

Tia Reiser

The Power of Art

Due: 5/8/2019

### **Final Project: Prior to a Semi-Colon...**

#### **Concept/Idea**

For my creative project, I addressed the issue/topic of stigma and mental health, specifically, I focused on the subtopic of shame. Throughout history, those struggling with poor mental health have experienced stigma by the majority of society which has prevented many from seeking help and support due to induced feelings of shame. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, those with mental illness wait nearly a decade to get treatment or fail to seek treatment at all; This may be due to the fact that only 25% of adults with a mental illness believe that society is understanding. If society is able to become more aware of the stigma associated with poor mental health and its effects, the issue of feeling ashamed of oneself and one's feelings will be greatly diminished.

In order to address this issue from an artistic perspective, I used the medium of black-and-white film photography and, although my work has a specific idea behind it, it may not appear straightforward due to the fact that mental health as a concept is not straightforward; In other words, while everyone experiences some facet of poor mental health, its effects are experienced by each individual differently. Through this assignment, I hope to start a dialogue that not only leads audiences, classmates/the public, to question their perception of mental health, but works to eliminate the barriers to discussing mental health openly and unashamedly. The way in which I plan to accomplish this goal is through the use of original and appropriated

imagery, in order to incorporate my personal experiences as well as the mindscapes of others, as well as through the techniques of photogramming, multi-printing and collage, in order to express the complexity of poor mental health. In part, this idea was inspired by the tactics of Martha Rosler. For instance, while Rosler's work made viewers self-conscious with regards to what it meant to be a woman, my work is meant to make viewers self-conscious with regards to poor mental health and the implications of society's misinformed perceptions of it. Also, similar to Rosler, my work is intended to be conceptual as it is not my intention to instill my opinion on viewers, but to induce contemplation regarding the social issue I am passionate about, the stigmatization of poor mental health. Aesthetically, my work was also inspired by Rosler, particularly, her work *Cleaning the Drapes*. The tactic that inspired me was her use of photomontage and her use of images in which she felt a personal connection to. In my work, while not exclusively photomontage, multiple images, shapes, and textures of both original and appropriated origin are combined in order to create meaningful images representative of a complex whole. In this way, I hope to not only depict shame in a context which challenges the norm of silence with regards to poor mental health, but to utilize it in a way that creates relatability, making it an approachable topic of dialogue for audiences. In order to affect change, these images may live in public in tangible form; In placing these images within a book, or even a zine, mediums both intimate and personal, not only would my images have a decent chance of reaching a larger public, but could reach this public in a way more profound than if they were posted on social media, a medium which is overwhelmed with images and information. While I hope that, at some point, society can put an end to the stigma and shame around mental health

issues, I also hope that, through this project, I can contribute to the movement, even if only minimally.

### **Relation to Critical Theory**

At first, the critical theory that I was most inspired by was that of Walter Benjamin. Considering his theory of mechanical reproduction, I found that it related to the issue/topic of stigma and mental health through the notion of emotional distance, or false aura. According to Benjamin, this false aura was encouraged by those with power and so, the major concern was that, due to this emotional distance, society would be left with only deception and distraction instead of revolutionary perception and contemplation. This theory is relevant to my topic since, typically, it is those with power, or the majority of society, who enable the stigmatization of poor mental health; Oftentimes, this occurs due to an over-exaggeration of mental health issues in popular media, general misunderstandings created by such portrayals, as well as a lack or opposition of dialogue regarding the issue, all of which distract and hinder the public from contemplating the real-world implications of poor mental health. Concerning the medium of black-and-white film photography, this theory relates in the way that it mentions the exhibition value of a work of art which possesses the ability for mobility and fosters creation with new artistic function. For instance, concerning the ability for mobility, photography, like artwork with exhibition value, is widely viewable and so, allows for a larger response by a collective audience; In this case, the influence of the images can achieve a great impact since they may be exposed to many people. Concerning the creation of new artistic function, within photography, images are able to be endowed with an artistic function, in this case, one which serves to stimulate dialogue regarding the issue of the stigma associated with poor mental health. This

theory of Benjamin's relates to another critical theory considered within this project, that of Elspeth Probyn, by the way in which Benjamin's concept of emotional distance, or false aura, relates to Probyn's concept of shame; For instance, while Benjamin theorized that emotional distance would leave society with only deception as opposed to contemplation, or, in other words, leave those with power with the ability to stigmatize mental health issues, Probyn theorized that one's shame, while associated with the failure to interest those with power, affected their ability to belong and so, both Benjamin and Probyn articulated the existence of power and its effects of society.

