The Art of Affect

Submitted to the Art Department, Allegheny College, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

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Artist Statement

Woman 1: Not necessarily that he wants to give me an item, what about taking me to a nice location and just enjoying the time with me or wanting to see me and just wanting to watch a movie and be present with me... but instead, I have men who can't have deep conversations or can't hold a conversation... and when they can hold a conversation, everything that they've told you is a lie!

Woman 2: What? Who lied to you?

Woman 1: Not really, I'm being dramatic.

We live in a world of surveillance. Every comment we say or action we do is observed by others, even if think we are in a private environment. This piece challenges the idea that when people are vulnerable and do not succumb to social desirability, their authentic self is revealed. Through the exploration of rewired landline phones, I have created an eavesdropping experience as well as an intriguing visual of the listener. One of the two voices heard in the recordings was consensually unaware of the moment they were being recorded, allowing a genuine conversation from them. Supporting references such as Trevor Paglen, Sophie Calle, and Brené Brown inspired me to further investigate these thoughts.

Acknowledgments

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The participants in my work whose names are kept anonymous

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& particularly

Ian F. Thomas
for encouraging me to find the best in myself & my work as an artist &
challenging me to be more confident in the *simple* walks of life

Woman 1: Where's my happy story? Where's the man who's going to spread out blankets for me and buy me flowers and candy? Huh?
Woman 2: I'm asking the same question.
Woman 1: Well at least --- buys you some stuff.
Woman 2: Yeah he buys me stuff now and then but he also ruined my birthday.
Woman 1: That's true… Well --- ruined Christmas, New Year's, and my birthday.
Woman 2: Wah, he ruined all the holidays without even being present!
Woman 1: Yeah, fuck him! The only thing I've ever received from a man was a Wendy's milkshake from --- in high school, and that was because... And that was because I think he really just wanted one for himself, and he couldn't finish it before he got to my place... Because he showed up with his half eaten. And he's like, "Here I got this for you!" I was like, "Thanks, ---." I didn't even eat it...

When people are vulnerable and do not succumb to social desirability,

their authentic self is revealed.

The Exhibition

I have created an interactive installation consisting of five landline phones and audio playing from them. The phones have been rewired allowing an MP3 player to be plugged into an aux adapter which is connected to the wires leading to the speaker. The wiring construction has allowed the audio to break the sound when the phone is placed back on the home base, and the recordings on the audio are on loop so when the listener picks up the phone, the track will play at any point in the recording. These tracks vary from four minutes to ten minutes.

My piece was intended to demonstrate the authenticity people allow themselves to reach while with others in a private conversation as well as bring to light the issues within social desirability bias in public settings. I chose to ask two of my close friends at Allegheny College and a family member to participate in this project, because I knew both myself and the participants would be most willing to have more intimate conversations with one another. My participants consented to being recorded at any moment during the duration of my project without being notified of when they were being recorded. This vulnerability allowed authentic conversation from them and myself. The content of the audio was between two women discussing topics of partnership and the struggles within it, ranging from online dating to breakups.

I was inspired by research professor Brené Brown for her findings on vulnerability and human connection as well as articles discussing social desirability. I additionally referred to artists such as Sophie Calle, Robert Gober, and Trevor Paglen for their works that challenged the idea of public versus privacy.

Social Desirability Bias (SDB)

There is discussion about the threat on validity in research due to Social Desirability Bias. Social Desirability is a form of respondent-related sources of error bias which occurs when an individual feels pressured to behave in a way that is more socially desired. This is an issue in research because it causes potential ingenuine and inaccurate results (Lavrakas, 2008). Participants in research may be "faking good" when describing this social norm[1] (Randall, 1991). For example, an online dating user may lie about their favorite pastime activities, such as going to the gym or getting drinks, in order to seem more appealing to other users. After I would record a conversation, I would confirm the release of the audio from my participants for their conversations. One of my participants, however, denied me the access of using one of their more emotional recordings in my final presentation because they were speaking negatively about their partner.

I captured authentic conversation through my undisclosed recordings, but when that specific participant realized I would be presenting their intimate conversation to the public, regardless of it being anonymous, they requested to not have that audio clip presented. In respect to the ethical guidelines of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I removed it from my presentation. Social Desirability Bias can skew results because the participant presents themselves in a way that they believe is more acceptable (King, 2000). Had my participant known they were being recorded during that conversation, the comments they made about their partner would have been different, more socially acceptable.

[1] What people in a group believe to be typical and appropriate action in that group (Paluck and Ball, 2010).

