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Art Overcomes the Numb

Introduction:

I feel my phone vibrating in my pocket. I reach into my jacket and pull out my device, which illuminates with a variety of incoming information. I scan my lock screen and see text messages, social media notifications, missed calls, and a breaking news alert. The alert from CNN states that 5 people have died in a mass shooting. I feel a momentary ping of sadness and as I swipe my finger to unlock my phone, all of the information disappears. I respond to my messages and scroll through other applications on my phone, subconsciously forgetting about the breaking news alert entirely.

Due to modern day news distribution I am no longer surprised to learn that there has been a mass shooting. With technological advancements our generation has news accessible at our fingertips instantly. I receive breaking news updates on my phone in the form of text messages. Once I unlock my phone the alert disappears without expanding on the information, ultimately leading to me forgetting about the news within minutes.

I am exploring how to portray gun violence in a way that will make viewers take notice. There have been more mass shootings than days in the year 2016. I want to bring back the shock of how horrible these tragic shootings are and in doing so create more conversations about gun violence and gun laws. It is my job as an artist to use design as a tool to better the world. Art has the ability to inform through more than words and in doing so, have an impactful affect. In order to accomplish this successfully I must look into how gun violence is currently handled in the news and why it isn't impactful. What way have artists approached it and has it worked better? What are the statistics and facts that I'll need to address in my work in order to inform my viewers?

Gun Violence in America:

The Second Amendment of the United States Constitution declares, “The right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”¹ This amendment is still intact today despite tremendous political controversy. While many Americans enjoy using guns as a form of hunting, sport, and self protection, an increase in gun violence has caused many to believe that there should be rules and regulations implemented in order to prevent guns from falling into the wrong hands. There are 12,000 gun homicides every year in the United States with at least 91 Americans killed by guns on a daily basis. This rate is 25 times higher than all other developed countries through out the world. Due to this unfortunate reality, there is no shortage of articles, conversations and segments on gun violence in the news. While it is pivotal and essential for news distributors to inform their audience on the influx of shootings occurring, the abundant information on this topic leaves many numb to the information. Gun violence in the media is so prevalent that it is no longer shocking and becomes expected to the audience. The abundance of reporting on this topic results in a decline in conversation as well as action among US citizens.²

Gun Violence in The News:

Barack Obama, the President of the United States, has addressed the nation responding to mass shootings 14 times through out his eight-year presidency. While addressing the audience after 10 were killed at a College in Oregon in 2015 he laments, “Somehow, this has become routine. The reporting is routine. My response here at this podium ends up being routine. We become numb to

¹ "Second Amendment." LII / Legal Information Institute. Accessed December 04, 2016.

² Willingham, AJ. "A Visual Guide: Mass Shootings in America." CNN. June 21, 2016. Accessed December 04, 2016.

this.”³ There are a variety of reasons why this numbness occurs. One reason is for the abundance of shootings in America. While it is important that the President as well as news distributors report on shootings in order to inform on a large scale, this can often have a negative effect on the American audience. Steven Maier, a psychology professor at the University of Colorado Boulder states, “If you repeatedly experience something your reaction to it diminishes.”⁴ The more stories there are on gun violence, the less striking and noteworthy the problem becomes.

So far in 2016, the *New York Times* has published over 250 articles pertaining to guns and gun violence. This abundance of reporting can leave the US audience feeling hopeless and helpless. By being informed about the amount of shootings occurring and the lack of control over gun violence, US citizens are less likely to believe they can make a difference due to the enormity of the problem. Brad Bushman, a professor of communication and psychology at University of Michigan states that, “the more people are exposed to something bad and no one tries to fix it, the less people believe it can be fixed, which breeds complacency.”⁵ His studies find that, “People exposed to media violence are less helpful to others in need because they are comfortably numb to the pain and suffering of others.”⁶ Headlines such as “Just another day in

³ "Statement by the President on the Shootings at Umpqua Community College, Roseburg, Oregon." The White House. October 01, 2015. Accessed December 04, 2016.

