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RESEARCH REPORT FOR [UN]SEEN

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HONORS PROJECT

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Introduction

[un]seen is a project that explores ways art and design can uplift intersectional LGBTQ+ voices and identities that are often left out of the mainstream media portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community. This project was initially born out of research into the commodification of LGBTQ+ identities and the realization that corporations tend to market to members of the LGBTQ+ community who they believe have the most spending power: white, cisgender, able-bodied, upper class, gay men. Therefore, corporations most often feature LGBTQ+ people who conform to this demographic in advertisements and media. From this realization, a research question emerged: How can graphic design be used to de-homogenize the media representation of the LGBTQ+ community while bypassing commercialization and commodification?

Rainbow Capitalism (also called Pink Capitalism) describes corporate efforts to reach a commodified LGBTQ+ market, and the immorality of this exploitation harms members of LGBTQ+ communities in multiple ways. Even companies who seem to be benefitting the community by pledging a certain amount of their profits to LGBTQ+ charities and organizations often harm the cause they are trying to help. Companies typically benefit from the wider customer base more than they give and end up creating a "consumerist donation structure [that] creates a context of so-called slacktivism, giving brands and consumers alike a low-effort way to support social and political causes" (Falco 104). This so-called "slacktivism" without any additional support often results in the LGBTQ+ community reaping very few of the rewards, while creating the illusion of significant charity so that consumers and companies are now released from the responsibility of contributing further.

In her book *Selling Out*, Alexandra Chasin details the history of Rainbow Capitalism, and references a 1992 article that describes "a market that's educated, affluent, and homosexual"

(Chasin 30). Aurea Falco and Sanjana Gandhi's article "The Rainbow Business" describes the ways in which today's market follows the same rules, particularly through the use of the rainbow flag in marketing campaigns. Corporations that engage in Rainbow Capitalism thus most often feature LGBTQ+ people who conform to this demographic. This homogenization within media creates of the most significant adverse effects of the commodification of LGBTQ+ identities: the community appears as though it is primarily white, cisgender, able-bodied, upper class, gay men. As a result, any benefits that could come from the commercialization of LGBTQ+ identities (more significant exposure to the public, leading to a wider acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities) are most often reaped by individuals who don't hold intersectional identities.

It's important to emphasize the intersectional identities that make up the LGBTQ+ community because privileging the identities of white, gay men creates progress only for people who fall into that very narrow demographic. A consequence of this narrow representation is that the world is still very dangerous for people in the LGBTQ+ community who are the most marginalized, particularly trans women of color. 2021 was the deadliest year on record for transgender people, surpassing 2020's record in early November with the murder of Marquiisha Lawrence, a trans woman of color (Kumar). There can be no progress for the LGBTQ+ community if Black, disabled, poor, trans and gender-nonconforming identities are not represented, and the specificity of the oppression that affects each person is considered. As Cherrie Moraga states in her essay "La Guera," "The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression" (Moraga 29). Rainbow capitalism erases the "specificity of the oppression," in its homogenization of the LGBTQ+ community.

In order to create progress for all members of the LGBTQ+ community, intersectional identities must be seen, and their voices listened to; [un]seen strives to achieve this through community-centered art and design. [un]seen is a community-centered project and installation that consists of a collection of portraits and statements from underrepresented members of the LGBTQ community. Each subject submits their own action item that depends on their identity and response to the question, "what do you wish people understood about the experience of being [your identity]?" In the physical installation, seven portraits and statements are layered over each other via a custom-built hinged frame. The statements sit overtop of the portraits, prompting viewers to lift the outer frames in order to view the photo underneath (see Appendix A). The rest of the portraits are displayed in a virtual gallery via the Instagram account @unseen_installation and a looping video played on a monitor in the gallery. A collection of additional resources is available in the gallery in the form of small booklets that viewers can take with them. While just a few resources are printed in the booklet itself, a broader collection are accessible via a QR code on the back of the printed booklet (see Appendix B).

Anticipated project outcomes included the uplifting of intersectional LGBTQ+ voices that are underrepresented in mainstream media, and the subsequent impact that seeing these messages has on viewers. I hope that seeing this collection of messages and portraits causes both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ viewers to form a more inclusive and accurate picture of the LGBTQ+ community in their minds. Viewers also have the opportunity to practice responding to the statements they read through in the way they interact with LGBTQ+ people in their own lives. For example, one participant wrote, "I wish an alarming amount of people would stop claiming I am who I am just for attention or some kind of trend." This project aims to alert viewers to the participants' wishes so that they may respond with more empathy. The resultant

understanding from reading the participant's feelings would be that we should never claim that any LGBTQ+ person's identity exists for attention. Overall, I hope that by creating a physical installation for [un]seen, I can uplift intersectional LGBTQ+ voices, create a more inclusive and accurate picture of the community, and drive positive change among viewers' beliefs. Centering the words and images of underrepresented LGBTQ+ community members accomplishes this by driving user interaction, and subverting the use of "marketing" to create a project identity that is both cohesive and celebrates the individuality of its participants.

