

~~EVERYTHING WILL BE OKAY~~

BFA Thesis
Hannah Hillier

“An odd by-product of my loss is that I am aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet...I see people, as they approach me, trying to make up their minds whether they’ll ‘say something about it’ or not. I hate if they do, and if they don’t.”

- C.S. Lewis, A Grief Observed

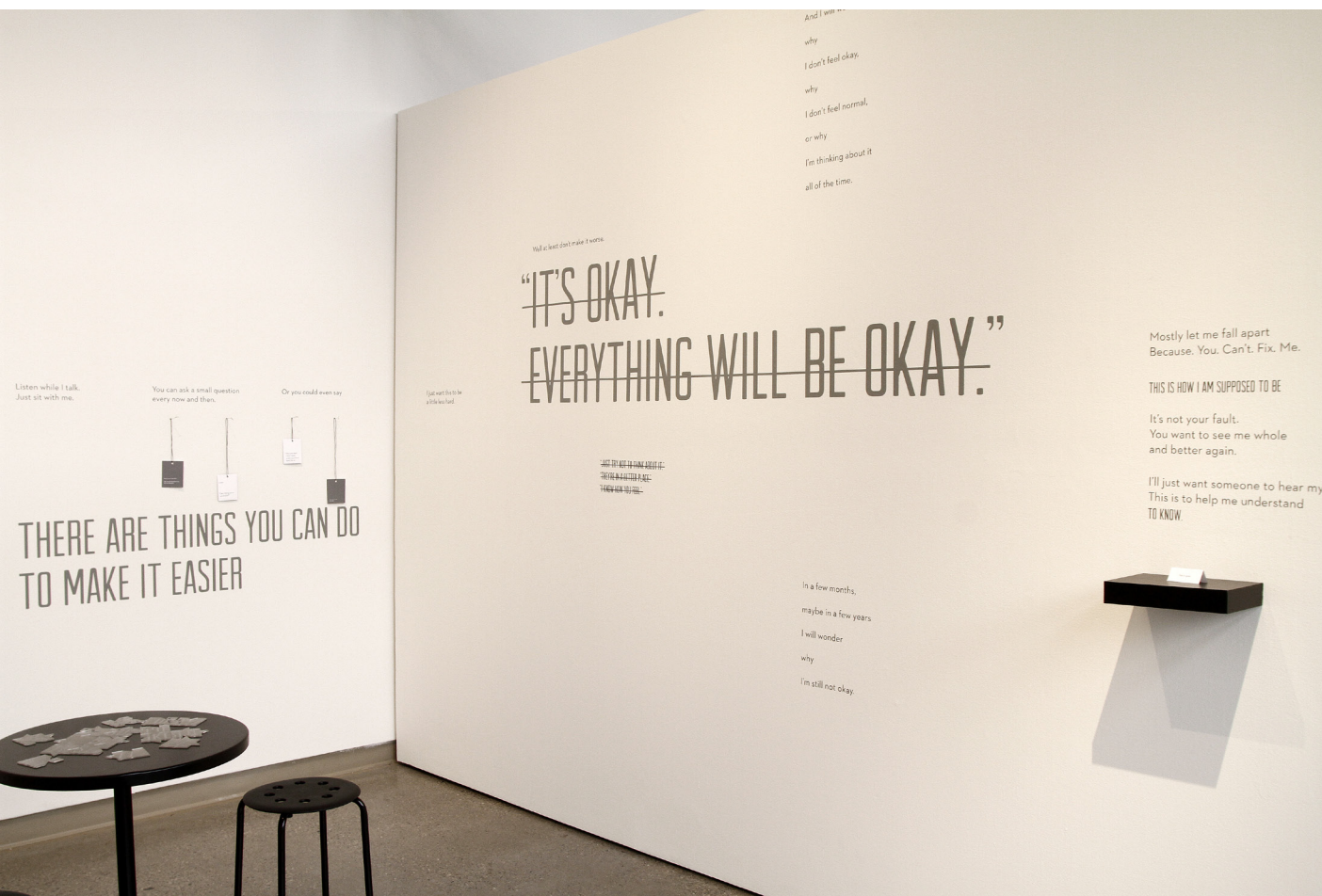
INTRODUCTION

The grieving process can be, and often is, an alienating and isolating experience. When my father died two years ago, I had difficulty connecting with the people around me. In particular, I struggled to relate to those who had never experienced grief at that kind of scale. Many didn't seem to know what to say to me, and even when they did it often felt inadequate. They looked uncomfortable and unsure or they tried to "put me back together." They didn't want to see my grief, despite it being a very natural process, and they weren't okay with me not being okay. I wasn't looking for a string of magic words or an easy fix, because there wasn't one. I knew that. I was just looking for someone to say or do something that made everything just a little bit less awful, or at the very least, not worse.

I wanted the people who cared about me to be helpful, for their sakes as well as mine. I had the urge to show them a set of instructions and say, "Here, this is something that can help you help me. This is how I actually want you to talk to me. This is what I need from you right now." During my grieving process, however, it was difficult to find the time, energy or even the right words. Not only did I struggle to understand what I needed, but I also felt embarrassed to need help at all. I found myself living in a society where "bereaved individuals often experience profound social pressure to conform to societal norms that constrict the experience of grief rather than support it. (247, Harris)" Due to the social pressure to shy away from grief, there were very few people who were prepared or willing to be there for me when I needed them.

Based on this experience, I began to understand that there was an aspect of embarrassment that is part of grief. In fact, according to Darcy Harris, author of *Oppression of the Bereaved*, “death and grief must be normalized as part of the human experience to remove the shame and stigma attached to them, and the underlying social narcissism in Western society that promotes death denial and avoidance needs to be exposed to allow for the full range of human existence to be manifest.”