⁴ Itkowitz, Colby. "President Obama's Right: Americans Might Be Growing Numb to Mass Shootings. Here's Why." The Washington Post. December 3, 2015. Accessed December 04, 2016.

⁵ Itkowitz, Colby. "President Obama's Right: Americans Might Be Growing Numb to Mass Shootings. Here's Why." The Washington Post. December 3, 2015. Accessed December 04, 2016.

⁶ "U-M Study: Violent Media Numb Viewers to the Pain of Others | University of Michigan News." U-M Study: Violent Media Numb Viewers to the Pain of Others | University of

the United States of America – another day of gun-fire, panic, and fear” solely contribute to gun violence being viewed as normal.⁷ There is nothing normal about innocent people losing their lives because of dangerous gun owners. There needs to be a change in the distribution of this information in order for there to be change in attitude among the American people.

Photographs or illustrations typically accompany the abundant news articles pertaining to gun violence. One *New York Times* article is titled, “*On The Beat of Black Lives and Bloodshed.*” The article is written from the perspective of a police officer who recalls multiple crime scenes throughout his career where he has showed up to discover “a young black man my age or younger dead with a halo of blood or brain matter splashed on the pavement.”⁸ While the article is touching and tragic, the information is nothing new or shocking resulting in a normalcy to the text. The article is, however, accompanied by a bold and disturbing graphic (fig 1.) The illustration, by JoHee Yoon, portrays five black silhouettes of guns, drawn in all different sizes and orientations. Inside each gun etched out in white there are abstract looking faces and body parts with haunting expressions. In one gun an etched figure has its hands raised, in another a figure is shedding tears and writhing with a pained expression. These figures and body parts emerge from the blackness of the gun, appearing ghostly as if the guns each tell a story of the lives that they have taken. The guns are portrayed over a bright red splattering of color, imitating

Michigan News. February 19, 2009. Accessed December 04, 2016.
<http://ns.umich.edu/new/releases/7001>.

⁷ "California Shooting: 'Another Day of Gunfire, Panic and Fear'" BBC.com. December 3, 2015. Accessed December 4, 2016.

⁸ Lee, Trymaine. "On the Beat of Black Lives and Bloodshed." *The New York Times*. January 28, 2016. Accessed December 04, 2016.

the blood shed from each implied narrative. There is a lot to take in throughout this one small illustration. Each gun appears to have more details and disturbing subtleties with each look. The faces within the guns haunt and captivate the audience, making it visually difficult to look away and ignore the disturbing narrative illustrated. With the abundance of articles pertaining to gun violence a reader flipping through the newspaper may not read this particular passage, yet the bright red black and white illustration is likely to catch their attention and leave a lasting and haunting impression. In this way, art has the ability to inform and impact greater than words. It is evident that news and broadcasting companies are no longer effective outlets due to the abundance of incoming information and reporting on gun violence. It is, however, still essential that this information reaches the public in order to publicize this tragic, on-going crisis. Art has the ability to inform on this subject through an entirely different approach.



Figure 1 – JoHee Yoon, *Black Lives and Bloodshed*, New York Times, 2016

Gun Violence in the Arts:

Art created in response to gun violence has the ability to create a conversation and ignite a feeling of shock, rage, and fear in viewers beyond capabilities of traditional news distribution.