Literature Review

Rainbow Capitalism

My initial research focused on the topic of Rainbow Capitalism (also known as Pink Capitalism), a term used to describe the commodification of LGBTQ+ identities by corporations. Rainbow Capitalism attempts to gain the business and subsequent spending power of the LGBTQ+ community under the guise of being inclusive and progressive. Alexandra Chasin describes this phenomenon in her book *Selling out: the Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*, where she explores the history of the commercialization and commodification of gay and lesbian identities, and how the gay and lesbian market interacts with the LGBTQ+ rights movement. This source directly addresses many of the points that I planned to explore in my thesis, including the process and effects of the commodification of LGBTQ+ identities, as well as ways this commodification affects the LGBTQ+ rights movement, and the ways race, gender, and class intersect with LGBTQ+ commercialization and the LGBTQ+ rights movement. Additionally, in "The Rainbow Business," Aurea Falco and Sanjana Gandhi "explore the concept of Rainbow Capitalism" with a specific focus on the use of the rainbow flag by corporations in their marketing campaigns (Falco). Falco and Gandhi highlight the way that while many

companies who celebrate pride month and promote LGBTQ+ products donate a portion of the profits to charities, "this consumerist donation structure creates a context of so-called slacktivism, giving brands and consumers alike a low-effort way to support social and political causes" (Falco 104). This paper acknowledges the surface-level "good" that companies engaging in Rainbow Capitalism do for the LGBTQ+ community while also clarifying that they are typically benefitting more than they are giving. Falco and Gandhi's analysis clarifies the way Rainbow Capitalism's apparent benefit to the LGBTQ+ community primarily benefits the businesses that only began marketing to LGBTQ+ customers once the stigma around the LGBTQ+ community was already in the process of being erased.

Andy Campbell also writes about the use of the rainbow flag, and other historic LGBTQ+ examples of graphic design in his book, *Queer x Design: 50 Years of Signs, Symbols, Banners, Logos, and Graphic Art of LGBTQ+*. *Queer x Design* chronicles the history of LGBTQ+ graphic design and delves into the origins and meanings of many symbols associated with the LGBTQ+ rights movement. This Book provided a variety of examples of LGBTQ+ symbols and designs from which I drew comparisons and contrasts while analyzing how current corporate graphic design works to commodify LGBTQ+ identities. The "Money Stamp" spread on pages 182-183 was particularly relevant to my research in that it details the way that "during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, dollar bills stamped with the words "gay money," some with pink triangles, appeared in circulation in major U.S. cities. The result of the uncoordinated efforts of individuals… [made] visible the purchasing power of LGBTQ+ people" (Campbell 182-83). As established by the widespread practice of Rainbow Capitalism in recent years, modern corporate America is well aware of the purchasing power of LGBTQ+ people and is intent on profiting off of the community.

In the article "Consuming Queer: The Commodification of Culture and Its Effects on Social Acceptance," M.J. Yaksich focuses on the ways that the commodification of LGBTQ+ culture, particularly that of gay men displayed in the television show "Queer Eye" allows straight men to adopt "the positive queer styles" (Yaksich 2). This consumption and adoption of marginalized culture "eliminates diversity through homogenization" and validates LGBTQ+ stereotypes (Yaksich 2). This source contributed to my research through its acknowledgment that while the portrayal of LGBTQ+ culture in mass media does promote representation of the LGBTQ+ community, it arguably does more harm than good in that it sometimes reinforces stereotypes and portrays LGBTQ+ identities, particularly queerness, as simply a style for consumption that anybody can try on rather than a true identity or culture. The dissertation *The Commodification Of Sexuality: A Critical Analysis Of Queer Eye,* continues the exploration of the influence of Queer Eye, and the commodification of queer identity within it, on the perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community. The dissertation focuses specifically on the ways in which "the representations of queer culture in the show reinforce the binaries of sex, gender and sexuality" (Velázquez viii). Ultimately, the dissertation argues that the "queerness" of the main characters, who are five gay men, "is depicted as asexual and a form of aestheticism" (Velázquez viii). This source informed my research by emphasizing the way that one particular example of the commodification of LGBTQ+ identities profits off of the sensationalism surrounding "queer" as a buzzword. Additionally, the idea that anybody, including the straight men featured as subjects of makeovers on the show, can participate in queerness, and the harm this inflicts upon the LGBTQ+ community. Jenna Wortham also touches on this subject in her article, "When Everyone Can Be 'Queer,' Is Anyone?" where she examines the history of the use of the word queer, and the ways in which its recent popularity has contributed to the commodification of

LGBTQ+ identities. The article highlights the contrast between the current use of the word queer for its inclusivity and the reality of a lack of inclusivity or equality for LGBTQ+ people, and the resulting terror and violence experienced by the community, citing the Pulse shooting and anti-trans bathroom laws as examples. This article informed my research in that it directly addresses the link between the widespread use of the word queer as a buzzword and the commodification and consumption of LGBTQ+ identities by many of the non-LGBTQ+ people who use it.