Public versus Private

sur·veil·lance
/sərˈvāləns/
noun
close observation, especially of a suspected spy or criminal

When considering the idea of public versus private, surveillance plays a key role. Trevor Paglen challenges the idea of surveillance in our world today and emphasises the significance of planetary telecommunications[2] systems (Thomas, 2018). My audio recordings were taken in a private space, however, the public will still be exposed to the secrets of those conversations. The listeners are unable to respond, therefore there is a sense of "spying" in on the voices of the audio. This inquisitive interaction could feel intrusive to the listeners, similar to listening in on a parent's phone call as a child. Paglen believes that surveillance is becoming increasingly more intimate such as systems detecting how we behave and what that reveals about us as individuals (Thomas, 2018). If a stranger picked up one of my phones, they might disagree with the conversation, however they are only allowed the insight of this eavesdropping interaction.



Natalia Buczek, *The Art of Affect*, 2019, Phones, Audio, MP3 Players, 10' x 1'

Similar to how I challenged the idea of public and private space through audio, Robert Gober challenges it through urinals (Paulson, 2014). His minimalist piece *Three Urinals* "evokes the presence of a human body through its absence," (Paulson, 2014). He presents the three daily life items side by side, just as I have done with my work. My phones

[2] communication over a distance by cable, telegraph, telephone, or broadcasting

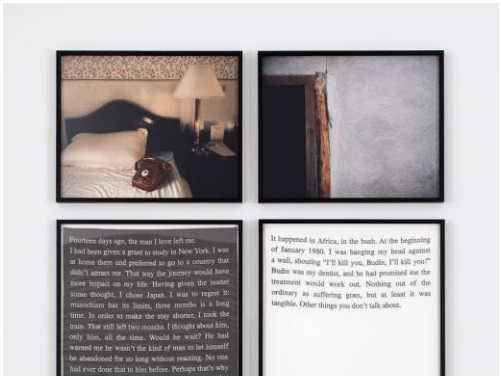
resembled the simplistic approach of Gober's work as well and too were influenced by the use of modern-day life objects ("Robert Gober Sculptures, Bio, Ideas."). Both having the goal of eliciting something unexpected. Gober's work was to evoke thoughts and emotions on the AIDS epidemic, whereas my work was to evoke thoughts and emotions on how we as human beings behave when we are unfiltered and vulnerable.



Robert Gober, *Three Urinals*, 1988, Enamel, Plaster, Wire, Lath and Wood, 21 ¾" x 15 ½" x 14"

Vulnerability & Authenticity

These conversations were not planned prior to the recordings, although the individual who was recording may have swayed the conversation in a certain direction, the choice of further discussion was pursued by the individual who was being recorded. Similar to Trevor Paglen's exploration of surveillance, Sophie Calle investigates human relationships through a voyeuristic approach (Jordan, 2007). The intimate connection she finds with the strangers she examines resembles my intention for the listeners and my audio. In Calle's diptych piece *Exquisite Pain (Douleur Exquise)*, she shares her own personal narrative for the public to observe as well as provide stories of pain and heartache from others (Jordan, 2007). She reveals her "days until unhappiness" stories through the use of photographs and recordings which are additionally



Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain*, 1999, Written Statements, Photography, Recordings

paired with another "worst pain" story from someone else (Jordan, 2007). These portrayals of loss of love and suffering relate to my audio recordings, which revolved around the subject of partnership and the struggles within it.

"In 1984 I was awarded a grant to go to Japan for three months.
I left on October 25, not knowing that this date marked the beginning
of a 92-day countdown to the end of a love affair—nothing unusual,
but for me then the unhappiest moment of my whole life." [3]

Calle's vulnerability and authenticity in her work, again, relates to the conversations exhibited in my piece as well as in the article "Self-Disclosure & Trust: Essential in Healthy Relationships" which discusses the significance of engagement in self-disclosure. By doing so, we as "potential friends" begin to reveal our more authentic self therefore transitioning into a deeper intimate relationship (Degges-White, 2018). This same action, however, is thought to discourage the disclosing of personal information due to the fear of rejection (Degges-White, 2018); connecting back to the example I gave of my participant who regretted her authentic words[4]. Degges-White supports the idea that if friends are vulnerable enough to allow this communal exchange, then their friendship will continue to develop (Degges-White, 2018). Research by Brené Brown furthermore supports this belief. Through her research, she found that people who believe in love and belongingness or feel self-worthy had common characteristics of courage, compassion, and connection. She delves deeper into explaining how having the courage to be authentically imperfect and the compassion to love one's authentic self first is what allows

[3] Quote from ("Sophie Calle, Selections from Exquisite Pain.")
[4] See page 6

for them to then connect (Brown, 2010). Referencing my participant, again, they only became apologetic of their authentic comments when they thought their partner could have been affected by them. We as a society *pretend* that what we do *does not* have an impact on others and how we need to recognize that and start with self-worth to change that in a positive direction (Brown, 2010).

