
Looking In: Creating Artifacts to Heal from Grief

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Figure 1: Detail seen through the peephole, *Looking In*, 2021.

Abstract

Looking In is a project that invites the audience to interact with the sculptor's experience of grief. By creating a material artifact of this event and period in one's life, grief becomes more tangible, easier to comprehend, and more prone to empathy from strangers. *Looking In* uses hand-built construction techniques, moss, cardboard, recycled plastic, video production, and music composition to develop a sculptural form. The resulting piece shows a novel approach to both grieving and how this complex emotion can be shared with others. This form of grieving has the potential to change how we think about healing and creation.

Author Keywords

Hybrid art; fine arts; human interaction

Introduction

Can we create art objects with our grief as a way of healing? Grief is a universal emotion, one that is felt through major loss and dealt with using a variety of coping mechanisms. Grief has been well-documented; for example, the five stages of grief are now colloquially acknowledged by the public. [1,2] Throughout the process of healing, it is important to pay close attention to the emotional landscape. By creating an artifact of the individualized grieving



Figure 2: Exterior of *Looking In*.

experience, the intense emotions inherent to grief become easier to visualize, talk about, and eventually heal from.

Looking In seeks to create a physical representation of grief. It combines sculpture, sound composition, and video to capture and communicate the experience of grief on a personal level. By externalizing these personal emotions into a physical form, visitors visualize the symbolic experience of another person. This design makes pain visible in a way that taps into empathy.

Another focus of this project is to tap into the human connection to nature, as well as to nature's part in the grieving process. A meditative effect is achieved with natural elements, and visitors use the senses (specifically sight, smell, and hearing) to transport themselves into the inner world of *Looking In*. The inclusion of nature and natural materials is also specifically conducive to healing. In different cultures' grief practices, natural elements are consistently represented and assembled (though presented in varied forms). In the United States, for example, it is customary to give a bereaved family funeral flowers or fruit. Indigenous teachings around plants show a long history of emotional connection involved with reciprocal nature of cultivating of the earth. [3]

Finally, *Looking In* works to understand the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on an individual scale. *Looking In* seeks to represent the emotional landscape of one person in the face of collective chaos, grief, and crisis. [4,5]

Looking In also provides a venue for grief to live. It does not replace cultural grief practices, nor does it replace professional psychological assistance; this artifact acts as a supplemental resource for those who are in grief.

Related Work

Globally, grief is processed in diverse ways. Each culture and subculture have various rituals and practices for honoring the dead. People make death a sacred thing through the routines of grief carried out by the living. Though different across cultures in terms of form – choosing burial or cremation, for example – all grief practices contain similarly symbolic honorifics. These rituals help establish the temporal, emotional, and social norms surrounding grief, and they can act as linkages between people and their individual experiences of grief.

Grief is also something that is felt deeply on an individual level, dictated by the closeness of a living individual to the individual who has been lost. Though communal events are often an important part of the grieving process, grief is ultimately accepted through personal reflection.

In the final construction of *Looking In*, the botanical elements, egg / cocoon imagery, and peephole are important symbols. The botanical elements, such as moss and peat, are found close to the ground, where a body might be buried. They emit a strong smell, and call attention to the process of the body returning to the earth.

Eggs speak to themes of growth, but they also represent containment and confinement. The egg, or

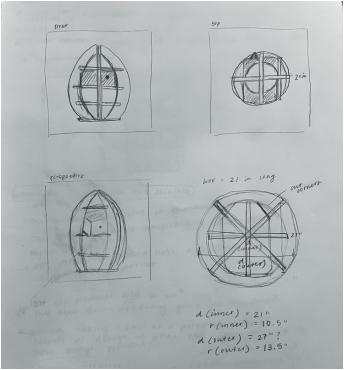


Figure 3: Plans for exterior construction.



Figure 3: Constructing the interior space of *Looking In*.

cocoonlike, structure is also a motif that can be found throughout art and nature at many different scales. The majority of animals on earth hatch from eggs. [6] The egg morphology reminds us that we are all cut from the same cloth, and that we are born from and return to the earth.