Finally, Lorenzo Yeh proposes solutions to Rainbow Capitalism in "Pink Capitalism: Perspectives and Implications for Cultural Management." Yeh proposes solutions in the form of alternate practices for businesses to employ, such as the integration of support for LGBTQ+ artists through LGBTQ+ art exhibitions hosted in conjunction with bar businesses. This source was relevant to my research in that it proposed possible solutions to Pink Capitalism that directly benefit both businesses and LGBTQ+ people. While many of the solutions proposed in this paper apply primarily to small businesses rather than corporate America, it is a good sample of methods that businesses can simultaneously attract and support LGBTQ+ patrons. My project is another solution to the commodification which bypasses commercialization altogether, in favor of building community and connections through user interactivity and real-life stories.

Sources That Model User Interactivity

The website "Under Our Skin," created by *The Seattle Times* is an excellent example of an existing project that uses interactivity to drive social change. "Under Our Skin" is an interactive website that engages viewers through video and audio of real people's stories and opinions on a variety of terms related to race, such as "institutional racism," "person of color," "ally," "white fragility," etc. "Under Our Skin" engages viewers through subtle interactions, such as clicking on the next video, choosing a term to explore, and having the option to include their

reaction to each term through a text entry box at the bottom of the page. This website also encourages viewers to emotionally invest in conversations surrounding race by telling a variety of real people's true stories. "Under Our Skin" informed my thesis by displaying ways that viewers can be successfully engaged and made to care about a topic. I'm implementing similar methods of engagement in my physical presentation of my thesis by including photos, handwriting, and the written statements and stories of real people. I'm also pushing user engagement through hinged frames and an Instagram page that incorporates the carousel feature, which allows users to swipe through multiple photos in a single post. I chose to include the words and stories of real people in part due to my research on the *Freakonomics* episode "Why Are Stories Stickier than Statistics?" where Angela Duckworth and Stephen Dubner discuss how conveying information that encourages viewers to deeply engage with and eventually take action often takes the form of a story. People tend to remember personal stories better than infographics or statistics. This podcast influenced my project in that it encouraged me to shift away from my initial focus of simply representing a problem that exists through the form of infographics, and toward representing individual voices and stories.

LJ Roberts' "Carry You With Me," is an art exhibition that focuses on telling queer stories through visual mediums. In the article "An Artist's Embroideries Reflect the Complexity and Interconnectedness of Queer New York," Alexis Clements describes the exhibition, which consists of a number of hand-stitched portraits suspended in hinged glass frames that can be swung away from the wall, allowing the viewer to see both the front and back of each embroidery piece. This source contributes to my research by acting as an example of an installation that demonstrates the interconnectedness of queer identities, as well as an installation that encourages (though doesn't require) viewer interaction. I also incorporated viewer

interaction into my project, however, my installation requires users to interact with the piece in order to get the full experience of the piece.

Initially, I drew inspiration from pull tab children's books similar to *Let's Explore Dinosaurs!* by Rupert Matthews. *Let's Explore Dinosaurs!* is an interactive children's book that makes use of a variety of interactive features, such as liftable flaps and pull-tabs that help to further engage readers with the content through physical interactions with the book itself. Pull-tabs that are most frequently seen in children's books like *Let's Explore Dinosaurs!* have influenced my thesis in that they were the original inspiration for the interaction between the portraits and the viewer. I originally experimented with a pull-tab format before eventually moving on to top-hinged frames that display a participant's statement on the outer frame, with the same participant's portrait in the inner frame. Hinging the frames on top (rather than the side) forces users to return the portraits to their original covered state, and have to actively hold the frames open in order to see the portraits, with letting go being a conscious choice.

Visual Inspiration

In addition to Under Our Skin and *Let's Explore Dinosaurs!*, I drew visual and artistic inspiration from a variety of other existing projects. This includes Jess Dugan's photography work, which focuses on LGBTQ+ identity. Some of Dugan's work, such as their collection "Coupled," features a variety of people all photographed against the same background, which in this case, is a dark red. Other collections, however, such as "To Survive on This Shore," which is a collection of photographs of transgender and gender nonconforming older adults, contain photographs that depict the subjects in various settings. This is relevant to my project because in allowing subjects to submit their own photographs, and therefore choose the setting, camera

angle, dress, and any other factor, I hope to create a project of authenticity and transparency, where the subject's true, rather than curated, selves can come through.