That’s what *Everything Will Be Okay* does. It is an immersive installation that uses graphic design, typography, sound and objects to communicate a set of instructions. By making the topic of grief accessible and understandable through visual and aural communication, I created an interactive, practical, and in some ways, poetic experience for the audience. The installation incorporates expressive typography, appearing both on the walls of the space and upon various objects, and sonic voice narratives as a means to immerse the viewer in understanding the role both the bereaved and the support system play in these interpersonal relationships. The idea that sometimes all people need is someone to sit with them without attempting to fix or cure is not acknowledged or understood. Through listening and learning and seeing and doing, the audience is invited to better understand the ways in which they could hurt or heal. The installation speaks specifically to those who are not experiencing grief themselves, but who have ever questioned how they might be helpful to someone who is through both their verbal and non-verbal communication. In this way, I hope to communicate the experience and feelings inherent in moments of these interpersonal exchanges and allow those who have experienced grief the opportunity to connect with the piece.



CONTENT

Crafting the Written Narrative

The effectiveness of this written set of instructions depends largely on its tone and language. Whether read on the walls or read on the objects, the narrative and content is the foundation for the majority of the formal decisions in the work. The writing is honest and direct as though the words are being spoken to the audience by a close friend. It is the voice of someone who is understanding yet critical. Without sensationalizing the grieving process or selling it short, the narrative illustrates the internal conflict at work as well as the external factors that influence that conflict. The piece travels from explaining what you can do to make it easier for a person experiencing grief, for instance getting them a sandwich, to what you can do to make it worse like using the phrase “in a better place.”

Creating this piece of writing not only involved reflecting on my own experience with grief but also included looking to the writing of others to supplement my observations. I found statements from a variety of sources that confirmed what I already believed to be true. The mortician, Caitlin Doughty, a person who interacts with the bereaved on a daily basis blogged that, “No matter what the tale of woe, horrific or simple, all you can do is listen. You can’t fix anything at that moment, when it seems like nothing will be fixable ever again...The best thing you can say is nothing.” In the book, *A Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion, a writer and a widow explained that “those who are in great distress want no food, but if it is handed to them, they will mechanically take it... [she] would never forget the instinctive wisdom of the friend who everyday for those first few weeks, brought [her] a quart container of scallion-and-ginger congee from Chinatown.(61)” Because of this research, the narrative of the piece is a more rounded representation of the needs of the bereaved.

