

Perception

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Perception

This work explores the notion of perception. I studied the psychological reasoning behind flawed perception and how prior life experiences lay the foundation for how we see the world around us. I discovered that, as a result of perceiving the world through a flawed lens, an everlasting cycle of misperceptions is created. We are unable to distinguish between what is evidentially true about the world around us and what we have trained ourselves to see. As an artist, I want to visually create this cycle.

This installation is comprised of 232 rectangular mirrors hung at varying heights to create the illusion of a whole cylinder. It is nearly 6 feet tall and hangs suspended from the ceiling. The mirrors form the exterior circumference of the sculpture. As the viewer peers at the fractured cylinder, one's eyes are manipulated by the fragmentation; one stares at their own reflection *and* the reflection of the surrounding environment. This distortion depicts the two competing perceptions: 1. that found within the private realm of our own mind, and 2. that determined by society's influence over us.

As the viewer considers the sculptural installation, I want them to be in awe of their inaccurate perception and, by doing so, rethink the common misperceptions that they do not admit to in everyday life.

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Perception determines the way that we see, understand and interpret life around us as we know it. It is the filtration of the data that we receive from our senses which allows us to comprehend and analyze our surroundings. While we all share the same definition of this word, our actual perceptions differ. Your thought when you walk past a homeless person might be of compassion, but the man next to you might associate them with trickery. While you might think of the man alone on a park bench reading as rather studious and intelligent, the woman walking near you may think of him as a loner or a book nerd. This difference of perception is the result of our differing past experiences. The way that our perceptions were useful to us in our past, as a result of these experiences, formulates how we see things in our present and future. However, our prior experiences do not create perfect, universal truths, as each individual's interpretations are altered based on their established perceptions. Since the interactions that we have come from our distorted societal environment, our brains become programmed in a skewed manner and begin to perceive the world around us in individualized and inaccurate ways. As a result of perceiving through a flawed lens made up of our social experiences, an everlasting cycle of misperceptions is created because we are unable to distinguish between what is evidentially true about the world around us and what we have trained ourselves to see through our curated experiences in society

In order to understand the world, and understand why we perceive it so inaccurately, we must first understand how we sense our surroundings. At the moment of birth, our brains begin processing the world around us. We begin feeling sensations when our senses, like vision, hearing, and smell receive outside stimuli.¹ When we view the world around us, light enters our eyes and is processed by the retina into visual information. We are able to process and “analyze many aspects of a situation at once... [as] the brain makes sense of form, depth, motion, and color” simultaneously.² From the sensations that we feel, our brains organize and interpret the information and put it into context. As the famous philosopher George Berkeley stated, “we have no direct access to our physical world other than through our senses” and without which, we would be challenged to form perceptions of the world.³ A great example of this principle is the neurological disorder known as prosopagnosia, better known as face blindness. While people's vision is unaffected as a result of prosopagnosia, it is their perception that is distorted. They can easily recognize a favorite shirt in the closet, but could not pick out their mother's face in a crowd. This neurological disorder illustrates how sensation and perception are extremely similar and connected to one another, but are not at all the same thing.

We all are able to sense the same world but we are not always able to perceive it in the same ways as evidenced by situations such as prosopagnosia and color blindness, among others. As many phenomenologists argue, “all perceivers have access to the same world... [regardless of] their different perceptions.”⁴ An example of this would be if you are looking at a landscape while there is a man next to you peering at the same nature scene. While

¹ Yale, Kahleen. Sensation and Perception. Crash Course, Crash Course, 3 Mar. 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_4240133775&feature=iv&src_vid=fxZWtc0mYpQ&v=unWnZvXJH2o.

² Ibid.

³ “Optical Illusions Show How We See.” Performance by Beau Lotto , TED Talks, TEDGlobal 2009, July 2009, www.ted.com/talks/beau_lotto_optical_illusions_show_how_we_see.