While Elspeth Probyn referred specifically to writing about shame, her theory also applies to different types of shame and different forms of its expression. Particularly, considering Probyn's theory, I found that it related to the issue/topic of stigma and mental health through its linkage of shame, a humiliating experience, and interest, an element necessary in community building, to belonging. Concerning this notion, Probyn suggested that interest imparts a connection to belonging which, in turn, marks one's relationship with oneself and society. While she indicated that the risk of writing shame was the thought that one could fail to interest others, regarding the topic/issue of the stigma of poor mental health, the risk of speaking openly about mental health is the possible failure to convince others of its relatability. In this way, the failure to spread one's interest to society can result in greater shame and diminished feelings of belonging as, due to stigma, the discomfort with openly discussing poor mental health may begin to make one feel inadequate and unwilling to seek help. Concerning the medium of black-and-white film photography, for Probyn, the heart of her piece was the notion that writing shame enabled language to function differently and, regarding one's belonging, encouraged new

ways of thinking to emerge; In sharing photographs, new ways of thinking may emerge regarding the shame associated with the stigma of poor mental health due to the fact that the interest in the topic is presented in a way which enables it to function differently from before. In other words, since art is a transformative object, in a visual manner, audiences may begin to perceive shame and poor mental health from a new viewpoint. By breaking the norm of silence, this medium may change the way audiences confront poor mental health by guiding them on a visual journey which introduces them to one's private internal reality, in this case, the internal reality of myself as well as my unofficial collaborators. I hope my work utilized shame in a way which enabled audiences to respond to and start a dialogue about shame and mental health issues as I believe that, the more common dialogue becomes, or the more of interest it becomes, the less mental health issues will be associated with shame and the more those with mental health issues will be able to feel as if they belong.

## Process (Notes and Draft Images)

The Revisor: Process

March 19<sup>th</sup>:

Topic - Mental Health - Stigma/Romanticization

There shouldn't be a stigma towards mental illness, especially, since there isn't a stigma towards physical illness. Mental illness is not "weird" or something "cool". These perceptions need to change.

March 21<sup>st</sup>:

Content - this topic will look at the present

The beginning of the project will be the initial response to the images, the middle will be reflection, and the end will be conclusive thoughts.

I think that by putting the images in a slideshow, it allows for the addition/justification of images over time.

Scale - micro/macro - mental illness is personal and varies for individual, however, mental illness is prevalent globally.

March 22<sup>nd</sup>:

physical works in actuality, are shared

Space/site - specificity - into virtual reality.

I want my work to live virtually, on a screen.

I think that I can reimagine the virtual experience in which mental health is commonly stigmatized/romanticized. This may help to alter one's perception of mental illness, especially that which they perceive virtually, through the media.

Although the virtual experience is consistent in the work, I think that, over the course of the project, the character would change with the images that are included.

March 23<sup>rd</sup>:

Human-interactive component -

engagement with the audience could happen through sight and sound. Since I'd like to put some form of audio behind the slideshow of images.

Human dynamics may shape the work as it relates to what we as people experience emotionally, thus I think that empathy will be a large factor.

March 24<sup>th</sup>:

Community/Social engagement -

I think engagement will begin with the individual and, hopefully, be spread by the individuals.

I think some may already be aware of the issues, some may support it, others may find fault with it.

I think participation may come if others begin to share their personal experiences/thoughts on the stigmatization/romanticization of mental illness.

I hope that viewers will feel comforted and spread their personal experiences.

I think some people may be opposed to sharing personal experiences, others may be in denial regarding the stigma and romanticization of mental illness.

March 26<sup>th</sup>:

Collaboration - As I will be using film, I will seek the help of my past photo professor.

If I included more people, the vision would expand to include other experiences aside from those I am familiar with.

March 27th:

Aesthetic Considerations -

I'd like to sequence my work in a meaningful order.

As of now, the final form of this project will consist of 7ish images.

The most important aspect will be the feelings they bring about.

March 28th:

My form - another skill I have is editing, this may be applied to each image in post.

I'd like my process to be linear, and well-planned.

Concerning economics, film and paper cost about \$40.

## THE PROCESS:

March 28th - Today, I begin brainstorming visual images and concepts I'd like to explore.

- I begin gathering materials like paper/film
- Blocked out lab time for April 3rd

March 29th - I began shooting original work and decided to screen for appropriated elements as well.

- Also, I began to research different shapes/symbols for photograms

April 1st - Today, I draw/printed, and cut out shapes to use for photograms

April 3rd - Today, I developed 3 rolls of film, 2 of original content, 1 which contained pictures of series I'd like to combine w/ my own.