Original Written Narrative

*There will be a moment
I need to tell you something
something really important.
I've just lost someone
someone really important.*

*I'll need you.
I'll need you to do things for me.
In that moment
and later
and maybe for a long time.
Just be patient.*

*I'm sorry.
And I will say I'm sorry.
I will say I'm so sorry.
I'll apologize for sharing.
I'll apologize for not sharing.
For being emotional.
For being cold.
For crying.
For not crying.*

*I don't know the protocol here.
Tell me I'm not stupid.
Because I will feel so dumb.
Like a burden.
You might get uncomfortable
I'll apologize for that too
I am sorry if I'm upsetting you.
Tell me I'm strong.
Don't pity me.
I want your respect more than anything.*

*Just sit with me.
Listen while I talk.
You can ask a small question
Every now and then
Something like
"How are you doing today?"
And be prepared for me to answer.
Or not answer.
Or even ask
"Can I get you a sandwich?"
And bring me one regardless.*

*Help me with the little things.
Run my dishwasher.*

*There are things you can do
to make it easier.
I just want it to be a little less hard.
You say, "This is so hard.
I don't even understand how hard this is."
One more time with passion,
"Most people can't do what you're doing
right now."*

*Well at least don't make it worse.
"It's okay."
"Everything will be okay."
"Just try not to think about it."
"They're in a better place."
"They're not suffering anymore."
"I know how you feel."*

*And I will wonder
why
I don't feel okay,
why
I don't feel normal,
or why
I'm thinking about it
all of the time.
In a few months,
maybe even in a few years
I will wonder why
I'm still not okay.*

*Mostly
let me fall apart.
Because. You. Can't. Fix. Me.
This is how I am supposed to be.
It's not your fault.
You want to see me better
and whole again.
I'll just want someone to hear my story.
This is to help me understand.
To know.
They're gone.*

Sound and Personal Interviews

To address the variety of individual experiences in my piece, I not only include my personal written narrative but also include sound from interviews conducted with others who are experiencing or have experienced grief. In these interviews, I sought to understand how my friends and family had experienced the grieving process, specifically in regard to communication with those who are only looking in from the outside, their loved ones. I wanted to discover from them if there is a way in which these outsiders not experiencing grief, can help insiders through their verbal and, potentially, nonverbal communication. Letting the interviewees know that I have also had my own experiences with grief allowed the conversations to be a sort of mutual exchange. I asked questions such as; how does a person experiencing grief want to be talked to, and what is to be avoided? What is alienating? Comforting? What advice would you give to someone wishing to be helpful? What have been your experiences communicating with others who have not been able to understand? These recordings will be played as a non-linear narrative to help create an immersive environment at the exhibit. Presented as a progression of voices, the audience has the stories filter into their awareness as they make their way through the installation and interact with the various elements. Incorporating these interviews into the installation allows for the experience to have practical implications, but also leaves room for fragility and loss.

FORM

Typographic Choices

After many typographic explorations I made the decision to pair Neutraface and Arvil Sans together for the final installation. Using large-scale vinyl cut outs of these letterforms on the walls of the space allows the audience to be immersed. Neutraface and Arvil Sans were the appropriate choice as they, together, were versatile enough to capture the nuances of voice of one character while maintaining a consistent and appropriate tone. Too many typefaces and the audience would have been left wondering if the writing is from multiple perspectives held by multiple people. Too few and there would be a lack of visual interest as well as a smaller range with which to express the moments of frustration, anger, and fragility inherent in grief. In the piece, Arvil Sans functions as a louder and more urgent voice because of the quality of its tall, all caps letterforms. Comparitively, due to its slender letters, Neutraface ranges from neutral to soft. It's quieter but still manages to be assertive. With these two typefaces and the use of scale, color, and composition I controlled the volume of voice and the way in which the information is delivered. In other words the way the character is intended to speak in the written narrative is captured by the typography.

Pacing, Sequence, and the Role of Objects

Within the narrative there are moments, however, that, in order to be effective, could not all be experienced as type on a wall. Understanding that the installation is a public experience, I identified and isolated the moments that needed to be private and more intimate. To do this I created smaller objects displayed on shelves throughout the installation that act as extensions of the wall and of the narrative. Instead of attempting to take in the writing all at once, the audience must move in closer and interact with the piece. In this way, the work becomes more personal and engaging and, in the end, the audience is more likely to absorb the instructions.