Additionally, I studied Al Lhotská's work in the early stages of my project. Al Lhotská is an LGBTQ+ artist whose work focuses primarily on butch lesbians. Lhotská works in a variety of mediums, including linoleum prints, gouache, ink, watercolor, and more. I was interested in their work because I find their illustration style and the way in which they portray LGBTQ+ identity to be particularly engaging. Much of their work draws from historical reference photos, as well as current photos and life drawings of lesbians, and at the time, I also planned on drawing from historical LGBTQ+ photos and design to explore the contrast between the historical self-portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community and the current imagery being assigned to LGBTQ+ people by corporate America. Lhotská's portfolio also contains several zines, which I referenced as I considered a potential final form for my project. [un]seen's final installation used a zine format to create the additional resources booklet that were available for viewers who visited the exhibition in the gallery.

Simón Prades and Levente Szabó's work also inspired initial directions that the final form of my project could take. Simón Prades is an illustrator whose work features detailed illustrations with bright, relatively limited color palettes. Some of his work includes animated gifs with subtle shifts in color or morphing of shapes. I considered incorporating the use of his bright, limited color palettes into my final body of work. Additionally, I studied how simple animations or augmented reality could contribute to my final project. I did eventually incorporate simple animations into the video and Instagram feed featured as a part of the project, and used QR codes to link the physical installation and Instagram page together. Levente Szabó is a freelance graphic designer and illustrator whose use of color and framing I admire and hoped to

incorporate elements of into the portrayal of my research topic. I believed that the incorporation of Szabó's framing technique, where one image is nestled inside another, could successfully convey the idea of one reality being nestled inside of, or hidden behind, another. While this exact application of framing didn't translate directly into my final pieces, I did incorporate literal frames to host each portrait, and layered handwritten statements over photos in a way where the words framed fragments of the image beneath them. This contributes to the idea of multiple layers and pieces coming together to form a whole, as well as the idea of revealing a truer image of the LGBTQ+ community than what is seen on the surface.

In my early stages of research, I also looked at the book *The Other Side: An Emotional Map of Brexit Britain,* which is a book created by graphic designers Roberts and Wright that strives to encourage its audience to engage with people who voted for the opposite political party. This book focuses on Brexit, but many of its core principles, as well as the design of the book itself, can be applied to other concepts. I studied this book specifically for its design that incorporates the juxtaposition of contrasting colors, text, and other elements in its cover and many of its spreads. Much of my research focused on contrast: the contrast between historical representation of the LGBTQ+ community and its current representation, as well as the contrast between the current portrayal of LGBTQ+ life by corporate America and the harsh reality that many LGBTQ+ Americans face in their daily lives. Similarly to the role of Levente Szabó's work in my research, this specific contrast didn't translate directly into my final form, but informed my process and contributed to the idea of contrast between being seen and unseen. When I began to solidify the final form my project would take, I looked to projects that explore similar subject matter, such as "Not Another Second." "Not Another Second" is a campaign that tells the stories of LGBT+ seniors (the Q is intentionally omitted due to the word "queer" still

being painful to hear for some seniors), while exploring and acknowledging the years that they "lost" due to being closeted. This campaign includes videos and photos of 12 seniors, as well as a book, exhibition, and website. One aspect of the campaign that I took note of in particular is that all of the participants are dressed in lightly toned dress clothes and are all documented against the same light grey background. There is also a lack of significant diversity in regard to race, ability, religion, nationality, and other identities. In my thesis project, I chose to allow subjects to submit their own photos in an effort to portray a diverse array of personalities, including unique backgrounds, dress, camera angle, etc. I also contacted a variety of diversity-focused student organizations at BGSU, as well as LGBTQ+ community hubs in the Toledo and Detroit areas, and used internet-based LGBTQ+ organizations such as Queer Design Club, Butch is Not a Dirty Word, and Queer Appalachia in an effort to reach a wide array of LGBTQ+ people who hold intersectional identities.

Intersectionality

In 1989, professor Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to describe the ways that people's identities can overlap (Crenshaw). In 2020, she spoke about the continued relevance of intersectionality today, over 30 years later: "It's basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts" (Steinmetz).

