

MS1 RESEARCH: ask / interview

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the question

The research question that I am considering is: how can I create artificial things – objects, scenarios, sensations, etc. – that are scary or uncomfortable in the same way that natural things are?

IDEO methods

Using the IDEO method cards as a prompt I chose to approach this research question through asking five whys and conducting an extreme user interview.

five whys

Why are natural things scary?

Because we cannot control them, they are unpredictable, and sometimes they can hurt us.

Why can't we control them?

Because human beings cannot immediately influence the behavior of natural phenomena or living creatures with whom we do not know how to communicate.

Why can't we communicate with non-human creatures?

Our brains have evolved past using the communication techniques that most non-humans employ. We have evolved to communicate using our brains more than our bodies.

Why is this useful from an evolutionary perspective?

This allows us to transfer or save important knowledge across time and it allows us to build larger knowledge structures.

Why is it important to transfer knowledge between humans over time?

Knowledge allows us to protect ourselves from and dominate natural phenomena that otherwise makes survival difficult.

This is a really cyclic result! I did not quite expect this line of whys to progress in the way it did.

extreme user interview

I interviewed one potential user whom I would consider to be very at ease in the natural world. They sleep outside most of the time and rarely wear shoes, generally preferring to have as few man-made constructs – whether material or social – between themselves and the world around them as possible.

The question I asked the subject was, “what natural things do you find uncomfortable or creepy” taking the example of a spider to start. The subject replied that when they encounter an creature such as spider or snake, which moves in a unique way, they don't feel a knee-jerk sense of fear or revulsion, but rather a deep curiosity and sense of awe about how the creature achieves that motion.

After addressing how motion causes more curiosity than revulsion, we talked about the scale of natural events. This was harder to discuss and pin down. Taking the example of how a rainstorm

can be a drizzle or a flood we talked about the uncertainty of scale that accompanies natural phenomena. We concluded that the huge variation in scale of the natural world is difficult to conceptualize and can lead to fear in some situations. Some things can feel frighteningly small, like a tick or bacteria, or frighteningly large like the grand canyon or an avalanche. This aspect of fear or discomfort never really goes away, but we agreed that the more direct experience you have in the natural world, the more at home you can feel with scale of different magnitudes.

Overall, I found that my subjects conscious choice to live with fewer man-made constructs heightened their empathy for the natural world around them and led to more curiosity than fear in unknown situations. This result wasn't particularly surprising, however it was interesting to hear it articulated in such a plain way. The role of observation also felt important in their response; instead of feeling scared and turning away, their response in most situations is to observe and ask. As we observe and ask questions of the world around us we build a better sense of understanding and fear becomes less instinctive.

expert interview

I interviewed kinetic sculptor Ed Andrews. He would say his most defining work is site specific kinetic installations. Andrews and I have worked together in the past - starting when I was 19 (we have known each other for nearly 10 years) - and I recently saw his work in Boston (like this past Friday). Two years ago he was diagnosed with Leukemia and had a brain tumor. We haven't spoken much since the beginning of the pandemic. It was really nice to catch up. He is probably the most important mentor figure in my life.

I had some questions prepared, but let conversation stray as needed. These notes have not yet been edited. The interview was conducted this morning.

Why is creating movement appealing to you?

difference between life and death

a static object is not alive

even in static work there's still a kinetic element as you move around the work seems to life

I like wind power since it has the randomness, and unpredictability

sense of time comes as things move

Do you consider movement to be a medium?

What is the difference between natural movement and artificial movement?

natural movement has a certain unpredictability

randomness can be generated to create movement artificially, that's a grey area

important that the work is responding to something else, not just the viewer

whether the weather, movement of people

instead of building an object that you look at externally that contain everything you're supposed to perceive, you're creating a responsive system which changes depending on where it's at in time and space

20th century sculptors were looking for reality, didn't like illusion art should be about reality

machines, people talking about robots, technology

mechanical quality to the work which reflects our current reality

too many artists know what they want to do but are limited by lack of technical knowledge

collaboration

collaboration is becoming more and more necessary

difficult for one person to contain the breadth of knowledge to pull off the work

creative marriages are really interesting...force multiplier

derek and jennifer were at the opening game developers...maybe on the FBI watch list

it's hard to separate yourself sometimes

a lot less stressful when you can control everything yourself

don't like being so dependent on others in collaboration

can sometimes compromise too many times and it changes the quality

works best if you know the person you're collaborating with really well

very hard to do it 'cold'

(in my own work i find it's hard to move forward before you establish a shared vocabulary about a work)

Why would you want one over the other?

