A Better Conversation With Myself

"Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are
    flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging."[1]

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Integrative Project
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What happens with unspoken words?

The nature of shame is that we don't want to talk about it, but by locking away our shame we give it permission to prevent us from living a fuller life. But what if we did talk about shame during dinner parties, social gatherings, and at bars? Emiliya Zhivotovskaya, an educator and coach, said, "A model I teach in positive psychology is that self-awareness enables self-compassion, which enables self-care."[2] Zhivotovskaya believes that self-awareness leads to a more authentic, positive life. As a visual designer, I have the ability to help people easily process information. For instance, there is a difference between readability and legibility. Someone *can* read all the information on a poster, but do they actually *want* to? Are there visual queues within the poster that help guide the viewer's eyes? This is where the designer comes in. By openly discussing my thoughts and memories that brought me shame, I am questioning my inability to be vulnerable. Through visual design I am raising awareness about the importance of releasing shame as a form of self-care. What if having these difficult conversations about our discomfort with shame and vulnerability became a social norm?

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[1] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), 68.
[2] "Divine Feminine, Creative Suffering and World Traps?" narrated by Jonathan Fields, Round Table, *The Goodlife Project*, March 2016, https://goo.gl/PlZdQA.

To begin, a difficult conversation is inherently meaningful because we consciously decide to be vulnerable with someone. This requires profound trust and courage.[3] We're not talking about the weather or our weekend plans, but rather we're talking about race, sexuality, politics, gender, and religion to name a few. It's challenging because we are exposing our emotional baggage, childhood traumas, and deepest insecurities. But it's still valuable because we discover something new about ourselves, the other person, or life in general. These intimate moments are the foundations for enriching connections with another human being.

In "Difficult Conversations" by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, they define a difficult conversation as anything you find challenging to discuss. Decades of research on social psychology, communication therapy, interpersonal structure, and John Grinder's "Three Viewpoints" have altered perceptions of difficult conversations. Some main characteristics include vulnerability and uncertainty. Both the topic you are discussing and the person with whom you are talking are important to you.[4] While difficult conversations are emotional, there is actually an objective underlying, scientific structure to them. A difficult conversation begins with figuring out what happened with each person involved, and then moves to question intentions and impact with each perspective person. Next comes the contribution factor, which questions how each person contributed to the conflict. No matter how scientific the situation gets, feelings cannot be ignored when facing a difficult conversation. After identifying how one feels, ranging from angry to disappointed to guilty to embarrassed, the final step is asking, "How does what happened threaten my identity?"[5] But the objective skills to have a more productive difficult conversation were not the obvious solutions I was seeking.

FIG. 1
Initial prototype
of a difficult
conversation kit for
a general audience

At the core of my thesis, I want to portray my misperception that an objective, designed solution to help people have difficult conversations would automatically resolve my profound fears of vulnerability and challenging
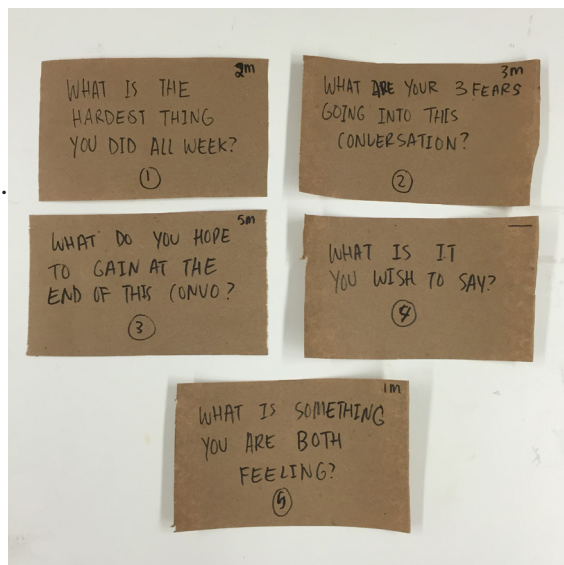
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[3] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 46.
[4] Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, (New York: Penguin, 2000), Introduction XV.
[5] Stone, Patton, and Heen, *Difficult Conversations*, 219.

relationship with shame. Dr. Brené Brown, a Texan scholar, author, and public speaker, who has done decades of research on shame and vulnerability, noted that emotional experiences of social rejection hurts in the same way as physical pain.[6] According to Dr. Brown, "Vulnerability is basically uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure."[7] It can only be gained through time, effort, and patience. Dr. Brown explains that vulnerability is extremely difficult and complex. When someone else is vulnerable with us, we define it as courage, but when we are vulnerable with another person, we define it as weakness. It is about being seen for whom you are as you are.[8]