Emphasizing intersectional identities challenges how Rainbow Capitalism tends to homogenize LGBTQ+ identity. In providing a platform for a variety of voices and identities to describe their experiences, [un]seen emphasizes the impact intersectionality has on both

individuals and the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. A focus on intersectional identities and voices has been central to my project because in my early research on Rainbow Capitalism, I found that those who hold intersectional identities are those who are most often left behind by any progress for the LGBTQ+ community gained through Rainbow Capitalism, as they are rarely seen by corporations as a demographic who holds significant purchasing power. LGBTQ+ folks who hold at least one other marginalized identity are often more vulnerable to a variety of dangers and challenges, including violence and homelessness. Brandon Robinson's paper "Child Welfare Systems and LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness: Gender Segregation, Instability, and Intersectionality" documents a study that explores the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in central Texas who have experienced homelessness or housing insecurity. Many of the subjects describe negative incidents of segregation based on gender, isolation, and stigmatization that they say are linked to their gender identity or sexuality, "which often intersected with being a youth of color" (Robinson). Robinson informed my research by detailing some of the real, immediate harm (discrimination, social isolation, feeling as if one has nobody on their side, or that they don't fully belong to any community) to LGBTQ+ youth that is caused by the stigmatization of those who hold intersectional identities, which emphasizes the necessity of uplifting intersectional LGBTQ+ voices.

My research on intersectional identity also included Cherrie Moraga's "La Guera," an essay in which Moraga discusses the impact that her identity as a biracial, white-passing lesbian has on her life, as well as the way that the different aspects of her identity impacted her ability to participate in different activist circles. She discusses the way that the privileging of some identities over others negatively impacts all marginalized groups, and states that one must acknowledge the "specificity of the oppression" in order to make progress (Moraga 29). This

source was useful to my research in that it addresses and clarifies the necessity of centering intersectional identities in any marginalized group. Finally, another source that emphasizes the importance of giving voice to intersectional identities is the article "Intersectionality in the Lives of LGBTQ+ Youth: Identifying as LGBTQ+ and Finding Community in Small Cities and Rural Towns, Journal of Homosexuality." This article emphasizes the need for further attention in LGBTQ+-related research to geographic location (rural versus urban), as well as the intersecting roles that faith, class, and race play in forming a person's identity and lived experience. This source was relevant to my research because it directly addresses the need for more attention to be paid to intersectionality in LGBTQ+ lives. [un]seen focuses specifically on intersectionality by uplifting intersectional LGBTQ+ identities and giving them a space for their voices to be heard, their portraits to be seen, their needs to be understood and their presence to be celebrated.

Methodology

Designing the Portraits

In response to my research, my thesis project itself consists of a series of portraits and statements that depict a variety of different LGBTQ+ people, many of whom hold intersectional identities. Each subject yields their own individual action item that depends on their identity and response to the question, "what do you wish people understood about the experience of being [your identity]?" Responses range from "I wish that people understood that being bisexual, biracial, and non-binary is more than being one thing or the other, and that my identity is greater than their perception of me," to "that I don't exist seeking attention." Each subject also submitted their own photo that is used as their portrait. I chose to allow subjects to submit their own photos for a variety of reasons. It allows for the project to reach a wider variety of subjects from a wider range of places (there are a few international participants, and I would not have been able to

travel to photograph them myself), and it allows participants to have total control over how they're seen. They get to choose what they wear, where they take the photo, how much of their face or body they include, and even the angle the photo is taken at. By participating in this project at all, subjects are already being incredibly vulnerable, and I wanted to give them as much autonomy, power, and authenticity as I could.

Each individual portrait's setup consists of a white vinyl cutout of words that form a takeaway, or action item, quote from each subject. The vinyl cutout is then adhered to framed glass that appears over each portrait. The portrait of each subject can be seen in pieces through the holes that the letters form, but is mostly obscured. The frames are attached to each other with brass-colored hinges, allowing the outer frame, containing the words, to lift up, revealing the unobscured portrait affixed to the wall beneath them. I chose to use brass-colored hinges because they are similar in color to the gold that appears in the project logo and pattern. The hinged frames allow the viewer to physically interact and engage with the piece, creating a more memorable experience than they would have if passively viewing portraits and statements (see Appendix A). The hinged frames also emphasize that the viewer must take deliberate steps to ensure that each subject is seen, and the ability of the frame to only swing up serves to emphasize that constant, deliberate action must be taken by the viewer to make the subject seen; as soon as they walk away or decide to let go of the frame, the subject is obscured again. Furthermore, it would take teamwork to allow all portraits to be viewed simultaneously. I ultimately decided to pursue a uniform presentation of the portraits in order to help maintain a cohesivity visual identity. I was concerned that too much diversity in presentation, coupled with diversity in subject matter, would prevent the collection of portraits and statements from immediately being read as part of the same project.