What is the relationship between the natural and artificial in your work?

What role does scale play when you're using movement?

never thought about it in terms of scale and movement

but more about scale and context

come from a land of vastness, with a dominant horizon mind

anything in an environment like that must be oversized or even register or be noticed

from a very early stage I was working large in order to be noticeable

large 30 foot sculpture

some people think working large is silly and vain

if you're working outdoors it's incredibly necessary

indoors you just need to plan around a contained space

site specific subjectivity defines scale

go into a space and see what it's like - especially if you're creating a responsive system - you need to understand the space and what you feel needs to be responded to

a gallery is often a space which tries to cut out all outside influences, but in fact if you go there and spend time you'll find that's not the case - the Boston Ballet is behind that wall

do you go with what the gallery is trying to do, or create a system that brings those things to life

BOOK for me to read - Robert Irwin: seeing is forgetting the name of what you're looking at

he had a big influence on Ed,

new show makes Ed a bit uncomfortable because it's as traditional as he can get things that go on a wall

the most recent work is very therapeutic, kept my mind very occupied

why is landscape so important to you?

Are there any types of movement that make you uncomfortable?

not a type of movement that i'm attracted to

most of the movement i try to create is attempting to be beautiful

field painting is a really good exampl - a single element that moves in unison within a field

not sure about teh cocoons, wasn't the movment that was uncomfortable, but the form moving that was uncomfortable

anytime that there's a living organism inside something that you can't see but you know is in there is a bit creepy

don't know if when it gets out would be trheating

that squirmy movement is

underwater video of a nest of eels

a bunch of crocodiles...it's just kind of creepy

it's menacing when you habe numbers

nests can be creepy since you don't know how many there are, an infestation in a sense

if movement is seemingly random then whatever it is looks more alive

suddenly something that habs't moved moves is startling

then you start getting into spookhouse territory and that cheapens the response

as soon as you have someone who things, oh you're just trying ot scare me

it has ot be something more than just to scare...attempting something beautiful

sound and movement are stuck together

original kinetic artist

ben ritchey kinetic sculptor

his work was almost silent

outdoor vs indoor

kinetic outdoor work doesn't really translate to the gallery

how do you translate that into indoors

about talking

good to talk about this stuff, because it resets the clock in a way

kinetics have always been central and i just produced the most static work ever

...it's always cyclic

just put together a 3d printer and it makes the lightest little objects you've ever seen

going to be great for making kinetic work

looking forward ot mixing 3D and arduino

some advice

strengthening connections is important no matter where you are
asking if someone needs any help is always

the same people who are going to reccomend me for a job

can build a lot of respect and appreciation through my own work

What things in the natural world scare you?

class interviews

Rama, she/her, 24, from Pune

Can you describe an encounter with something - object, sensation, situation - where you were unsure if it was of a manmade / artificial or natural origin?

certain hikes, there are parts which are created / rocks and natural elements, but so well defined that you don't really know if it's because people have been there so often it's been created by people

is it like that naturally, or because people have made it that way

How did that uncertainty make you feel?

in that specific situation, doesn't really make a lot of difference in the end goal, it doesn't really affect the

wouldn't really think about it that much unless someone asked me

do wonder that about stuff like house plants that are grown in a certain way, they are made to look a certain way

also time where there are natural things which have been made to look a certain way by humans

don't appreciate make

Have you ever encountered something in nature which made you feel uncomfortable?

probably insects and bugs

because they're really small and it's hard to know what they can do to me

makes me uncomfortable, not scared, just don't want them on me

Conversely, have you ever encountered something in nature which made you feel comfortable?

Is there some type of movement - trains, planes, snails, human fingers, bouncing balls - that you find interesting?