Notably, according to Dr. Brown, shame appears during difficult conversations because we believe that we're simply not worthy and we're terrified that others might judge us if they see our authentic selves. Sharing stories of shame with people helps us understand that we are not alone in our thoughts.[9] Sharing my stories of shame releases the power of shame over me. Shame has prevented me from happiness and a sense of belonging.[10] Writer Ashley C. Ford quotes, "Dr. Brown says, 'Shame cannot exist being spoken,' but it thrives in the dark." Ford believes that our stories don't belong to us and talking about things takes all of the power out of them.[11, 12] Modern designers such as Timothy Goodman and Jessica Walsh are publicly exhibiting self-expression through sharing their personal stories. This act of retaliation against the old design model of client
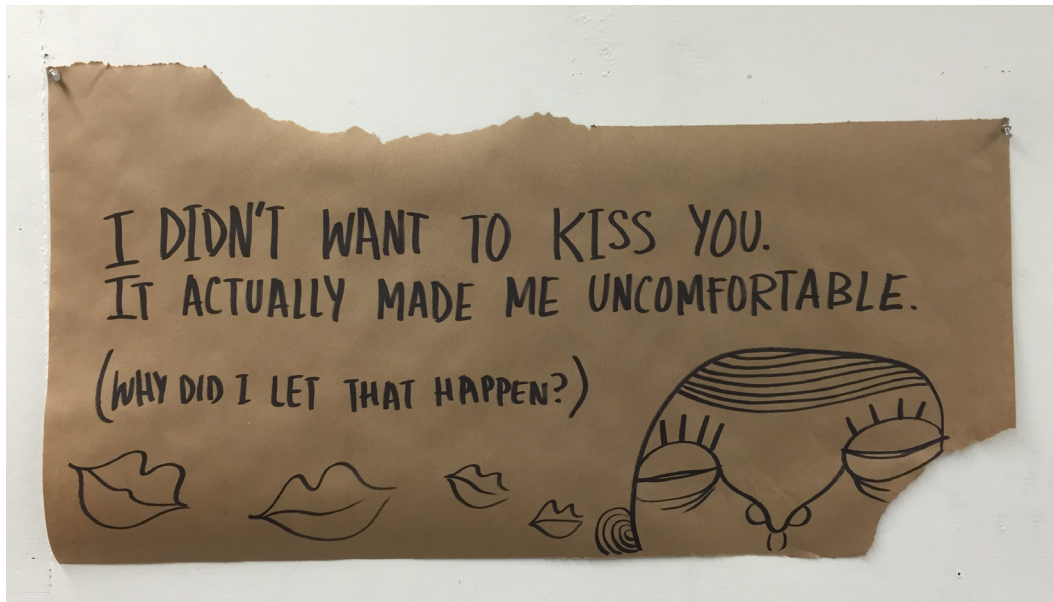

FIG. 2
Visual experimentations with publicly sharing my inner conflicts

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[6] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 71.
[7] Ibid, 34.
[8] Ibid, 113.
[9] Brené Brown. "The power of vulnerability," Filmed June 2010, TED Video, 20:19, Posted December 2010, https://goo.gl/Mr0bCp.
[10] Ibid, 109.
[11] Ibid, 58.
[12] Ashley C. Ford, interview by Tammi Heneveld, The Great Discontent, November 5, 2015. https://goo.gl/A7QFzl.

work has resulted in a powerful community of empathy and human connections in their recent project, "12 Kinds of Kindness."[13] Honoring my shame through black and white acrylic ink about honest, vivid memories, and unexpressed thoughts is significant because these secrets have unconsciously imprisoned me my entire life.

What does design have to do with self-expression?

The basic definition of a designer is a visual communicator who uses typography, graphic elements, and words to tell stories. It is about the connection of ideas between one human to another human and in many ways, it is functional self-expression. While it is easy to assume that graphic design is a modern art form, it has actually been around for the past 20,000 years. The first known handwriting was Paleolithic cave paintings at Lascaux, southwestern France in c15,000–10,000 BCE.[14] Early artifacts show the inherent need for humans to communicate and document their ideas.

FIG. 3
the Gutenberg Bible

The next big technological advancement for design was the invention of the printing press in c1400 by Johannes Gutenberg, which was inspired by Eastern culture. But with technological advancement in design history there was always a pushback for evidence of the human touch. Even with the invention of movable typography, the Gutenberg text still had an illuminator who added red headers and text, initials, and floral marginal decorations by hand.[15]

From the 18th to 19th centuries the Industrial Revolution took place in Europe and America and rural societies became more urban.[16] Originally manufacturing was done in people's homes, but with the Industrial Revolution, there was a boom of special-purpose machinery and factories for mass production of commodities. There was an increased volume and variety of manufactured goods, but there were also detrimental side effects such as the elimination of many printing and letterpress jobs in the design industry. The mechanized methods of type casting and printing sparked a rebellion to

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[13] Timothy Goodman and Jessica Walsh, "12 Kinds of Kindness," *12 Kinds of Kindness*, January 2016, http://12kindsofkindness.com/.
[14] Alston Purvis and Philip B. Meggs, *Meggs' History of Graphic Design* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2012), 7.
[15] Purvis and Meggs, *Meggs' History of Graphic Design*, 71-79.
[16] History.com Staff, "Industrial Revolution," *History.com*, 2009, http://goo.gl/mMdhEP.

bring back the integration of art and industry called the Arts and Crafts movement. People had anxieties about the technological advances and focused on the revitalization of handcraftsmanship. William Morris was a founder in this movement and believed that industrialization alienated labor and created a dehumanizing distance between the designer and manufacturer.[17] This was the beginning of the ongoing tensions between industry and the human touch in graphic design.

After the Arts and Crafts movement was the modernist era, which was influenced by modern art and the Bauhaus. Influenced by the trauma of World War I, this dramatic shift was a philosophical movement in Western society. Modernism rejected the romantic era of traditional forms of art, architecture, literature, religious faith, philosophy, social organization, and sciences because the world was changing to become completely industrialized.[18] Scholars often define modernism as a mode of thinking related to self-consciousness or self-reference. While the sterile, minimalistic aesthetics were different than what people today assume is self-expression the philosophy of modernism is closely related to today's interest in self-expression. Modernism encouraged the re-examination of every aspect of existence from commerce to philosophy. It wanted people to believe in their power to create, improve, and reshape their environment. This was the first time a movement stimulated critical thinking about the self and environment in design history.