⁴ The Partially Examined Life. The Partially Examined Life Philosophy Podcast- Episode 48: Merleau-Ponty on Perception and Knowledge.

maybe you are focused on the trees while the man is focused on the grass, both of you are looking at the same scene. If you were to point out a specific detail of the scape to the man he would have to focus his attention to it, but he would be able to alter his viewpoint in order to perceive the scene you first saw. Most phenomenologists will agree with this point that there is not two worlds where one highlights the trees and the other highlights the grass, but rather one with just differing personal perceptions. The difficulty with our constant altering perceptions is that our brains begin creating patterns in what we often see, and we begin to sort these relationships into behavior context.

These behaviors which come from our contextually skewed patterns, cause us to formulate the judgement and prejudice we have about other people. Our brains begin to justify these inaccurate perceptions by using many concepts, such as the Just World Hypothesis. In this hypothesis our society suggests to us that there is a type of cosmic justice insuring those who perform noble acts will be rewarded and those who execute evil ones will be punished. Logically, this theory makes sense and seems fair. People who do bad should receive bad and vice versa. The only trouble is that the world is nowhere near fair and by believing that our actions forge our consequences, we allow individuals to rationalize good fortune and misfortune of other people. While this concept allows people to feel that their actions influence the world around them, the idea that our behaviors cause our destiny completely skews our perception of others. The world is obviously not 'just' as the hypothesis states and there are many people whose behavior does not reflect their happenstance in life. An example of our inaccurate Just World perception is in situations of poverty. Because our society wrongly suggests that our behavior shapes our circumstances, impoverished people are often blamed for their situations. The common misconception that people in poverty are lazy or apathetic does not at all reflect the truth. The same is true for victims of domestic violence. Many times the victim is blamed for the bad that was done to them because society wants a way to justify the situation. As a society, we constantly define others by their labels rather than by their essence and feel the need to rationalization our treatment of others based on their happenstance in life. By having this type of Just World thought process when access those around us, we are ironically being extremely unjust. We are perceiving people in the way our minds rationally want us to, but we do not take into account the unfairness that this logic has on the individual. By thinking that one's actions always directly relates to one's consequences in life, causes us to inaccurately judge others character by their social standing or situation. Rather than perceiving other based on their true identity, when we use the Just World Hypothesis we are using their position in life to determine their entire identity.

On top of our flawed Just World view, our perceptions are skewed daily by both the Primacy and Recency Bias. The common phrase "you never get a second chance to make a great first impression" is much truer than you might want to believe. Psychologically, our brains rate individuals by first impressions. The opinions that we have of others when we first meet them tend to be incredibly strong and often hold as an unbreakable foundation of our perception. Unknowingly, we will "subsequently put extra emphasis on bits of information that helps to support our first impressions."⁵ While sometimes we believe that we are accessing a person as a whole, many times we just place emphasis on the parts of them that

⁵ Vahabzadeh, Arshya. Social Perception - Primacy Recency. Khan Academy, Khan Academy, <https://www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/mcat/individuals-and-society/perception-prejudice-and-bias/v/social-perception-primacy-recency>

are in line with our original perceptions. If you were to meet someone who you thought of as very rude and mean, no matter the nice comments that they could give to you or others around you, your brain would subconsciously not pay attention to the data that could disprove your original impression. Even if this individual complimented you for a week, you would only be able to focus on the rude comments of the person rather than the nice ones because your brain would be focusing on the information that aids your prior thought. Often, this primacy bias creates incredibly skewed perceptions because we are unwilling to try to disprove our own first opinions. This stubbornness that we have undoubtedly comes from human nature and our inability to want to disprove our own first opinions.