"When the barrier is our belief about vulnerability:

Are we willing to show up and be seen when we can't control the outcome?

When the barrier to vulnerability is about safety, the question becomes:

Are we willing to create courageous spaces so we can be fully seen?" [5]

Personal Process

People do not always realize the effect they have on one another, whether they were in one's life for years or only said one sentence to them. When reflecting on my own life experiences, I began to recognize the effect words had on me, both positive and negative. Praise. Compliments. Criticizing. Belittling. All of these things had a larger impact on my self-esteem than I realized. In the beginning of this project, I knew I wanted to address this notion of *affect* because of how much it influenced me in the past. I also knew I wanted to address the issues within social

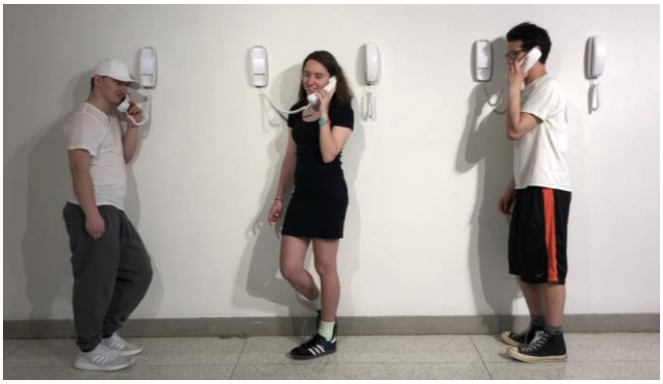


Natalia Buczek, *The Art of Affect*, 2019, Phones, Audio, MP3 Players, 10' x 1'

[5] Quote from (Brown, p. 154, 2018)

desirability and authenticity when a former friend claimed she needed me to pretend to be friends with her in order for her to go on with her day smoothly, even if it meant making me go against my own self morals of "being fake" to her.

At first, I wanted to interview my friends, requesting they tell me a story of a time when someone influenced them. I came to recognize that I had taken away the authenticity of their stories by having them recite their own script to me. I then decided to challenge the idea of vulnerability and request my participants, as well as myself, be recorded without being aware. Our vulnerability allowed our authentic thoughts to be revealed during conversation. I acknowledge that full authenticity was absent since one of the two parties during recording was cognizant, however the authenticity of the unaware was still present. I also acknowledge the theme of partnership. I found those conversations to be compelling and evoked more emotions from the individuals, including myself, which is why the audio I recorded of my participants revolves around those subjects of partnership.



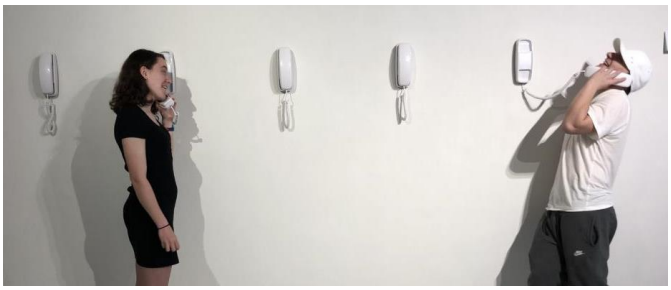
Natalia Buczek, *The Art of Affect*, 2019, Phones, Audio, MP3 Players 10' x 1'

Although my project was originally focused on the audio itself, I soon recognized the significance of the audience. The listeners and their interactions with the phones additionally contributed to my idea of vulnerability. After setting up my exhibition, I observed the physical stance and facial reactions from the listeners. Their approaches varied from standing back to back with another listener to twisting and playing with the phone cord while looking directly at

another listener. Just as the authenticity of conversation in my audio was disclosed, the authenticity of their own personal space was revealed.

Future Directions

Observing the audience interaction with my piece was more compelling than I expected. When I saw someone smiling, I smiled. When they looked serious, I began to wonder which audio they were listening to. Regardless of the stories themselves, I can only hope that future audience members, who listen in with an outside perspective can acknowledge the various points I had discussed.



Natalia Buczek, *The Art of Affect*, 2019, Phones, Audio, MP3 Players, 10' x 1'

Towards the cessation of my project, I noticed myself becoming more mindful to my surroundings and choice of words. Although I knew I was not being recorded, I still took a more thoughtful approach to my conversations. I believe that we are all experiencing our own journey in life. Although my original goal throughout this exploration was to make others aware of the impact people have on others, I believe I had come to understand that the most.

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