Emily, she/her, 28, Las Vegas

Can you describe an encounter with something - object, sensation, situation - where you were unsure if it was of a manmade / artificial or natural origin?

yes

moved from vegas to seattle, wondered if it was a real lake

no natural lakes in las vegas

on the beach you find lots of items that could be manmade or natural but the sand action erases

How did that uncertainty make you feel?

find more meaning if the thing is naturally occurring

better than manmade

Have you ever encountered something in nature which made you feel uncomfortable?

when i was 10 went hiking ot hotspots, it was nudist drum circle

nakedness was uncomfortable

hiking in the alps alone, there were animal droppings on the ground not sure what it was could've maybe been wolves, actually turned back because of the uncertainty

dog though it was exciting

Conversely, have you ever encountered something in nature which made you feel comfortable?

Is there some type of movement - trains, planes, snails, human fingers, bouncing balls - that you find interesting?

hiker person

fascinated by anything by a ridge on top of something really high

planes and boats are crazy when you think about them

combination of scale

and the intentionality of the action, defying the normalcy of how we experience space in that you can define where something ends up

intrigued by soccer players how they kick a ball, there's no explanation for the motion, you just know it

Skylar, she/her, 22, Shanghai

Can you describe an encounter with something - object, sensation, situation - where you were unsure if it was of a manmade / artificial or natural origin?

overall environment, artificial environment has something that makes it feel real it's confusing

such as I live in a house that is partially manmade or natural

friend's home is half garden half manmade space, but it is deliberately controlled by her

when I encounter something embarrassing I am not sure if it's real or fake, more psychological than physical

How did that uncertainty make you feel?

when I was at my friend's house I didn't know how to respond

Have you ever encountered something in nature which made you feel uncomfortable?

when I went to Tibet by the river, people would throw burned people into the river

so the fish in the river are eating people

and then people eat the fish

Conversely, have you ever encountered something in nature which made you feel comfortable?

Is there some type of movement - trains, planes, snails, human fingers, bouncing balls - that you find interesting?

taking the subway, the train is moving so fast and it passes me it feels like déjà vu, i can't believe I'm still present in current time

fast movement blurs the sense of time

eye movement when I'm dreaming, there's a period for rapid eye movement when I'm dreaming, eyes have been moving the whole time I'm asleep

Smitha, 25, she/her Chennai, India

Can you describe an encounter with something - object, sensation, situation - where you were unsure if it was of a manmade / artificial or natural origin?

there was a

my aunt had posted something on ig, wasn't sure if it was a painting or a photo, could've been an aerial photo or a painting of a water body

it was a photograph - would consider it both, of nature using mechanism

How did that uncertainty make you feel?

surprise, i knew she was into photography, also a painter, curious to know how she got so good

then awe

not regarding this particular situation, such as a sculpture or device, that has a sense of duality it intrigues you want to find out more

Have you ever encountered something in nature which made you feel uncomfortable?

dead animals

snakes - even photos

not sure what it is about snakes, they seem so slimy, what creeps me out the most is the pattern

been training myself to get better at snakes and dead animals

threw my phone when I saw a photo of a snake

ok with rodents, spiders

inch worms

Conversely, have you ever encountered something in nature which made you feel comfortable?

Is there some type of movement - trains, planes, snails, human fingers, bouncing balls - that you find interesting?

unpredictable movement is interesting

motion graphics and typography, 2d objects seems 3d

title sequence of killing eve

expected movement that doesn't obey the expected laws

Alex, 36, he/him, Connecticut

Can you describe an encounter with something - object, sensation, situation - where you were unsure if it was of a manmade / artificial or natural origin?

fake rocks

landscaping, walking around ground that's been manicured, fake grass

How did that uncertainty make you feel?

unease

though it was safe, but now it feels synthetic and less of the world and more sterile or arranged

Have you ever encountered something in nature which made you feel uncomfortable?

some kind of animal had pooped near mushrooms in the forest

the whole afternoon i felt revolted just cause i stepped in some poop

tied up with wild mushrooms and always being cautious

up until that point i'd never had some unpleasantness happen to me in nature

always associate it with being clean, had never been dirty

since it was hidden in mushroom it made me associate

more of a

Conversely, have you ever encountered something in nature which made you feel comfortable?

Is there some type of movement - trains, planes, snails, human fingers, bouncing balls - that you find interesting?

random windstorms that pick up dirt or sand have a strange pattern in the air, lose their momentum and return to the ground