our minds are isolated in our own self-centered versions of reality. Our bodies allow us to perceive others and be perceived—including having verbal communications—and, therefore, could be seen as helpful or restrictive in the social world. However, our bodies also allow us to engage in physical interactions with others, such as sex, which is a means to forming closer connections. The preexisting voids between the self and others is exacerbated through contemporary forms of communication, which cause us to have disembodied interactions. By researching works by artists such as Yayoi Kusama, Nick Cave, Nicole Eisenman, Tracey Emin, and Ernesto Neto, as well as having a background in psychology, I came to further understand these relationships within the context of art. I created *The Void Between Us* with the hope of physical interaction connecting people more deeply to the piece.
Hannah Blumer

The Void Between Us

The human body—the vessel that grounds us—is the physical barrier between others and ourselves. Using one’s mind and bodily senses, one perceives others, largely basing her perceptions on external features of the individual’s body. However, there is also a distance between our minds and bodies, which becomes apparent when considering interactions such as sex and verbal communication. As my artwork builds off of these concepts, I have been investigating physical contact as a solution. The preexisting voids between the body and mind and between the self and others, created by varying perceptions and exacerbated by contemporary forms of communication, can be mediated through physical interaction in order to form truer connections. This physical connection felt between individuals can be mimicked, or at least represented, in art.

My thesis piece, The Void Between Us, is a pile of organically shaped, stuffed objects, which participants can approach, touch, and otherwise physically engage with (Figure 1-2). There is something anthropomorphic about the pile, and yet, unlike a body—which usually creates a barrier—it has been broken down into many unconnected pieces. Made from old clothing, felt, and paint, the tactile surfaces of these “bodies”—as I call them—
are covered with written messages, cultural symbols, and sexual references (Figure 3). These visual stimuli represent the extent to which one individual is able to perceive another from the exterior. However, the piece also invites the viewer to enter the realm of physical interaction, which is what my work is centered on.

The relationship between the body and mind is crucial to my work. In my “Doll” series, I integrated the concepts of body and mind, creating hand-sized dolls with crudely shaped human forms (Figure 4). I use them to represent a spectrum of intangible emotions, but their tactility also connects them to the viewers’ and my own body, especially while I made them.

There is a duality within this tactile experience, as well. Sensory experiences, which are initially perceived through one’s body, then are analyzed by one’s mind. I have experimented with sensory experiences in multiple other projects, isolating and manipulating the participants’ senses. For the interactive sculpture Untitled (Table and Beanbag) (2014), I attempt to enhance participants’ haptic experiences by making the piece monochromatic, diminishing the visual stimuli (Figure 5). Likewise, in Food Porn (2015), I play with synesthesia, simulating the gustatory sense through the visual experience of watching a digital animation. For both, I considered the relationship between individual viewers and the work, as well as how I perceive things. Specifically, I
questioned whether there would be common ground among people’s experiences. According to Wright, a perception is “a particular thing existing here and now for a living individual,” as opposed to an objective truth (Wright 437). In other words, everyone’s viewpoint is formulated based on her self-centered perception of reality. This mental isolation from one another, despite existing in the same physical dimension, is one factor that creates the void between one’s self and others. With this in mind, my thesis work is based on the assumption that individuals’ interactions with the piece are more reflective of their own perceptions than anything else.

There are multiple ways to address the topic of human connection, keeping in mind the void between the mind and body. One route is to focus primarily on either the mental or bodily aspects of human interaction. I first became interested in closing this void before creating my thesis work. After noting people’s lack of interaction with strangers while in public spaces, I created Light Cycle, an interactive, public installation in University City, Missouri (Figure 6). The pedal-powered sculpture initiates collaborative social interactions and creates a humorous shared experience between individuals in Rabe Park with the goal of breaking unnecessary inter-personal boundaries and creating moments of connection. Light Cycle addresses human connection only in terms of verbal communication with minimal regards to the individuals’ bodies.

In her artwork as well as outside of her work, Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama collapses the division between mind and body, reflecting a more bodily way of thinking (Figure 7). For example, in an interview with BOMB Magazine, she refers to her painting “obsession [as having]
been lodged in [her] body” (qtd. in Kusama). Her utilization of “happenings”—or spontaneous occurrences, events, situations, or performances that are meant to be considered art and typically involve audience participation—also presents the human body in a way that emphasizes its physicality as well as calls into question one’s connection to others. The figures in Kusama’s happenings—which she calls “Body Festivals”—are usually nude with painted bodies, as seen in the photograph of her “Anatomic Explosion Happening” (1968), because, according to Kusama, “painting bodies with [polka dots] obliterated their individual selves and returned them to the infinite universe” (qtd. in Kusama) (Figure 8). This statement implies that one needs a bodily connection to something greater than herself, beginning to suggest a way in which one can be more connected to others through physical means.