- I created 3 contact sheets and signed up for another lab session on the 7th.

April 4th - I began to shoot more film

- Using my contact sheets I began the process of organizing the prints I wanted to create, which images would be combined, and which photograms would be included.

To-do list: 7th - Tree photogram, train photogram, bird photogram, falling photogram

April 7th - I printed draft images of the to-do list and signed up for lab time on the 10th in order to finalize them.

- began brainstorming more image combinations

April 8th - To-do list for the 10th

- tree photogram: F4, 65m, 15 sec (add sugar!)
- train photogram: F4, 65m, 13 sec: #7 (mirror), #10 (m.p.), #21
- bird photogram: F4, 65m, 12 sec: 17 sec → (sign)
- falling photogram: F4, 65m, 17 sec: #20 (door), #21 (vignette)

April 10th - Completed 4 images based on drafts

- signed up for lab time on the 17th
- More brainstorming (inspired by Martin Koller)

April 11th - Decided to collage the train photogram w/ my door and using previous pieces (taped it over photogram)

April 13th - Shot more images of inspiring work I'd hope to use for appropriation

April 14th - draw/printed and cut out new photogram pieces

April 17th - Developed 2 more rolls of film and made contact sheets

- signed up for lab on April 21st
- Looking at contact sheets, I decided what images I wanted to use, possible combinations, and wrote down which photogram would go with which image.

To-do list - 21st - dinner photogram - F4, 65m, 12 sec: #10 (mirror), #21 (sugar), #33 (door)

April 21st - I developed 4 images, 3 based on the to-do list, 1 spontaneous (bubble photogram) #19 - glass

At home I printed out stock images of fish, cut them out, and taped them to the piece

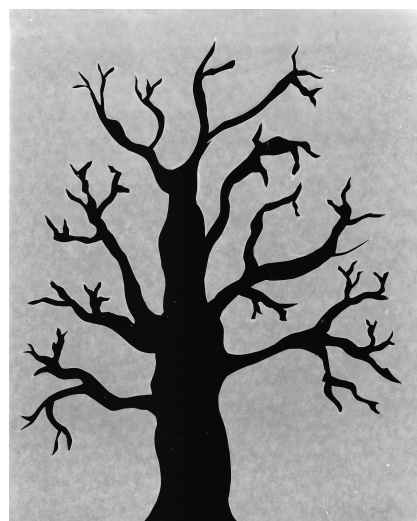
April 23rd - I scanned in my final 8 images, edited them in Photoshop, and began to sequence them

April 25th - I changed my mind about space as I think my work would live better in tangible form, however, with my current time frame I don't see this becoming a reality.

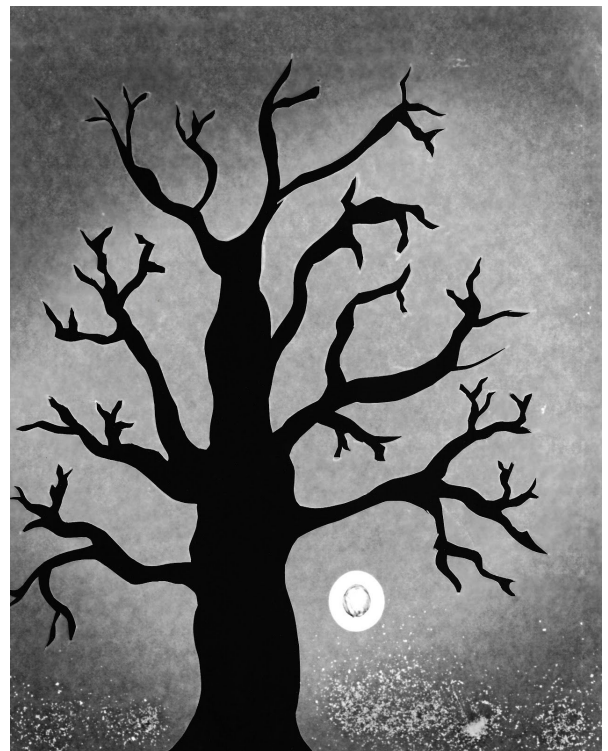
- collaboration: I will be collaborating with other artists (appropriating) by interjecting their imagery with my own.