The same is true for people's most recent actions. Just as we tend to focus on first impressions, we also psychologically pay more attention to current actions rather than the activity in the middle. Arshya Vahabzadeh, a professor at Harvard Medical School specializing in Behavior Health stated, "when we form impressions of other people, the most important parts... are One: the early impressions that we form... and, Two: the most recent actions."⁶ As a result of living in such a busy and hustling society, we often get lost in the everyday rhythm of our actions. I believe that we focus on the beginning and most recent actions of a person, in order to access their traits, because we frequently forget or ignore the actions in the middle of the two because of our quick paced society. We unknowingly place more weight on the present because it is what is directly in front of our eyes and is what we have most recently sensed and perceived. The difficulty with only focusing on the first and last data is that we ignore the person's actions in the middle. Rather than perceiving the entire person, we focus on what was first formulated in our minds and what was last seen. Thus, we pigeonhole our views of the individual and unknowingly categorize the evidence we are shown about someone into ways that help our first views, and we ignore all other data in order to build our perceptions.

Not only does the primacy and recency bias skew the raw information that individuals present to us, the Halo and Devil Effect causes the same outcome. The Halo Effect falls under multiple categories such as first impression and attractiveness. While the primacy bias and Halo Effect both relate to our first feelings with someone, the Halo Effect causes our overall impression to change just as a result of first opinions of feedback. If our first impression of someone is great, or if we hear from a trusted peer that someone is great, "we may think other traits are also outstanding regardless of evidence."⁷ Let's say that you and a coworker bonded very well at your first encounter, regardless of if your coworker gave any specific evidence to being extremely good at their job, your brain would automatically perceive their skills as excellent just as a result of your overall first impression of them. Even if your coworker gave evidence to suggest that they were actually not good at their job, your brain would still create a false persona that their skill level was better than average. This misperception that those who seem outstanding when you first meet them or have outstanding 'reviews' is known as the Halo Effect. We unknowingly perceive other people's skills as greater if we have a positive original impression of them, regardless of evidence. We are unable to truly focus on the traits that people have shown us because our brains are too busy romanticizing one's

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Vahabzadeh, Arshya. Social Perception - The Halo Effect. Khan Academy, Khan Academy, www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/mcat/individuals-and-society/perception-prejudice-and-bias/v/social-perception-the-halo-effect.

skills. We create the same misperception in the opposite way when we degrade someone's skillset as a result of a negative first impression or bad analysis from our peers. This theory is known as the Devil Effect where no matter the evidence to support someone's true abilities, they are labeled as less than because of their bad first impression. If the same coworker and you did not bond, and even became foes after your first meet, every action that they performed would be devalued as a result of the Devil Effect. While your coworker's skills could even be greater than your own your "overall negative impression... [it] would carry over into his other traits [and] [you] [would] reduce [his] skills."⁸ By using the Halo and Devil Effects "our impression of individuals [is] affected by our overall or particular impression"⁹ of them despite any evidence. While we may perceive them as higher or lower, these perceptions are completely skewed and are not supported by any factual evidence.

The Halo and Devil Effects not only stem from first impressions or peer views, they also relate to attractiveness. Jena Pincott, author of *What Your Face Reveals About You*, wrote about a UK study that asked volunteers to analyze faces, in order to determine whether or not more attractive individuals would be seen as greater members of society. Not surprisingly the study's hypothesis was true and more attractive individuals were consistently rated higher. These individuals had more symmetrical faces looked similar to the average population. Strangely enough, while there was no evidence to support that these more attractive individuals were kinder, smarter, or better at their jobs, they were rated in such a way because of the Halo Effect. These good-looking people were assumed to be, "smarter than their homelier peers, although there is no correlation between intelligence and appearance."¹⁰ While there was no evidence that the individuals in the study had any greater skills than their peers, they were perceived as more capable just for their physical looks. On a day to day basis, we place the Halo Effect onto individuals without even realizing it. In Politics or even in our workplace "we may elect bad leaders and hire the wrong employees, believing them more honest, capable, and intelligent than they are"¹¹ because of their appearances. The study not only proved that other people see more attractive people as better for no factual reason, it also showed that these individuals considered themselves to be greater members of society. The people rated as better looking also rated themselves with higher traits proving that our perception of ourselves is also flawed as a result of the unsound perceptions around us.