Documentation of designers explicitly using self-expression in their works started after World War II. Suddenly, people were interested in ideas and concepts beyond the baseline narrative information. Designers inspired by cubism, expressionism, fauvism, and pop art were interested in elements of juxtapositions, surrealism, color, and recycling mass-media imagery. The authors Philip B. Meggs and Alston W. Purvis of "Meggs' History of Graphic Design" said,

In the decades following World War II, graphic artists had greater opportunity for self-expression, created more personal images, and pioneered individual styles and techniques. The traditional boundaries between the fine arts and public visual communications became blurred.[19]

When Hitler first invaded Poland, the invasion caused six years of destruction in the country. Poland was deserted and design along with Polish society and culture ceased to exist. Through the devastation the internationally celebrated Polish School of Poster Art was established.[20] Tadeusz Trepkowski was the first Polish poster artist to successfully express the trauma of the war. He created simple statements by reducing the imagery and words in his posters. For instance, his famous antiwar poster used

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[17] Monica Obniski, "The Arts and Crafts Movement in America," *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, June 2008, http://goo.gl/oU61VH.
[18] Pericles Lewis, *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 38–39.
[19] Purvis and Meggs, *Meggs' History of Graphic Design*, 436.
[20] Ibid, 437.

simple shapes of a silhouette of a falling bomb to symbolize the distraught city of Poland.[21] Meggs and Purvis noted, "The posters were creative statements trafficking an idea rather than commodities."[22] The Polish government supported poster art as a major form of expression and communication for half a century after the trauma of the war. Trepkowski showed the power of posters as a new form of communication because it allowed him to express the dignity, ambition, and strength of the Polish people.[23]

FIG. 4
Tadeusz Trepkowski's antiwar poster, 1953

Growing up drawing and typography were always my preferred methods of communication. Even at the age of eight, I kept a diary to document my life, which was filled with clumsy drawings and misspelled words. I experimented with my own naïve graphic creations through Adobe Photoshop, but I didn't know what design was until my freshman year of college. Since discovering the history of design, especially Trepkowski, I've realized my passion for human connections through self-expression using design. This narrative between designer and designed product interests me because of the authentic, personal connection. In my recent experimentations, I question the purpose of design. Trepkowski inspired me with the potential social influence of design with purpose.

Who is questioning instead of accepting?

Today, we live in a world where pixel perfection is mindlessly desired. Many designers create aesthetically beautiful graphics, but there are a few designers who challenge the substance being used. Designers have a long history of working for clients, but what happens when we become our own client? Designers have the agency to make an impact in the world for promoting self-care because they have the ability to make people read and notice critical information. They can abolish the cheesy self-motivational posters for something more accurate and sincere. What happens when designers become responsible for their own content instead of dismissing their responsibility?

Stefan Sagmeister, an Austrian graphic designer, is a strong example of pushing past the superficial content in design. He is an established New York-based graphic designer

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[21] Purvis and Meggs, *Meggs' History of Graphic Design*, 437.
[22] Ibid, 440.
[23] Ibid, 437-440.

and typographer. In 2006 he published his second book "Things I have learned in my life so far." Over the course of his career from late 1990s to early 2000s, he was hired by corporations to design advertisements. Instead of using a typical ad copy, he took inspiration from his own reflections from his diary. For instance, he created the typography "Trying to look good limits my life." by using physical objects and surrounding environments. He displayed his artfully designed maxims on billboards, projections, light-boxes, magazine spreads, annual report covers, fashion brochures, and giant inflatable monkeys. In the 21st Century he was the leading example of integrating self-expression in design and he continued the on-going conversation.[24]

Another example is Timothy Goodman, a graphic designer, illustrator, and an art director in New York City. He has designed illustrations for New York Times articles and murals for Airbnb, but he has also explored his identity through the same tools of design. His personal project "Memories of a girl I never knew" specifically tackles the themes of self-exploration about his previous dating mishaps. With black and white lettering he creates short poetic visuals inspired by his past romantic experiences. Often, these stories are brief and poignant. By the end of the story, the viewer is invited to feel a deeper connection with the designer because he has provided a glimpse of his mind. For instance he illustrated, "I was attracted to the sadness in your eyes because sadness is a part of life and you made me feel alive." These intimate details of his self-