Displaying the Project

My project was displayed in the BFA Thesis Exhibition in Spring, 2022, and was nominated for the Monnier Family Foundation Outstanding Artist Award. Seven framed portraits were installed in the gallery, while a digital collection of the rest of the portraits is hosted on Instagram, through the project-specific account @unseen_installation (see Appendix B). I chose Instagram specifically due to the traditionally square format, as well as the ability to create posts that contain multiple photos, which serves to re-create the viewer interaction that I hope to facilitate in the gallery in a digital space. Additionally, I chose Instagram as a platform for the digital archive of my project due to the website's ability to host a community through comments, shares, and other digital interactions. With my project, I hope to not only uplift intersectional LGBTQ+ voices and identities, but also to show LGBTQ+ people who (due to a lack of representation) feel isolated or as though nobody like them exists, that they are not alone.

The portraits that weren't chosen to be physically framed were also displayed in a looping video that played on a monitor in my exhibition space (see Appendix A). This allowed everyone who visited the exhibition to view the portraits, even if they don't have Instagram or a smartphone, or even if they simply don't see the QR code that linked to the project Instagram. The video also includes an animated version of the logo as a title card, and features the question that participants responded to at the beginning of the video. The monitor was displayed on a shelf that also held several small booklets that contain information on additional resources in Ohio that benefit LGBTQ+ people, mutual aid resources, and places that allies can donate and volunteer. I chose Ohio-specific resources to fill the booklets on display in the gallery, because most people visiting the exhibition in person are from Ohio, though participants are from numerous locations, including a variety of states in the U.S., and five different countries. Virtual

versions of the booklet were also posted to Instagram, and a QR code on the back of the booklets leads to an accessible pdf document that contains clickable links and a wider variety of resources, including national and international resources, as well as resources dedicated specifically to intersectionality (see Appendix B). I chose to include additional resources because while each statement does yield its own action item, I wanted to make sure that if someone was moved by the project, they would have access to methods of making additional change through donations or volunteering opportunities. The booklets are made in a traditional zine format, where a single piece of paper is folded and cut in the center to form a booklet. I formatted them so each one would be in a square shape, to mimic the square motifs that appear in the project's logo, frames, and Instagram posts. Due to the zine format, the booklets are relatively cheap to produce, so gallery attendees were able to take a booklet with them if they wish.

Designing the Project's Visual Identity

I also developed a logo and visual motifs for this project, which appeared in my gallery space, as well as the Instagram page, resources booklets, resources document, and video components. The logo consists of hand-made letterforms that create the word [un]seen, with the "[un]" portion colored light grey, and the "seen" portion colored a light yellow with additional orange strokes that appear on the insides of the curves of each letter (see Appendix A). I chose to use brackets rather than parentheses because they mimic the square format of the gallery frames and Instagram posts. I hand-made the letterforms specifically to convey movement and multiple, intersecting pieces through the multiple strokes that make up each letterform. Finally, I chose to use both orange and yellow in the "seen" portion to create depth with multiple colors, and convey warmth, freedom, and happiness with yellow and orange. This also contrasts the dull grey of "[un]," implying that once the frame formed by the brackets is lifted away, participants

will be "seen" in all their glory. I created the final version of the logo by hand-tracing over a

digital version of the logo with a textured stroke to give it a handwritten feel, to echo the

handwriting motif that is present in participants' statements. I used tints of the yellow in the logo

to develop a swirling pattern that's used as an accent in the resources document, gallery setup,

and Instagram posts. I developed the pattern to mimic the curved, multiple stroke motifs present

in the [un]seen logo that represent multiple pieces coming together to form a whole, and formed

the strokes with the same hand-drawn, textured stroke used to create the logo (see Appendix A).

Challenges

Challenges that I encountered throughout this project consisted primarily of gaining

access to participants and the logistical challenges of mounting the frames in the gallery. I

struggled to get the number of participants that I had hoped to find, likely because the nature of

the project requires a high level of commitment of time and trust on the part of the participants.

Not only did they have to take the time to form a one-sentence statement about what they wish

people understood about their experiences, but they had to find a sharpie and paper, write it out,

and submit a photo. I had several participants submit everything but a photo of their handwriting,

and I had to reach out to them to follow up. I also had a few participants who told me that they

would have loved to participate, but that they weren't comfortable with submitting a photo of

their face, in some cases because they weren't fully out or had safety concerns. This very fact

demonstrates the necessity of [un]seen. Additionally, in order for participants to upload files to

the survey I used, they were required to sign into a Google account before beginning, which is

not only another step of effort on their part, but could also have been a safety concern for some.

While I'm not retaining or using the emails they used to sign in and complete the survey, if a

prospective participant had concerns over remaining completely anonymous, this step would likely deter them from participating.