The exhibition “Unforgotten” uses art to shock viewers by portraying disturbing sculptures in a surprisingly public environment. The public traveling exhibit was created by art director Jordan Sparrow as a remembrance to the victims of gun violence, humanizing and transforming headlines into more than statistics. Sparrow states his intention was to “come up with a new way to stop people in their tracks and understand that gun violence truly is a problem.”⁹ This exhibit was launched by FCB Chicago and served as a campaign for the Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence. The exhibit uses faceless statues with the exact height and clothing of gun violence victims. The artist spoke to families who have lost their children in shootings throughout Chicago in order to make the sculptures have as accurate of a resemblance as possible to the victims. Chicago is a state with an enormous and increasing gun violence problem. The purpose of this project is to not only honor and remember gun violence victims, but to also shock the Chicago audience with an eerie and powerful art piece. By installing this exhibit in the public St. James Cathedral Plaza in Chicago, by-passers will be surprised to come across these haunting, faceless, sculptures. While these by-passers may be aware of Chicago’s gun problem, being presented head on with a nearly identical faceless shrine is a much more powerful reminder of the innocent lives lost from gun violence. Due to the fact that limited amounts of people are able to view this exhibition in person, the campaign released a video that takes viewers through the experience of creating and installing these sculptures.

The video opens with the mother of a gun violence victim explaining how her son was killed on a bus when a teenager opened fire. At 0:26 the video screen goes black and text appears which reads, “30,000 victims die from gun violence every year, we brought some of the victims

⁹ Martinson, Sarah. "Traveling Art Exhibit Honors Gun Violence Victims." Columbia Chronicle. April 20, 2015. Accessed December 04, 2016.

back to tell their stories.”¹⁰ The video then cuts to the same mother who is donating her son, Blair’s clothes to the campaign. The viewer is then presented with what appears to be the back of a person walking. The person appears to be frozen, standing still and not moving forward yet his clothing portrays a sense of movement. His backpack is slung over his shoulder and his right arm is in an upward motion as if he is stepping forward. When the camera rotates 360 degrees around the figure, and only then, do we realize that underneath the hood of the jacket there is only darkness. The figure is fully dressed, wearing casual elements that range from sneakers to a t-shirt and jacket completed with a name-tag reading “Blair Holt (fig 2.)” Other sculptures are shown throughout the video, each appearing to be people until the viewer notices the dark hollowness of where a face should be (fig 3.) This shocking and fast realization that the figure is not actually a person is meant to replicate the realization that these victims are ripped from their lives so quickly. The weapon of the gun has the ability to end someone’s life nearly instantly with the pull of a trigger. These eerie sculptures are meant to encompass that same gut-reaction shock to innocent by-passers who frequent the area.

¹⁰ *Help Us Make Sure Their Lives Are #Unforgotten*. Directed by Jordan Sparrow. The Unforgotten. April 21, 2015. Accessed December 4, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvKxuwn02Zs>.



Figure 2/3 – Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence, *The Unforgotten*, 2015

On the website for this campaign is a petition which viewers are encouraged to sign stating the support of efforts to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people. “The Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence saw a record number of site visits, stories shared and petitions signed, and declared the exhibit the most successful initiative in its 42-year history.”¹¹ Although gun violence is a known problem to many of the exhibition’s viewers, by presenting the information in a way that humanized the victims and enabled people to visualize the news rather than absorb the information solely through text, a beautiful response occurred. Viewers made the choice to act on the issue rather than solely absorb the information because they were moved through art in a way that news and media could not portray.

Art created in response to gun violence also has the ability to address current flaws with the nation’s response to this ongoing crisis. The film, “Speaking is Difficult”, takes it’s viewer through 24 shooting incidents in America from present day back until 2011 in fifteen-minutes. The goal of the film is to remind people that despite the common occurrences of gun violence, it

¹¹ "Unforgotten." Current Marketing. Accessed December 04, 2016. <http://talktocurrent.com/works/unforgotten/>.

should never be viewed as normal. It aims to impact viewers and motivate them to take action and engage after viewing the piece. It is not enough to simply feel emotions; people must be inspired to act upon them.