April 27th - Also concerning collaboration, I will be including the theory of Elspeth Probyn and Walter Benjamin, these theorists helped to inspire my concepts and aesthetics to an extent, Probyn's concept of shame directly relates to the shame associated with mental health stigma and Benjamin's exhibition value relates to the medium of black-and-white film photography. This theory informed my work's distribution to the larger public as it identifies art as a transhistorical object, capable of changing value and meaning over time as well as public perception in the current moment.

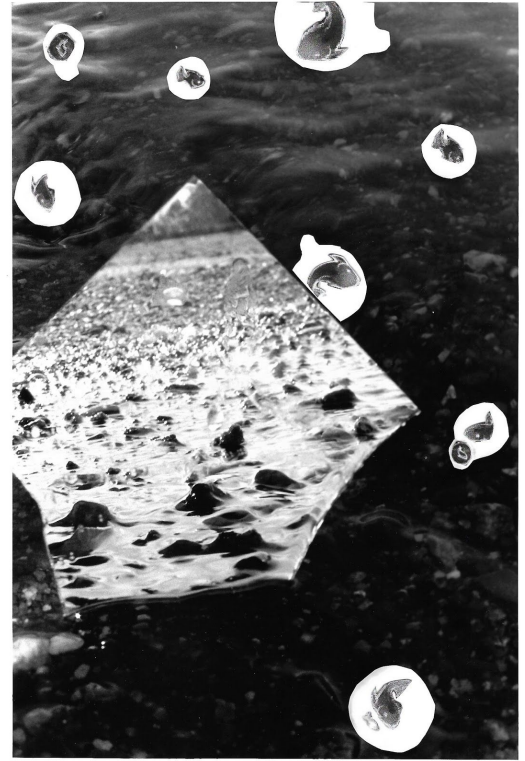




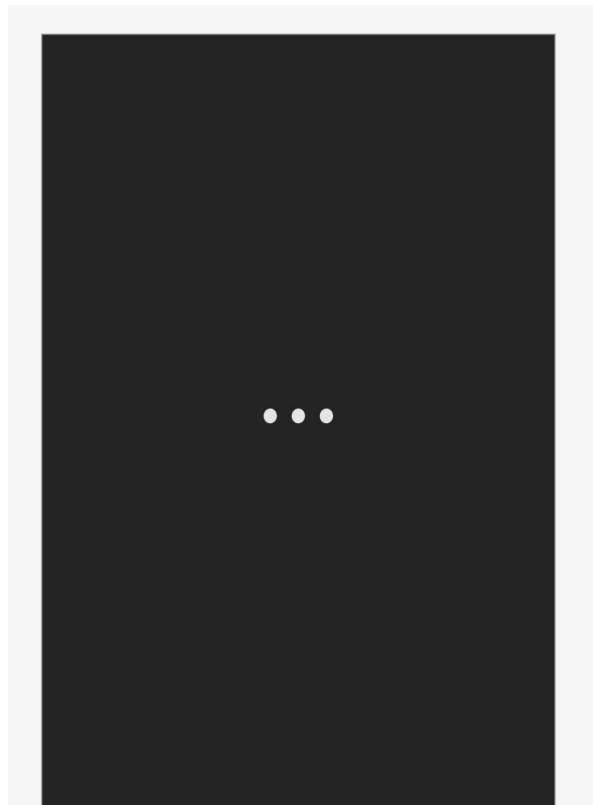
## Final Images (Individual Images and Screenshots of Final Form-Zine)

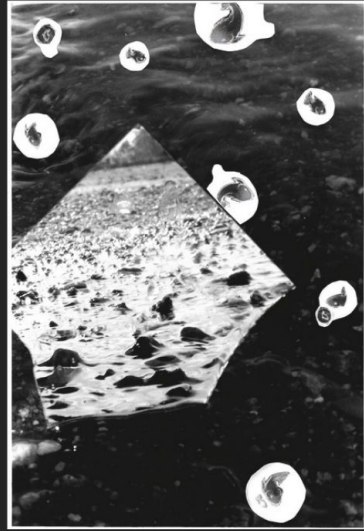




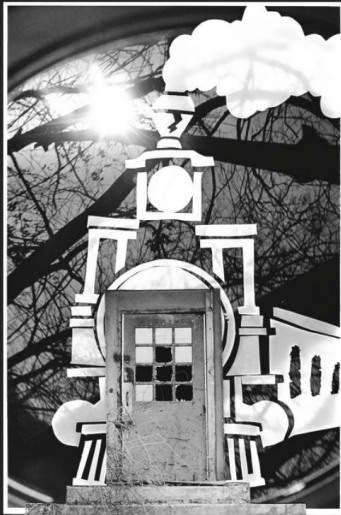


Front Cover









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