For instance in the first image on the right, the statement, “I need to tell you something” is largest and most urgent becoming the first level of information the audience accesses. It is what brings the viewer closer and draws them into the narrative. The second set of information is found after a visual pause and delivered quietly in the form of a book. “I’ve just lost someone,” the character tells the audience. Having this stated in a book as opposed to on the wall is appropriate because it is something that would not be just told to a room full of people but instead said very softly just to you. Creating this delay and sequencing the information through the use of objects allows the narrative to unfold more accurately as if the person experiencing grief were in the room telling you his or her story.





The installation does not only have these smaller, paper objects as interactive elements but it also includes a larger acrylic puzzle. Displayed on a circular table that allows it to be a communal experience, the puzzle has several different functions in the installation. First, it is a solution to a problem. I anticipated that it would be difficult for the audience to take in both the written narrative, the typography, and the sonic narratives. The puzzle provides an opportunity for the viewer to do something with their hands while also focus on the sound. Second, the object, because of its form and associations as a jigsaw puzzle, invites the audience to be a play a part in the installation and interact, slowing them down in the process of experiencing the exhibit. The type incorporated into the puzzle is also written from the perspective of the person experiencing grief so it is consistent with the rest of the installation. In terms of its form and design, it is unique from other conventional jigsaw puzzles. The connectors between the puzzle pieces are triangles in order to give the object a greater appearance of fragmentation as opposed to the organic shapes seen in most jigsaw connectors. The directions of the triangle connectors are also clues for the audience to help in assembling the puzzle. The pieces are square to allow them to be turned and placed in a variety of ways. It is a difficult puzzle and it is designed in a way that even if it is finished it's still not quite right. This speaks to people's need to fix a person experiencing grief or put them back together. It becomes not only expressive but also informative by reminding the audience that grief is a natural process and that attempting to fix isn't necessarily productive for either parties.

CONTEXT

Taking inspiration from museum exhibit design, I found the Happy Show to be of great help to me when thinking about how to approach this installation. Stefan Sagmeister, the designer allowed the show to fill the corners, hallways, stairways, even the bathrooms of the space. He also incorporated interactive elements such as a gumball machine in which you rate your own level of happiness by taking one gumball away from the dispenser that indicated your happiness at that moment. Allowing the audience to interact with the piece was an idea I was able to incorporate into my own installation after viewing Sagmeister's. Thinking about all the opportunities a space provides is beneficial to me as I am not just a graphic designer in this project, but I am also a designer of an experience. Sagmeister's use of type in new and inventive ways and locations, his tone and how he constructs his overall message have been instructive as a sort of example of how I might approach my own exhibit. For instance he even found a way to incorporate the exit sign in his exhibit space into the message and experience of the show. The pacing and sequencing of the show as one navigates the physical space by walking up the stairs and then into the hallway are also aspects of the experience that, previously, I had not had the opportunity to consider before viewing his work.



Another artist and writer whose work has been helpful for me to consider in how I might approach this topic is E.E. Cummings. He constructed his poems in a way that allowed them to begin to function as image, adding a second layer of meaning to the text. The way in which he distributes the writing implies pauses and reflects the spoken word. How you read the poem, the pacing and sequence, affects the way you understand the content and becomes a key part of the experience. This is an idea that I also incorporated into my own work in terms of typographical pacing and delivery of content.

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Buffalo Bill's
defunct
    who used to
    ride a watersmooth-silver
                stallion
and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat
                                                Jesus
he was a handsome man
                and what i want to know is
how do you like your blueeyed boy
Mister Death
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CONCLUSION

In many ways this project was a part of my own grieving process. After my dad died, I wanted to somehow take that horrible experience and make it not so horrible somehow. I wanted to do something productive with the things that I felt I had learned the hard way. To watch others interact with my piece and be moved by the show was helpful for me in my grieving process. The truth is that grief is different for everyone, and even though my project helped in starting the conversation, it is just that, a start. There is no way to make grief easier but I just hope that I could make it a little less worse for some or at least give others with similar experiences a chance to connect.

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