I also struggled to get a wide variety of participants. Almost all participants were in their teens or twenties, and while I had access to a large pool of LGBTQ+ adults in their 30s – 50s, very few participated. I'm unsure if this is due to a technology barrier (though I had a phone number available that you could call to have a paper version of the survey mailed to you) or due to a lack of interest. Most middle-aged adults came to terms with their identity a long time ago, and I've theorized that they possibly just didn't feel strongly enough about the subject matter to go to the trouble of filling out the survey (unlike young adults, whose identity is often still at the forefront of their minds after reckoning with it throughout their teens). Additionally, while promoting the project on social media, I noticed that many of the responses I got were from other nonbinary or butch lesbians, which is a community I'm heavily involved in. While I was able to reach people who don't share a part of their identity with me, I had the most immediate access to and the most trust from the communities I'm a part of.

Finally, I encountered several logistical challenges while constructing the frames themselves. I had never worked with vinyl before beginning this project, and I had multiple instances where I had to start over because some part of the process went wrong, from getting it cut, to weeding and finally applying it. Even after applying it, I struggled to get any air bubbles out, until I eventually developed a very specific process of using a hair dryer, a credit card, and a sewing needle to release any air that was trapped under the vinyl during the application process. I also went through a trial-and-error process while screwing the hinges into the frames. I struggled to get the screws in the hinges to lay flat because they were so small that I was unable to drill a pilot hole for them, and had to hand-screw them in. I worked with the sculpture studio, who

allowed me to use a tool that punches a divot into the wood that helps guide the screw and ensures it goes in straight. Finally, because the frames were going to be interacted with, I wasn't able to hang them with the traditional hook and wire. I explored the possibility of screwing them into the wall, but because the rear frame would be visible when the front one was lifted, there was no way to mount it that wouldn't leave the screws visible. I settled on using six industrial strength adhesive strips to secure each frame to the wall.

Collecting Data

As survey responses came in, a few common themes of what participants wish people understood emerged. Multiple participants expressed that they wish people understood that they are human, that nonbinary people don't all look androgynous or the same, that they aren't confused about their identity, that they aren't identifying the way they do for attention, and that their experience isn't just defined by either their race, gender or sexual orientation, but the combination of all three. Additionally, some of the Instagram posts that people viewing the project digitally responded most to via likes and comments featured the statements, "I wish outsiders understood how difficult it is to exist as an obvious 'other' in more rural spaces as a non-binary butch lesbian," "there is no 'look' for a nonbinary person, we all look unique," "That I don't exist seeking attention," and "queer or bi invisibility! Though I'm married to a cis-het man, I have been attracted to 'masc' presenting people, of all genders, my whole life!" While browsing the Instagram page or watching the video, people viewing the project tended to realize that each statement was written in the individual's handwriting after seeing 3-4 portraits, and often expressed excitement and enthusiasm for the project upon reaching that "aha!" moment. This is a subtle an interactive aspect that I didn't anticipate when creating the project, but was a wonderful surprise.

In the physical exhibition, numerous people went up to the frames and interacted with them unprompted (see Appendix A). Most people read and lifted a few and moved on, but some took the time to read and lift every frame, one after another. People also took the additional resources booklets that were available next to the TV, and I saw multiple people scanning the QR code to view the project's Instagram page. The Instagram page gained a few followers after the opening night of the exhibition, as well. The gallery lights pointed at the exhibition also created an effect that I didn't originally plan for. When someone lifted the front of a frame, the shadow of the words was cast down onto the portrait and wall beneath it, creating a visual echo of what the viewer had just lifted away (see Appendix B). The shadow of the viewer's arm could also be seen on the wall at some angles, which created an interesting visual connection between the viewer and the piece. Multiple people approached me at the opening of the exhibition and told me how much they enjoyed and appreciated my project, which was wonderful to hear.

Overall, I found that pairing concrete action items with user interactivity (digitally and physically) and real-life stories proved to be an effective method of using graphic design to de-homogenize the representation of the LGBTQ+ community while bypassing commercialization and commodification in favor of community-building. Watching people find the project and see themselves in it, while also learning something new about another person's experience with their own identity was incredibly rewarding. I received submissions from across the U.S. and from five different countries, and seeing a variety of people who had no other way of knowing of each other be able to connect and feel seen by statements that resonated with them was everything that I could have hoped for the project. I plan to keep the survey open and keep the project going on social media in my spare time. If I eventually gather enough responses, I would love to compile them into a website or a physical book. I initially gathered inspiration from pull-tab books when

forming the methodology for the project, and potentially exploring the creation of a physical

pull-tab book would be exciting to pursue as well. I'm excited to see what kind of responses

continue to be submitted in the future, and I hope to continue to help LGBTQ+ community

members who are underrepresented in mainstream media feel seen by sharing them.