FIG. 5
From Timothy Goodman's Memories of a girl I never knew series

reflection show the ability of design to provoke emotional connections with audiences through self-expression. Previously, he has stated in interviews that expressing these narratives were almost like therapy sessions. His personal project questions if the main audience is for himself or for the public. In an interview with Monsterchildren he said, "Maybe it makes the people reading them feel less alone to know someone else is feeling the same thing they have, but it also makes me feel less alone to know that they have gone through it, too. Connecting to people via my work is one of the true joys. That's what I'm in it for."[25] By being genuine instead of pleasing a client, the public is invited to explore his or her own introspection together with him.
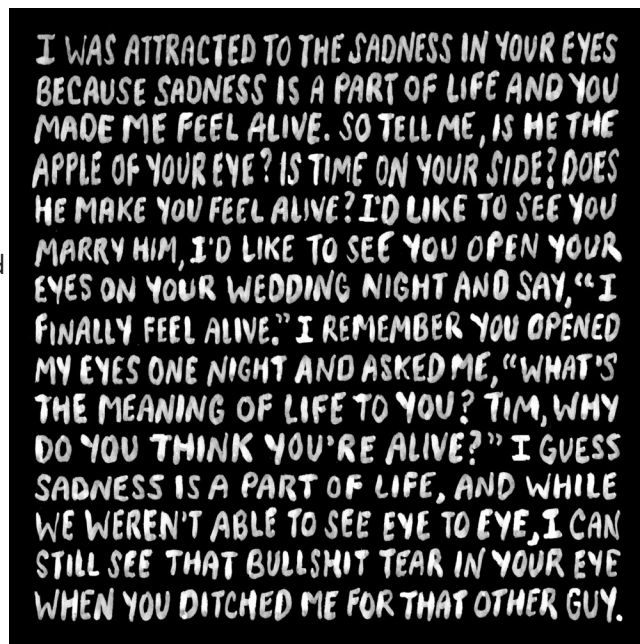
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[24] Stefan Sagmeister and Jessica Walsh, "Things I have learned in my life so far," *Sagmeister and Walsh*. 2008, http://sagmeisterwalsh.com/.
[25] Erin Bromhead, "Timothy Goodman's Memories of a Girl," *Monsterchildren*. August 5, 2015, http://www.monsterchildren.com/37112/memories-of-a-girl/.

Furthermore, Jessica Walsh and Timothy Goodman teamed up to engage with their audience about vulnerability through design. Recently in their project "12 Kinds of Kindness" they publicly shared their intimate, jarring stories about their lives such as Jessica Walsh facing sexual assault and Timothy Goodman finding his biological father on the Internet.[26] This courageous act has gently pushed me forward in exploring my introspective journey through design. The goal of their project was to invite their audience to become more empathetic and self-aware. They engaged the world about what it means to be human through their personal stories with visual design. Their ideologies and creative pursuits have heavily challenged the assumptions of modern design as superficial advertisements by using design for limitless possibilities of inspiring courage, vulnerability, and empathy. I found the ability to share my stories about my struggles with shame and vulnerability by indirectly being inspired by their journey and directly communicating with them both in the past year.

It was always about me

Last January while studying abroad in London at Central Saint Martins, one of my first creative briefs was "What is your statement as a graphic designer?" For the first time this daunting task allowed exploration of my self-motivations through design. I created an interactive typographic installation called "Everything is Temporary" made out of 500 post-it notes in less than ten hours. The day after the installation was completed, parts of the post-its were already crumbling down, but the installation remained on the wall for the rest of the week. This natural disintegration amplified the statement "Everything is temporary." Initially the statement commented on ephemerality, but after the first few days, the statement clearly critiqued public speculation, social interactions, and critical self-reflection. The installation encouraged physical and mental human interactions. Students, professors, and visitors were allowed to freely take away or add to the piece.
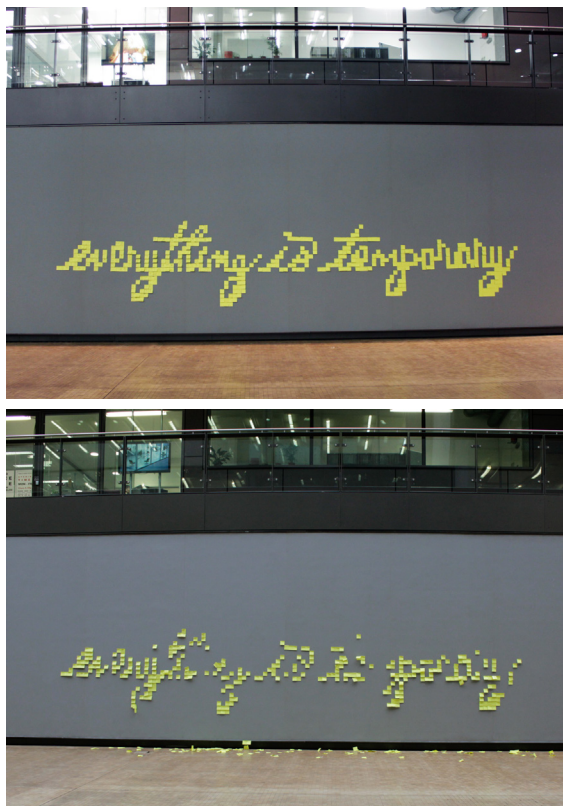

FIG. 6
My "Everything is Temporary" installation while studying at Central Saint Martins

26 Timothy Goodman and Jessica Walsh, "12 Kinds of Kindness," *12 Kinds of Kindness*, January 2016, http://12kindsofkindness.com/.

Each post-it note had something written, but there was also space to add your own post-it note. When the piece was finished I observed groups of students discussing about the installation among them. Some direct quotes were: "What the fuck?" and "When I first walked by I thought it said 'Everything is Tempo' and I thought it was some weird musical thing. But now I see it's temporary and I like it a lot. Really cool job." When I was cleaning up, I saw people's personal doodle contributions.

The fleeting interactions and physical installation brought attention to the ephemerality of human existence. Throughout the installation process students were taking photos and posting it on their public Instagram with their own interpretations. By documenting their own experiences about the project they were self-reflecting about the statement, but the digital footprint of their experience makes the project permanent. Overall the most intriguing aspect for me was using visual design to facilitate a public and personal conversation about an aspect of life. Through doing previous projects that focused heavily on client based work, this opportunity of self-exploration taught me about my self-motivations and personal creative goals.

