

Personal Statement [941 words]

Growing up, I had an unusual relationship with numbers. Each integer had texture and personality. 5 was a dull purple, and quarrelsome. But add 3 to it, and it became a dark, velvety 8.

I didn't find out what synesthesia was until years later. I learned that the phenomenon is caused by certain neural paths overlapping others, causing neural firings to trigger one another.

During my time at RISD, I took courses in neuroscience, digital poetry, computer culture, programming. In my work, I quantified the emotional and humanized the digital. I felt most at home in intersection spaces, where unexpected discoveries happen.

At the time, professors scratched their heads to recommend a course path. At RISD, I searched for courses like ITP's "Neuromachino" and "Window." When a friend recommended ITP, I was thrilled.

What excites me about the ITP culture is this sense of the discovery through diversity. Be it demographic, disciplinary, or in character, diverse environments have always inspired me most.

Who are your most valued collaborators?

What is it that you value about them?

After graduation, I took a fellowship at IDEO Futures, where my team imagined how blockchain could reinvent homeownership. There, I met my most memorable collaborators to date: Becca, our business leader, had read every single article under the sun. Our tech-specialist, Joel, could debate anyone to the death. And Bruno, a Bolivian HCI student, led with hands-on excitement.

What I appreciated so much about our team is how different we were. For instance, in our problem-solving styles—Bruno and I jumped to making, even on sparse information. Becca and Joel probed the realism of a solution from a systems-level, thinking through myriad details. Our expertise and tendencies challenged me to answer questions I would never have asked.

Still, difference sometimes creates friction. At times, the systems thinkers felt ignored, while the makers felt impatient. So what really made us a successful team was our mutual openness to listen. This created two things. First, we were always honest with each other, and so feedback flowed easily. Second, we learned to balance each other's preferences. I need space for “wandering” and “exploration,” whereas Joel hated any form of inefficiency.

Ultimately, I grew from my teammates' fortes. I learned to disagree well and wander with purpose. While my teammates were buoyed by my enthusiasm, I was held accountable through their pragmatism.

Through the experience, I discovered my strength in listening. My teammates thanked me for the way I focused our messy conversations, by reconciling points of view and asking the right questions.

What do you do about people who disagree with you?

Can you use new technologies to change minds? What are the difficulties and opportunities for finding agreement in your media ecosystem?

I've learned that dissecting conflict is foremost a question of empathy. In confrontations, I try to lead with curiosity. As opposed to a claim or a challenge, a well-framed question creates invitation for understanding.

I've been thinking about this especially this year. Yes, the 2016 presidential election felt nightmarishly like YouTube comments—where to nudge someone's worldview was to nudge a slab of granite. So much inevitably turned into shaming and blaming.

Initially, friends and I fumed in our righteousness. Still, I ultimately wanted to know why this happened. Beliefs aren't rooted necessarily in logic, but emotion.

And so, I don't think the question is about finding agreement, but finding better ways to understand each other. To begin with, the way we've learned to converse with others is broken. We've learned to shoot down ideologies with more ideologies.

Recently, I was moved by a commencement speech by writer Ursula LeGuin. She urged students "offer their own experience" in a space of resistance. She emphasized "offer," because we've become accustomed to "claiming" an objective truth

What does this look like, in practice?

By designing new technology in tandem with media, we're defining constraints of expression. I'm passionate about networks because they're powerful platforms for "offering," at scale.

The internet is already a mass conversation, but creating productive, contrarian discourse is challenging. I'm inspired by Lauryn McCarthy's work, which uses software to quantify human emotions and nudge new interactions.

To that end, we could build Mad-Lib-like guides into our media, that encourage personal narrative instead of alienating, soapbox-style writing. Our text boxes can encourage better framing—the way a therapist tells a fighting couple to try "I" instead of "You" statements.

We could also create "mortal enemy" matches, that ask people to talk about their life experiences instead of their opposing beliefs. We could quantify emotional openness, and build kinder conversations—surpassing the flamewars of online pseudonyms

What people, groups, or community do you care about most?

Still, changing minds is often less like moving a hill, and more like water eroding stone. Building empathy and curiosity needs to start young. I'm passionate about education, because exposing youth to ideas and people builds a more open-minded society. Right now, many students learn through passive instruction; they remember facts for the sake of arbitrary extrinsic metrics.

On the weekends, I volunteer at my local Science Museum, where grade-school youth make things to learn. The hands-on environment inspires a mindset of constant question asking.

In this way, making is an ongoing form of both inquiry and offering. It's a special power. Inventor Jay Silver (MIT) acknowledges this: If our world is made from human inventions, then anyone who can make is empowered to change their world.

In the future, I want to make discovery accessible, and turn emotional friction into insight. By building expressive tools and platforms, we can create sustainable means for discovery.

In my next move, I seek an environment where curriculums cross-fire. The ITP spirit aligns with my curious, anti-discipline mode of thinking. And importantly, the program embraces design, engineering, and things in-between as processes to shift culture.

Thank you for reading. It would be a privilege to join ITP's vibrant community in the heart of New York.