Looking to art history, Salvador Dalí's *Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man* [7] and the fruits and shells of plants collected by hand in Pleasantville, NY, in Autumn 2021 both also contributed significantly to the inclusion of egg imagery. The encasing acts as a venue for growth, and, in doing so, it also protects the interior from harm – until it is ready to crack open, of course. Additionally, *Étant Donnés: 1. La chute d'eau, 2. Le gaz d'éclairage* (*Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*) by Marcel Duchamp was pivotal in determining the final direction of this piece. [8] The idea of viewing art through a peephole added depth to the narrative of the piece. When the audience views



Figure 6: Seed of the eastern American black walnut (*Juglans nigra*) tree. Collected in Pleasantville, NY, 2021.



Figure 4: Testing the view from the peephole.

their subject matter through a peephole, it leads to feelings of profanity – they are peering at something they shouldn't.

Implementation

This project was constructed by hand, using an 18 mm OLFA knife, cardboard, glue, plastic sheeting, cotton cloth, reindeer lichen (*Cladonia rangiferina*), electric candles, and sphagnum / peat moss.

The interior space is constructed primarily as a venue for the personalized video to be shown.

- 1. Sound:** Record music (electric bass) and spoken word to evoke emotions of reflection. The music and spoken word were written and recorded by Guinevere Mesh (2021).



Figure 7: Mariel Soto Reyes interacting with *Looking In*, 2021.

2. **Video:** Video is produced using Adobe Premiere Pro. The video is shot, edited, and directed by Guinevere Mesh (2021).
3. **Interior Construction:** The construction of the interior space is therapeutic. The creator of the piece layers sphagnum moss, reindeer moss, and candles to create a miniature altar within a box structure. A peephole and window are created and tested at this stage with cutouts.
4. **Exterior Construction:** The exterior is built using a cardboard frame, glue, and the OLFA knife. The frame is constructed by connecting several "X"-like configurations of the cardboard through simple notch joints.
5. **Final Assembly:** To assemble the final form, the interior box must be placed on the middle shelf of the exterior frame. A plastic screen is added to the larger cutout, creating a transparent, but sealed, opening for the video to play in. Finally, the structure is covered with plastic sheeting and cotton cloth to give the illusion of a solid, opaque egg. The sheeting and cloth are secured underneath the structure, and the final piece is displayed on a pedestal.

Presentation

In the exhibition set-up, visitors are invited to approach the piece and interact with the peephole. There are no additional verbal or written instructions. As people explore the world inside the peephole, they hear the sound within, watch the video situated inside of the

piece, and smell the strong odor of peat. There is nothing on the exterior of the exhibit to indicate what they will see inside, so the interior is a surprise the first time people look in. They watch and experience the interior scene for as long as they want, but the height of the peephole makes it uncomfortable to stay and watch indefinitely. Ultimately, the audience experienced this exhibition as something that was both meditative and slightly unsettling. The interior space, soundscape, and video all functioned to calm viewers; however, the act of looking through a peephole made visitors feel like they were intruding upon something.

Conclusion

Looking In provides a snapshot of what individual grief looks like amidst a time of intense collective grief. Ultimately, the piece establishes a clear set of emotions and uses them to provide a narrative on grief within the psyche. *Looking In* exposes the potential disparity between expectation and reality in how we grieve, and it creates visibility around this mismatch. This project was personally successful; though at times, it was painful to dive into grief to such an extent, especially after recently experiencing grief, it was also healing. The act of creating an object to house my grief, sit with my grief, and ultimately share my grief was indeed restorative. It resulted in a heightened self-awareness as well as a sense of closure. In future iterations of this project, I would like to further explore how the form can be refined, the grief artifact can be potentially personalized for others, and how it fits into the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. I hope that the type of interaction found in this exhibition will inspire future projects and will eventually contribute to the landscape of art therapy.

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Video Link

<https://vimeo.com/657301413>

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