After my study abroad program ended, I further explored facilitating conversations on a seven-month journey called "100 Days of Better Conversations," which in hindsight was ultimately field research for my thesis. I had 100 conversations, 50 with strangers and 50 with people I know in 7 different cities. I integrated my innate obsessions with design and conversations into a social and visual experiment. The goal of the project was to challenge myself to overcome my fears of speaking with strangers, which physically made me nauseous, and explore the complexities of conversations, which allowed
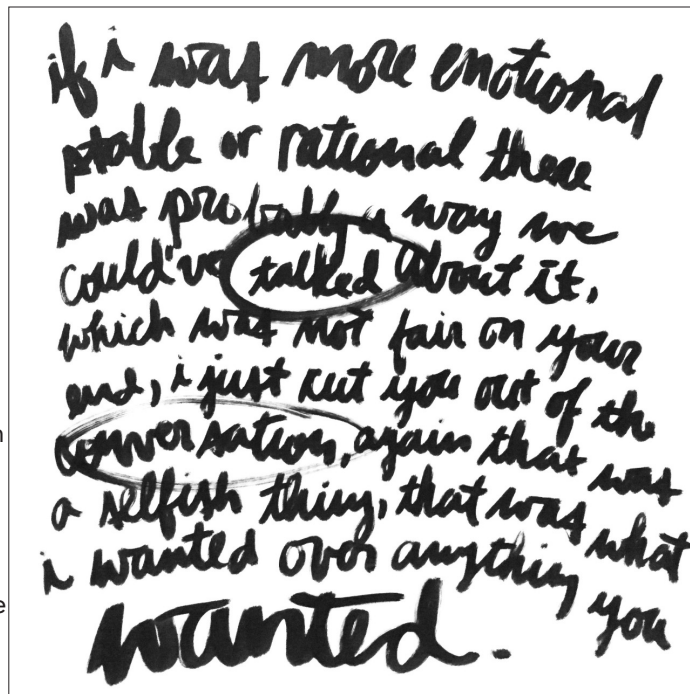
FIG. 7
Printed pieces from my personal project, "100 Days of Better Conversations"
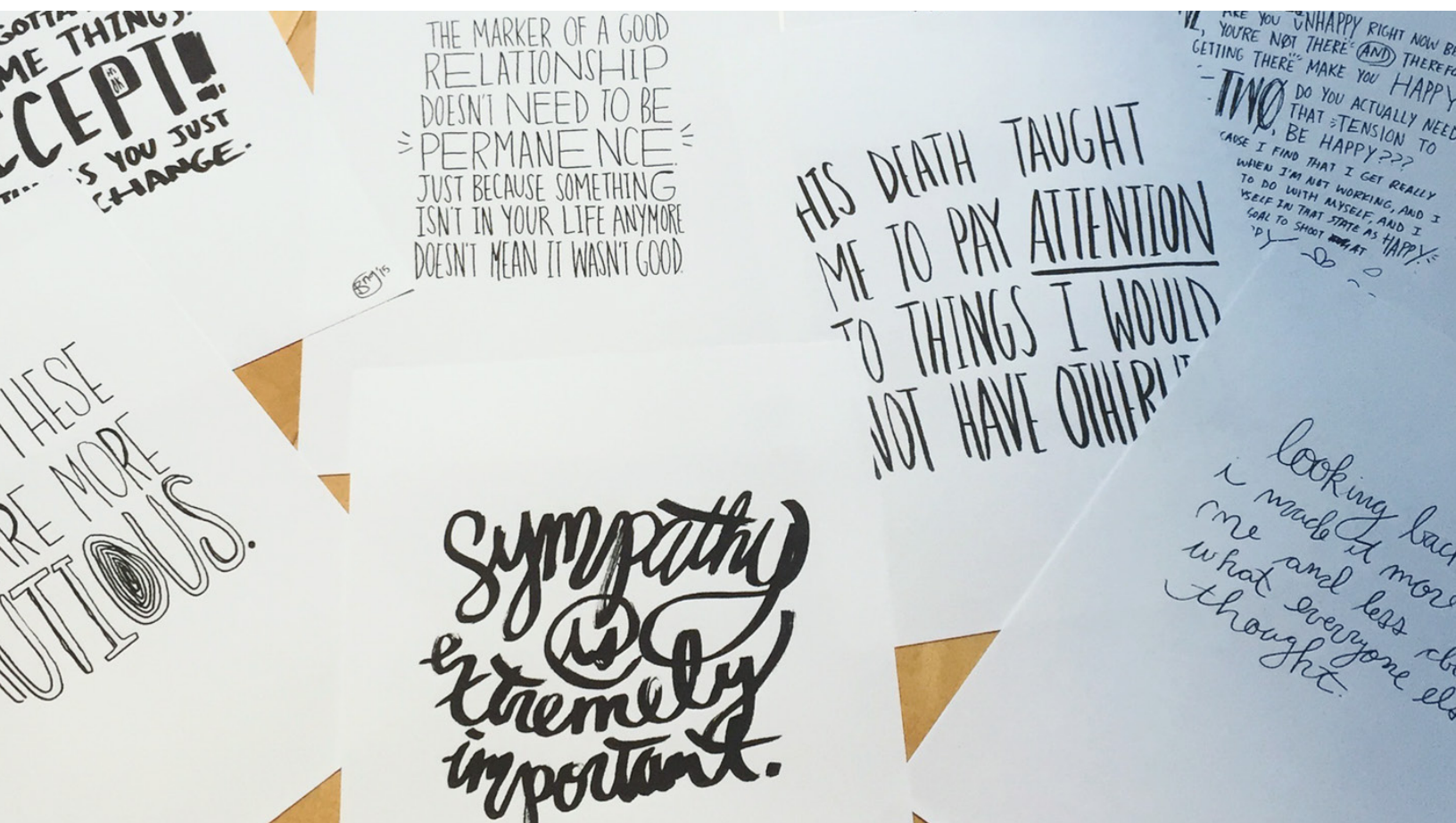
me to have profound conversations with my distant family members and childhood friends. After each conversation, I would illustrate a quote that I felt was the epitome of the conversation with a black acrylic ink marker. I was engrossed with the idea of authentically visually conveying someone's message through the quick, bold marks of acrylic ink. Each whimsical illustration was not preplanned and existed in my modest sketchbook. By the end of the journey I questioned whether I was more interested in the meaningful conversations with strangers or the people I knew.