The film “Speaking is Difficult,” was released online in April and is continually updated and expanded on with each mass shooting. The film uses the 911 audiotapes taken at the initial reporting of each shooting. As the frantic audiotapes play, the screen cuts through a series of static shots taken at the locations of each shooting. For example, at 1:54 the screen portrays a variety of different angles of a complex titled, “The Grand Theatre (fig 4.)” The audience is shown the main road of the theatre, multiple parking lots, and a shrine to the victims at the entrance of the complex. The videography is very eerie and disturbing. The shots were recorded while the camera was fixed on a tripod, creating a strange illusion to the viewers. While at first it appears that the scenes are photographs, tiny movements in the screen such as rustling in response to wind or a car in the distance imply that it is a recording of time rather than a captured moment. The stillness in this film is shocking and reminiscent of the stillness that occurs when a tragedy such as a shooting happens. The viewer is stuck in a trance as time moves, unsure how to navigate and make sense of their surroundings. The audio of a very panicked, breathless man plays as the viewer takes in the static shots. Upon hearing “911 what are you reporting?,” he frantically reveals that a shooting has occurred in the theatre where he was viewing a film. The woman on the other end of the line calmly asks him multiple questions, such as “how many shots did you hear” and “can you describe the man?,” her tone tranquil tone contrasting greatly with the mans exasperated breaths. While the officer is solely taking the necessary steps in her reporting, it is alarming to hear the normalcy in her voice amid such a horrific call. Her tone fits

with the very off stillness of the shots of each seemingly normal venue.



Figure 4 – AJ Schnack, *Speaking Is Difficult*, 2016

The purpose of this film is to remind viewers that mass shootings are not, and never should be viewed as normal. By portraying the locations of these 24 shootings, the film not only informs viewers but also reminds them that unless action is taken – safe spaces no longer exist. Film Director, AJ Shnack states the title “Speaking is Difficult”, “is about the fact that our ability to have a national conversation has been not only difficult, but almost impossible.”¹² The film is purposely repetitive. Each shooting is portrayed in the same manner, with a variety of static shots playing over 911 audiotapes. This repetitive style is meant to imitate the repetitive handling of gun violence by news outlets and other sources. Despite the recurring nature of the film, the audiotapes are each different, haunting and disturbing enough to ensure that the scenes are captivating, real and full of raw emotion. The viewer does not watch this fifteen-minute film with ease; no part of the viewing experience feels normal.

Once viewers are initially captivated by the work, art created in response to gun violence also has the ability to inform viewers. The Sandy Hook Promise is a non-profit organization that was founded by several family members who lost their children in the tragic Sandy Hook

¹² Murphy, Mekado. "A Documentary Grows With Each Mass Shooting." *The New York Times*. April 15, 2016. Accessed December 04, 2016.

Elementary School shooting in 2012. The mission of the organization is to “provide programs and practices that protect children and prevent the senseless, tragic loss of life.¹³” For the four-year anniversary of the Sandy Hook shooting, the Sandy Hook Promise released a shocking and powerful video on YouTube titled “Evan.” The video has received over 5 million views in just one week.

As upbeat music plays, the video opens with a scene of students roaming the hallways at school. The video focuses on one boy, who doodles “I AM BORED” on a library desk. The next day when the boy returns to his library desk, underneath his bold capital handwriting is a beautiful girlish script reading “Hi Bored, nice to meet you.” The boy writes back and the video begins following him through several school situations as he eagerly looks around for clues of whom his pen pal might be. Their correspondence on the library desk grows until the last day of school when the boy disappointedly finds out that the library is closed. The video then cuts to a scene where the students are signing yearbooks. As the boy signs a friend's yearbook, his pen pal standing nearby notices his familiar handwriting and excitedly introduces herself. At that exact climactic moment, a student enters the auditorium with a gun and begins shooting. The video then cuts to a dark screen reading, “While you were watching Evan, another student was showing signs of planning a shooting.”¹⁴ The video goes on to show a variety of flashback scenes from the prior minute long video, highlighting a boy in the background as he; reads books about guns, gets bullied by classmates, watches videos about guns, posts picture with guns, and makes shooting hand-motions (fig. 5.) All of his actions go unnoticed by the viewer, making the video

¹³ "Sandy Hook Promise." Sandy Hook Promise. Accessed December 09, 2016. <http://www.sandyhookpromise.org/>.