Appendix A

Figure 1

Members of the public interacting with [un]seen in the Dorothy Uber Bryan Gallery on the

opening night of the 2022 BFA Exhibition. Viewers interacted with the frames and leafed

through the booklets unprompted.

Figure 2

Wide view of the [un]seen installation, showing the TV monitor that displays the video sitting on

a shelf with the additional resources booklets. The logo appears in vinyl on the wall above the

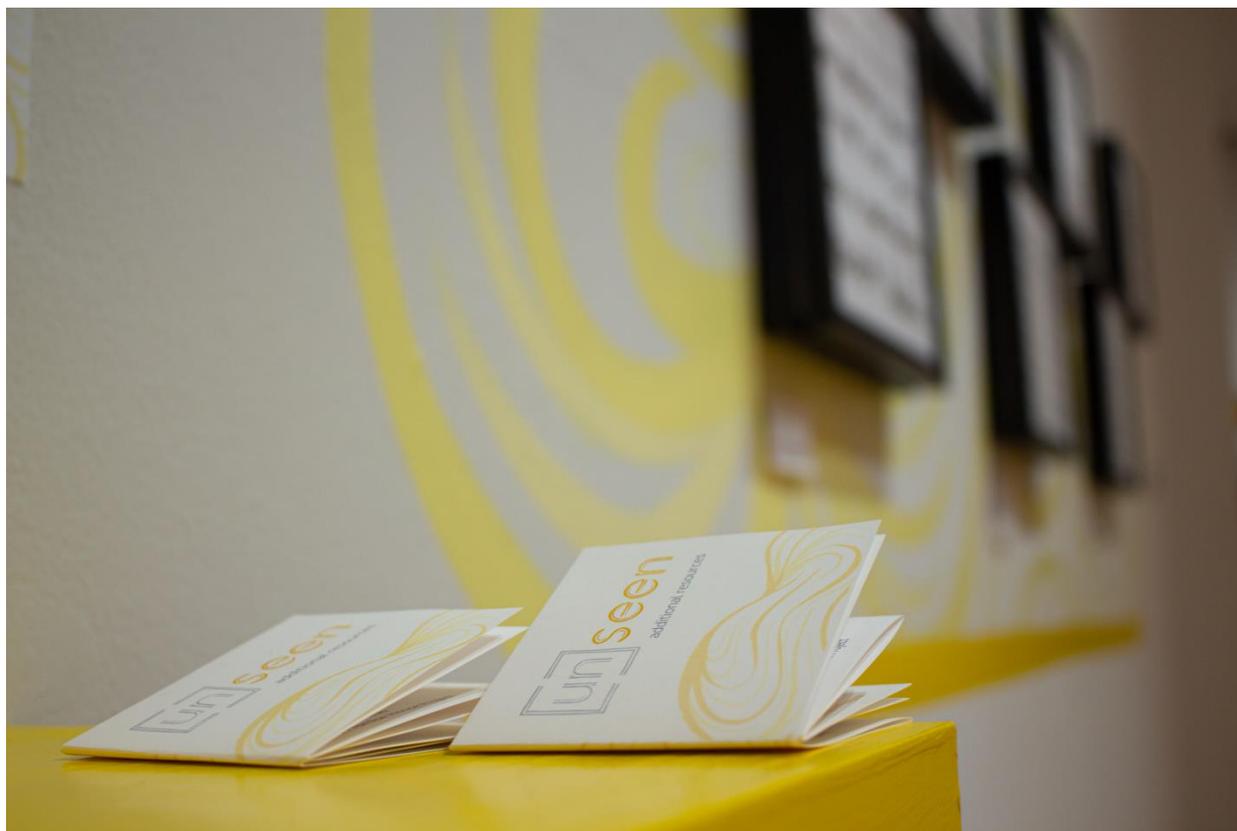monitor. Next to the logo and monitor are the seven physical frames.

Figure 3

Close-up of the additional resources booklets sitting on the yellow shelf in the gallery.

Figure 4

One of the physical frames open in the gallery, with the shadow of the outer frame casting the

participant's handwriting onto his portrait and the wall below.

Appendix B

Link to the project's Instagram page: https://www.instagram.com/unseen_installation/

Link to the logo animation and video of portraits: https://youtu.be/SE0Sm26Iq8o

Link to video of frame movement: https://youtu.be/D_jMGI8p7q8

Link to additional resources document:

https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:8767e3f2-3093-321c-92dc-158d5b41d52d

Link to my portfolio website, which hosts updated photos and videos of [un]seen:

https://albenbow.com/portfolio/unseen/

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