While I was studying abroad I visited Scotland and while exploring Glasgow's Botanical Gardens, I had a five hour conversation with a bathroom attendant. Through each friendly and intense conversation my irrational fear of speaking with strangers slowly became less alarming. Every new stranger I interacted with was terrifying, but it was also rewarding to push myself to overcome a personal fear. While this experience of speaking with strangers was enlightening, the experiences where I had intimate conversations with acquaintances, new co-workers, friends, and family members were more emotional and significant. For example, trying to have a deep conversation with my reserved father was awkward and hilarious because he was unexpectedly silly. Each unique conversation was meaningful for me, but the ones with whom I had a prior, unresolved relationship lingered in my mind.

I was interested in conversations with friends and family, but more importantly, I was interested in conversations of unspoken words. Through my 100th conversation, which was also the most difficult conversation I've ever had, I realized my heightened obsession with difficult conversations. Those 99 conversations actually gave me the courage to have this one difficult one about my unexpressed thoughts two years prior with an ex-best friend. After having this intense conversation, I was convinced that my thesis was about using visual design to help people through difficult conversations.

FIG. 8
The 100th conversation from "100 Days of Better Conversations"

Though I had finally expressed my thoughts and had this overdue conversation with him, I realized that speaking did not actually resolve my harboring feelings. I assumed that speaking with him was going to relieve me of the hurt I felt due to his actions when in reality, having that conversation just re-traumatized me. I would spend the next few months speaking with the school's therapist to overcome and confront the trauma I

pushed aside three years prior. Visual design was not the solution I was looking for with difficult conversations. I realized it wasn't even about the physical act of speaking. I was not interested in having difficult conversations and confrontations, but rather I was interested in what happens before we even have that difficult conversation. What is happening inside our minds? Why do we harbor these unexpressed thoughts? Besides anger and regret, there are mixed emotions of fear, shame, and vulnerability.

As a result of this emotionally draining experience, for the past few months I had a personal side project called "BNG Honest" with the premise of "This is me at this exact moment in time and space." Every day I illustrated a personal reflection by using a black acrylic marker in my modest sketchbook and posted it on my Instagram. I illustrated intimate moments and reflections of my life that I suppressed in reality. Visually displaying my words was my outlet and allowed me to express my thoughts in a way that felt comfortable for me. For example, I would illustrate my deep frustration with the problems of Tinder, dealing with the loss of my uncle, and the deep gratitude I felt for my professors, whom I see as a mentors. Even though it was a public platform, I felt a sense of privacy with expressing my thoughts because I was in complete control of my message. There was room to privately reflect on my thoughts before I shared them. I realized that these thoughts on my Instagram proved a strong desire for a deeper introspection. Beyond pondering about my daily thoughts, I wanted to question my past self and my deeper insecurities of vulnerability and shame. Through the progression of the various projects, I delved deeper into my journey of self-reflection. It was never about anyone else. It was always about me.