While people love to say, "never trust a book by its cover" it is extremely hard not to do so. As Pincott wrote, our brains see more attractive people with more symmetrical faces and begin to trust them more because "the closer a face is to symmetrical proportions... the more it advertises developmental stability."¹² The same is true of the opposite. We categorize people with less symmetrical and attractive faces as less for no apparent reason. Often

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Vahabzadeh, Arshya. Social Perception - The Halo Effect. Khan Academy, Khan Academy, www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/mcat/individuals-and-society/perception-prejudice-and-bias/v/social-perception-the-halo-effect.

¹⁰ Pincott, Jena. "What Your Face Really Reveals About You." Psychology Today, Sussex Publishers, 5 Nov. 2012, www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201211/what-your-face-really-reveals-about-you?collection=109167.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Pincott, Jena. "What Your Face Really Reveals About You." Psychology Today, Sussex Publishers, 5 Nov. 2012, www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201211/what-your-face-really-reveals-about-you?collection=109167.

individuals with asymmetrical faces are seen as a more crooked or angry person. During a job interview, you might hire the more attractive individual even if they are less qualified because your brain will automatically want to side with the more symmetrical face. This distorted perception happens daily in our society. We do not see people for what they are on the inside because we focus on the external figure.

While being able to perceive someone's characteristics through a quick glimpse of their face comes from our cave man instincts of fight or flight as we needed to be able to tell a person's trustworthiness, the trouble that arises with our misperceptions of those around us is very harmful to our society. These rapid judgments such as trusting those with symmetrical faces, can be thought of as our instincts. However, when we use our fight or flight thoughts to perceive people when our survival is not at stake, we make quick conclusions can often be inaccurate. The difficulty with these quick and private judgments of other people is when they are "appl[ied] too broadly... we risk turning a survival mechanism into knee-jerk prejudice."¹³ Instead of seeing people as they truly are, we see them for the quick glimpse that we get of their faces. The same is true for the Just World, primacy-recency bias, and the Halo and Devil Effects; if we apply them too quickly, we completely throw away evidence that would allow us to more accurately assess an individual. By misperceiving others on a daily basis, we do not really assess the evidence in front of us because the people that we see "become a content of one's private mind."¹⁴ Rather than detecting them truthfully and purely, the information perceived gets churned in our own private brains. While there is no way to get a society of billions of people to perceive the outside world in the same way as their neighbors, as a result of their differing past experiences, our only hope to try to fix our flawed perceptions is to be more aware. If we begin to understand our subconscious brain activity that categorizes the people in our lives and why it does so, we will be better off at understanding how to reverse our misperceptions. As psychologist Jena Pincott stated, "compassion, fairness, and rational decision-making happen only when the slower, more recently evolved prefrontal cortex weighs in."¹⁵ What Pincott means by this statement is that we are only able to truly perceive others for who they are when we take the time to slowly access them. In order to do this we must be more aware of our common inaccurate perceptions so that when we are accessing others we can take the true time to understand why we think of them the way that we do. By being more self aware and refraining from snap judgments, we are able to better fight against our misperceptions and truly see individuals for who they truly are instead of who society wants them to be.

¹³ Pincott, Jena. "What Your Face Really Reveals About You." Psychology Today, Sussex Publishers, 5 Nov. 2012, www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201211/what-your-face-really-reveals-about-you?collection=109167.

¹⁴ The Partially Examined Life. The Partially Examined Life Philosophy Podcast- Episode 48: Merleau-Ponty on Perception and Knowledge.

¹⁵ Pincott, Jena. "What Your Face Really Reveals About You." Psychology Today, Sussex Publishers, 5 Nov. 2012, www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201211/what-your-face-really-reveals-about-you?collection=109167.

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