However, a significant aspect of human relationships is people’s intangible perceptions of one another. These judgments are formed based on external factors. For example, since one cannot know what someone else is thinking, she has to trust what the person says. Emotions can sometimes be perceived through physiological reactions, but are mostly internal and,
therefore, hidden. For the most part, the body marks a barrier between one’s mind and external features that are exposed to the perceptions of others.

There are varying degrees to which people share the same perceptions as one another. In “Cybersex: Outercourse and the Enselfment of the Body,” Waskul, Douglass, and Edgley argue that all individuals have a wide range of selves, since “we are one thing to one person and something else to another” but that the human body “is not simply a fluid set of meanings. It is an empirically verifiable and objectively real thing” (Waskul, Douglass, and Edgley 376; 377). However, I believe that, while the existence of a body is verifiable, any further perceptions formed about it are subject to bias. This can become problematic when societal factors come into play. Based on influences such as ethnic and gender stereotypes, people end up misjudging individuals whom they do not know well and projecting expectations onto them. For this reason, the corporeal body, “which contains the self,” could be seen as restrictive in the social world (Waskul, Douglass, and Edgley 377).

Reflecting a similar point-of-view, Nick Cave combats societally based perceptions of people’s external features with his elaborate Soundsuits, which mask and distort the performers’ bodies (Figure 9). Cave draws influence from many different societies’ ceremonial costumes, Cave combines the look of African ceremonial costumes with the “wild playfulness and showy

Figure 9: Three of Nick Cave’s Soundsuits.
elaboration of Mardi Gras and carnival, not to mention everything from glittery Haitian flags to chunky Southeast Asian embroidery” (Knight). Reviewer Christopher Knight points out that the shape of the costumes “does two things: makes the figure larger than life while simultaneously obliterating the wearer's face” (Knight). This strips the wearer of his or her own identity but in an empowering way, replacing it with a vibrant collage of world identities. Cave, who is “interested in crossing boundaries[,] … combin[es …] representation and abstraction,” essentially creating a universal identity in each costume (qtd. in Cave). Thus, the Soundsuits combat misperceptions that are created by society basing judgments too heavily on physical appearance (Figure 10).

Superficial perceptions become even more relevant when considering the fashion industry. Although I have always been inspired by fashion, it brings with it many issues about body image, gender, and other social topics. In their Fall 2015 Ready-To-Wear Collection, the designer brand Libertine references these topics with symbols and words on their clothing (Figure 11). Similarly, for the reception of “Surfaces for Rent”—my thesis exhibition—I designed
a jumpsuit covered in fabric eyes and braids (Figure 12). In addition to the combining tactility and the visual sense, the jumpsuit has an eye in the center of each breast that challenges and looks back at anyone who makes eye contact with it. This guilt-triggering reference bodily perception references gender tensions in society that could get in the way of people forming human connections.

This issue is relevant in the contemporary era, but there is also a new issue in society that needs to be considered in regard to human connection. The advent of digital communication has exacerbated the voids between the body and mind and the self and others. More often than not, people “interact” without even being in the same physical location as one another. According to the authors of “Prototyping Social Interaction,” technology in contemporary society has “eased interpersonal communication,” rather than hinder it, “and brought it into new contexts such as bus stops, trains, cars, and city streets” (Kurvinen, Koskinen, and Battarbee 46). However, the possibility for miscommunication has increased immensely because people do not have the ability to read one another’s body language.

Furthermore, without these tangible interactions, the possibility for physical connection is lost entirely. Cybersex is the ultimate example of this interruption to our connections. On-line sexual interactions remove the physical aspect from sex, which is normally very bodily. Nicole Eisenman’s sensual, bodily depiction in *Swimmers in the
Lap Lane (1995) reflects the artist’s experience with her own body, providing “a sort of a Petri dish of human interaction, both sexual and social” (Knudsen) (Figure 13). The work is the polar opposite of cybersex, which explicitly contradicts its own form, simulating a “tactile [experience] through a non-tactile medium” where “typed words necessarily communicate taken-for-granted actions” (Waskul, Douglass, and Edgley 375; 376). Cybersex creates a disembodied social and sexual experience, “potentially reshaping body-to-self-to-social-world relationships” (Waskul, Douglass, and Edgley 375).

Addressing the same issues as cybersex, Tracey Emin’s Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995 (1995) uses disembodiment in a very different way in order to express the void Emin feels between herself and others (Figure 14). Through the tactile, comforting medium of felt as well as laborious handcraftsmanship—similar to my own work—Emin addresses the physical intimacy of sleeping in a bed with someone, as well as sexual relationships. She fills a womb-like tent with names, as if to fill a void she feels because the people are no longer physically here.

Figure 13: Nicole Eisenman’s oil painting Swimmers in the Lap Lane.

Figure 14: Installation view and detail of Tracey Emin’s Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995.
with her. This work emphasizes the role of bodily presence in human relationships.