FIG. 9
The Instagram feed of BNG Honest
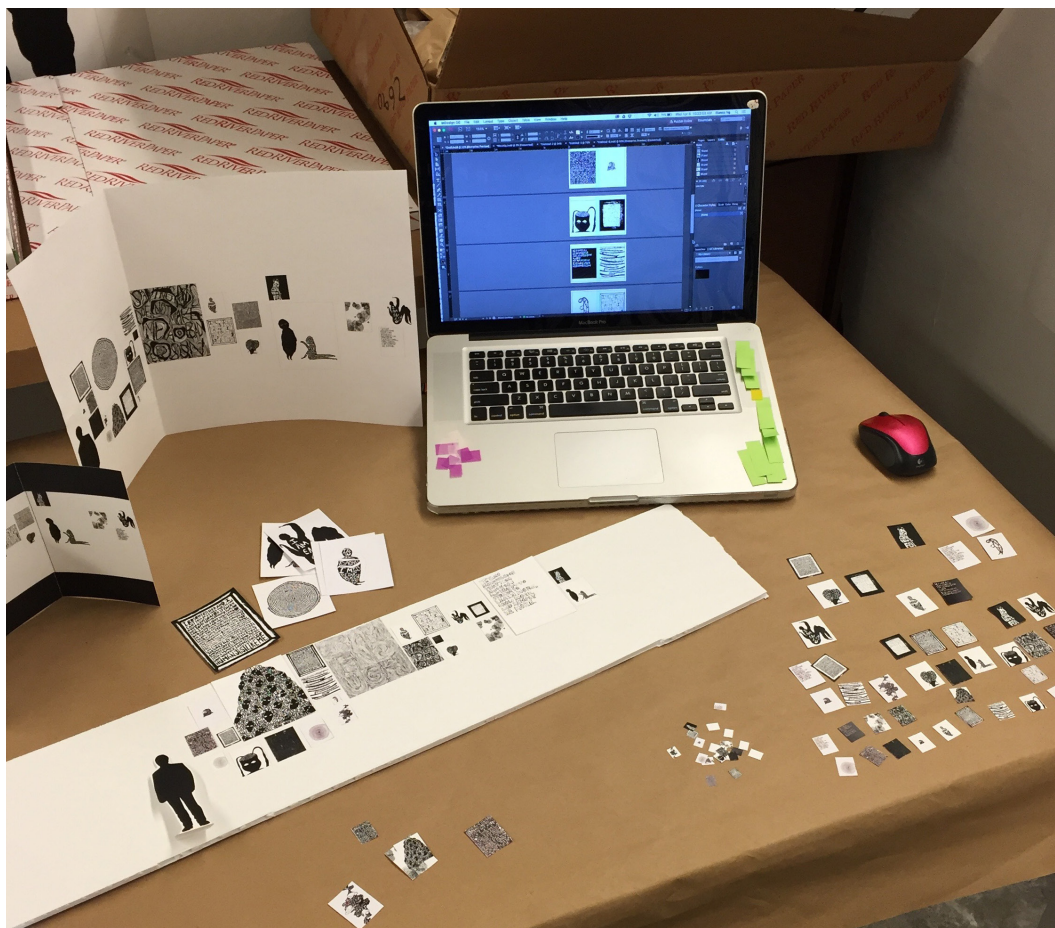
FIG. 10
Working on a final piece

FIG. 11
Mini scale mock ups for
my installation

I am enough

"A Better Conversation with Myself" is about having a difficult conversation with myself instead of helping other people have them. As you step into the space, I invite you to enter my mind. Through black ink I graphically express my shame, unspoken words, and internal conflicts. When I illustrate the words "How is it even possible to miss someone who made me feel like the shit beneath my shoes," they are messy and unreadable.

FIG. 12
The final installation of "A Better Conversation With Myself" with 19 of the 24 prints

[27] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 64.

These thoughts are not pleasant nor are they censored, but they are the essence of how I felt at my most vulnerable state of introspection. Aesthetically the personal narratives are illustrated in three main styles: obsessively delicate lines, hauntingly ambiguous figures, and chaotic strokes. Each piece demonstrates individual moments of my past and present experiences. There is a personal tension between wanting people to know my shame and a fear of them knowing my shame. Through the creative making process, I wrestle with my shame and began to understand its implications in my life. Dr. Brown states, "Shame keeps us small, resentful, and afraid."[27]

The visual journey begins with the jarring themes of suppression, anger, loneliness, and frustration. The words are unsettling because they implicitly talk about childhood neglect, sexual assault, and depression. The narrative progresses to misunderstanding and sadness. There is an evolution in the story where I began to question my understanding of my experiences. For instance, the realization that parenting is inherently imperfect and the best option is to find closure in letting go of personal expectations instead of grasping on to resentment. Eventually it becomes focused on hope, empowerment, and self-care. I no longer believe that my self-worth is tied to my success, and thus I allow my innate curiosity and hunger for knowledge to drive me instead of my ego and insecurities. This project conveys the importance of understanding your vulnerabilities. Visually, the images are lighter and there's more negative space, which symbolizes reconciliation. The final piece people leave with is, "I can acknowledge I am enough and strive to learn more, grow more, and simply be more."
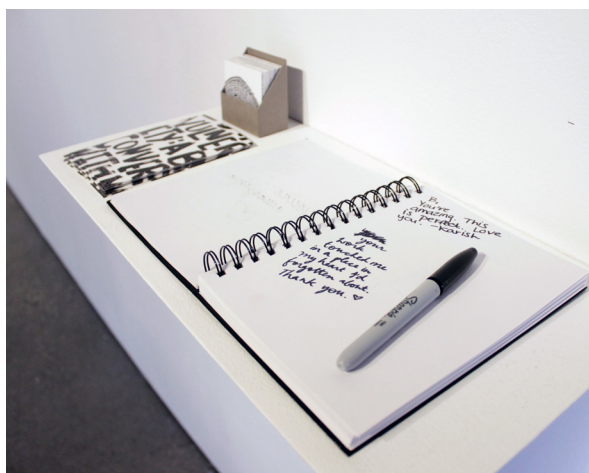
FIG. 15
Opening night of the exhibition

FIG. 16, 17
Postcards, business cards, and sign-in book

My business cards with 40 different designs taken from the 24 prints

Where next?