¹⁴ [Http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCI5MxshlyRwoFNsFut6UZdA](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCI5MxshlyRwoFNsFut6UZdA). YouTube. December 02, 2016. Accessed December 09, 2016.

shocking and proving the notion that these signs are easily overlooked and unrecognized. The video entices viewers by portraying an innocent, romantic plot line. This distracting plot line creates shock and horror as a gunman abruptly enters the video, which also simulates the unexpectedness of a real mass shooting. While viewers anxiously watch the video reveal what key moments they missed, they also learn how to recognize at-risk behavior. Through this cleverly crafted video, the Sandy Hook Promise not only brings attention to the abnormal and horrific nature of mass shootings but also informs about the behavioral signs of a potential shooter in the hopes of preventing another unexpected shooting.



Figure 5 – Sandy Hook Promise, *Evan*, 2016

Discussion:

Gun violence is an enormous problem throughout America that is getting worse with each day. Media and news reporting on gun violence and mass shootings is important because it notifies the public of how severe the current situation is, however, the overwhelming amount of reporting has negative effects on the American people and the issue of gun violence. People become desensitized to gun violence because they see it in the news so often, which makes them develop less of a reaction. Also, the amount of reporting publicizes the enormity of the issue making people feel as if they are unable to help or contribute to fighting the problem. Art can address gun violence and inform audience members by evoking emotions that text is unable to, thus inspiring people to take action. Through visuals and sound, art has the ability to humanize statistics and text enabling viewers to sympathize and be reminded of the innocent victims who have lost their lives.

Conclusion:

Gun violence is one of many ongoing crises in the world. The handling of other conflicts such as the Migrant Crisis, the 2016 Election, peace in the Middle East and Climate Change are all in the news on a daily basis. The overwhelming amount of reporting on these subjects creates less of a reaction from the American people with each day. It is important that this information is still available to the public without negatively impacting their attitudes. Art can inform without normalizing the information. More artists need to create work in response to these issues in order to elicit responses and spark emotions in people worldwide. Art is a tool that has the ability to better and change the world - we better get to work.

IP Grant Proposal:

The aim of my project is to portray gun violence in a way that will make viewers take notice. I will be photographing denim jackets, laser cut to read "WHO IS NEXT?" with a bullet mark on the back. Gun violence is an enormous problem throughout America that is getting worse with each day. My project will bring back the shock of how horrible these tragic shootings are and in doing so create more conversations about gun violence and gun laws.

The media and news reporting on gun violence and mass shootings notifies the public of how severe the current situation is, however, the overwhelming amount of reporting has negative effects on the American people and the issue of gun violence. People become desensitized to gun violence because they see it in the news so often, which makes them develop less of a reaction. The amount of reporting publicizes the enormity of the issue as well, making people feel as if they are unable to help or contribute in fighting the problem. Art can address gun violence and inform audience members by evoking emotions text is unable to, thus inspiring people to take action.

My denim jackets will be photographed at the venues of many of the mass shootings over the past five years. I am using denim jackets because they are an every day, American material. Gun violence is a huge issue in America and many shootings occur at every-day, ordinary places where one may wear a denim jacket.

I will be making several different jean jackets to fit all sizes in order to properly reference and depict the mass shootings. These ages range from a 6 year old on the playground to a 60 year old at the movie theatre. The people and places throughout these photographs will vary tremendously in order to depict how anyone at anytime can be affected by gun violence. The laser cutter has the ability to heat the indigo out of denim, creating a fade in the material that enables me to implement my message on the back canvas space of my jacket.

I will be transforming my photographs into a poster campaign that will address the prominent issue of gun violence and inform through a medium other than text. My posters will live in very public places with a tremendous amount of traction such as subway and transportation systems and college campuses. My intention is to shock and scare viewers with my powerful and disturbing posters, prompting them to take action on the issue of gun violence before we discover "Who Is Next."