The data from experiments conducted by Harry F. Harlow and Stephen J. Suomi isolating infant monkeys for the first few months of life exemplify this need for in-person and bodily contact. Data was collected from infant monkeys in different conditions—one completely isolated, one given a surrogate mother made out of a towel and wire, and one with a real mother. Those who were completely isolated had a crippled ability to interact with other monkeys once they were introduced into society. This suggests that sexual and social behaviors had to be learned during face-to-face interaction with other monkeys at an early age. Additionally, the monkeys who were given surrogates but no real mothers “began to contact the surrogates with increasing frequency and duration,” suggesting they were comforted by their presence (Harlow and Suomi 1535-1536) (Figure 15). This only demonstrates how desperate they were for social contact and not necessarily that a surrogate satisfied it “since the inanimate surrogates could provide no further social stimulation” (Harlow and Suomi 1536). This data alludes to the importance face-to-face interaction and physical contact for living beings.

All of these examples—and the fact that the body is at the core of perception—suggest that direct physical contact could be the way to form the strongest connections. According to
Wright, perception through “the tactual sense” is the most “conclusive verification” of a perception (Wright 438). Therefore, physical interaction helps close the gap between the self and others by lessening discrepancies in perception. If this is the case with human interactions, perhaps a bodily interaction with art would enhance the viewing experience. The ART21 article “Careful Not to Touch” describes people’s natural impulses to connect their bodies to works of art, even if they do not know what they stand to learn from touching it. This is in regard to making physical contact, but also in describing Constantin Brancusi’s *Portrait of Mademoiselle Pogany* (1912), one man reportedly “moved his arm in a slow arc, […] embodying [the piece’s] contours while he spoke” (Svenonius) (Figure 16). This demonstrates that his natural instinct was to experience the work in a physical, bodily way. Furthermore, “moving parts [in art], particularly controls such as levers and buttons, expressly beg to be touched” (Svenonius). When an artwork presents a mechanism that confounds the viewer, but he or she is only allowed to stand in front of it, rather than touch it, “some visitors feel [a disconnection]” (Svenonius). These movable parts are one aspect of the viewer desiring a physical connection with the work. Other works that are clearly meant to be interactive, such as Ernesto Neto’s...
Humanoids Family, evidently induce a bodily reaction, as well (Figure 17).

In order to form human connections, one must overcome the barriers that are inherent between one’s body and mind and one’s self and others. The tangibility of our bodies can act as either a boundary, holding us back to some extent, or a means to forming deeper connections. With The Void Between Us, I hope to support the latter concept and even explore the possibility of mimicking a physical connection created between people with art (Figure 18). We could question what the true nature of any of these feelings of connection are, since they are only another fabrication of our own minds. However, with our self-centered perceptions of reality, it is what we feel that truly matters. For this reason, I will continue to engage people’s perceptions and bodies through art.

Figure 18: Detail of a printed “letter to Mama” from The Void Between Us.
Works Cited


Figures and Illustrations

**Figure 1:** Blumer, Hannah. *The Void Between Us.* 2016. Clothing, felt, polyfill, paint, rug. Artist’s personal collection, St. Louis. Photograph by Stan Strembicki.

**Figure 2:** Blumer, Hannah. *The Void Between Us* (installation view). 2016. Clothing, felt, polyfill, paint, rug. Artist’s personal collection, St. Louis. Photograph by Terry Blumer.

**Figure 3:** Blumer, Hannah. *The Void Between Us* (detail). 2016. Clothing, felt, polyfill, paint, rug. Artist’s personal collection, St. Louis. Photograph by Judith Martin.

**Figure 4:** Blumer, Hannah. *Untitled (Dolls No. 2).* 2015. Muslin, polyester, acrylic, ink, plastic, pastel, clay, rubber, T-pins. Artist’s personal collection, St. Louis. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

**Figure 5:** Blumer, Hannah. *Untitled (Table and Beanbag).* 2014. Wood, paint, glass, muslin, styrofoam, fleece, faux fur, cotton sheeting, velvet, burlap, tulle, suede, mesh fabric, canvas, foam, plastic, rubber, rope, ketchup packets, medical tape and bandages, shoelaces, clay, glue, hardware. Artist’s personal collection, St. Louis. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

**Figure 6:** Blumer, Hannah. *Light Cycle* (installation view). 2016. Steel, concrete, enamel, plastic, electrical components. University City Commission of Arts & Letters, St. Louis. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

**Figure 7:** Kusama, Yayoi. *Infinity Mirror Room (Phalli’s Field).* 1965. Installation. Castellane Gallery, New York.

**Figure 8:** Kusama, Yayoi. “Anatomic Explosion Happening.” 1968. Multimedia happening. Alice in Wonderland statue, Central Park, New York.

**Figure 9:** Cave, Nick. *Soundsuits.* 2008. Chicago. *B4MODA.* Web. 11 Mar. 2016.


**Figure 11:** Libertine. “Fall 2015 Ready-To-Wear Collection (Look 11).” 2015. *Vogue Magazine.* Web. 27 Apr. 2016.


Figure 18: Blumer, Hannah. *The Void Between Us* (detail). 2016. Clothing, felt, polyfill, paint, rug. Artist’s personal collection, St. Louis. Photograph by Judith Martin.