People have a misconception that graphic design is merely style, advertising commodities, and superficial glamour, when it's actually a powerful tool that can motivate social change. I believe design can change the language of self-care and I want to continue the conversation through future projects. Designers have the ability to change the perception of stress. Posters had the ability to raise Poland after Hitler left it in ruins and I can only imagine the impact it can have with promoting self-care.[28] I refuse to accept the socially constructed toxic environments we live in. By using visual design to communicate a narrative that is often defined as personal information, I am challenging the perception of design and self-care. Shame is something that is not often spoken of in public. We understand that shame and vulnerability exist, but would never bring it up at a family dinner or at a bar with strangers. I question, "Why not?" The leaders in the field such as Dr. Brené Brown and Timothy Goodman are standing up in public, but we need public engagement to disassemble and demystify shame. Dr. Brown said "…language and story bring light to shame and destroy it."[29] More than ever mental wellness has become a growing nationwide concern in America. Stress is the number one silent killer with 44% of Americans feeling more stressed than they did five years ago.[30] What would a society look like where self-care and self-awareness became social norms? Would stress still exist? When was the last time you genuinely believed the statement, "I am enough"?

FIG. 18
Me basking in the bittersweet celebration of an ending and a new begining at opening night

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[28] Purvis and Meggs, *Meggs' History of Graphic Design*, 437.
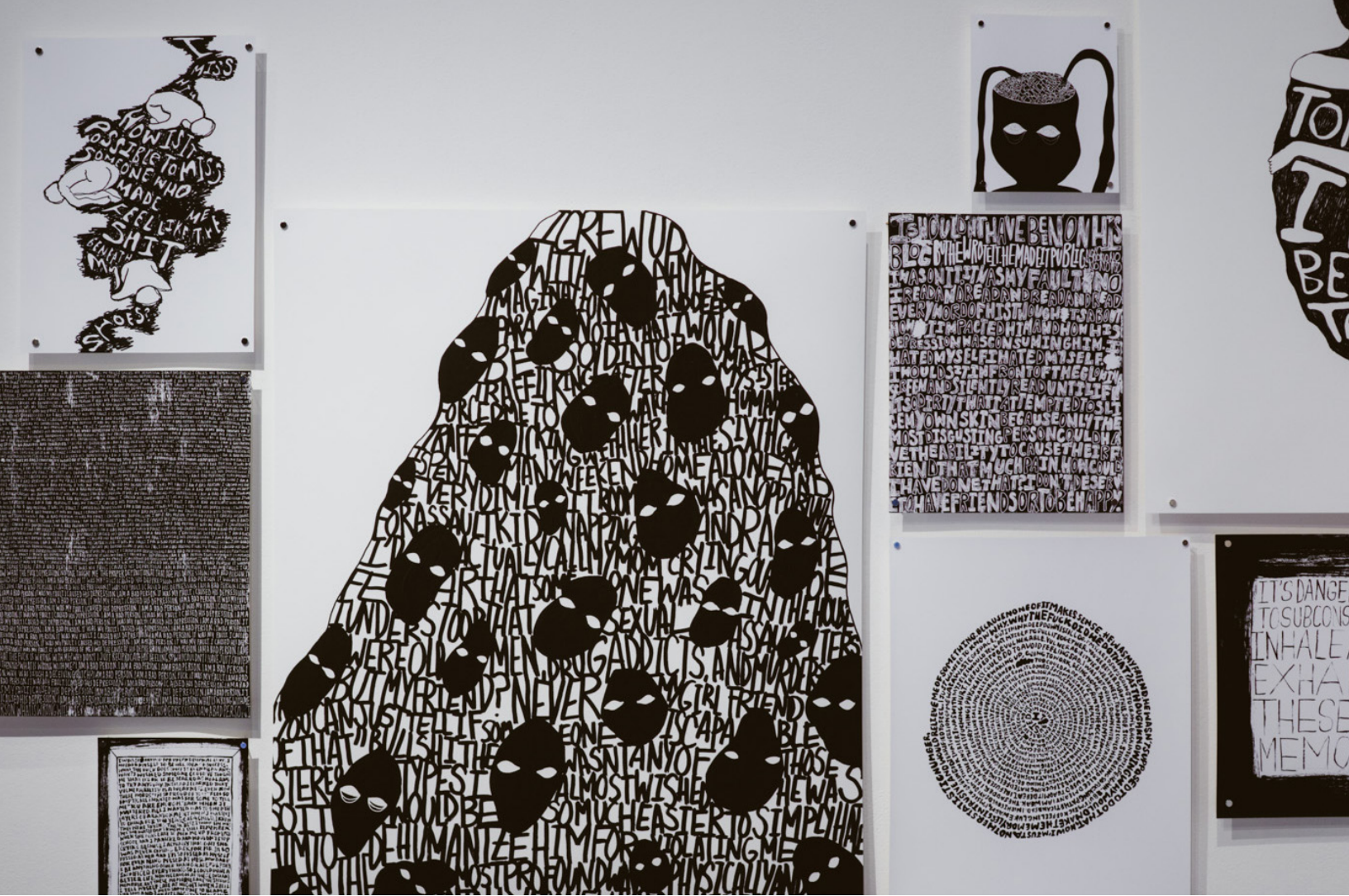[29] Brown, Daring Greatly, 67.
[30] MastersDegreeOnline.org, "Stress is Killing You," The American Institute of Stress. http://www.stress.org/stress-is-killing-you/.

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Figures

1. Original work.
2. Ibid.
3. From the British Library.
4. From Meggs' History of Graphic Design.
5. From Timothy Goodman.
6. Original work.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Photo taken by Carl Greene.
11. Original work.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Photo taken by LawrenceYong.
15. Ibid.
16. Original work.
17. Photo taken by LawrenceYong.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.