Disordered: Conversations about Mental Health and Society

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DISORDERED:
Conversations about mental health and society

By

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For my mom, Becky Brown

and everyone who ever felt trapped by the stigma of mental health labels
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ABSTRACT

We’ve got issues, and they’re connected. *Disordered* is a collaborative, participatory street art project designed to destigmatize mental health challenges like depression and anxiety, and reframe health as a societal issue. The project takes the form of conversations, stickers and signs in public spaces around New York City. It pushes ideas about how our history, culture, political, and economic systems affect our health in order to inspire personal, social and political transformations.

Through a combination of social practice and guerrilla strategies, *Disordered* intervenes in public places, creating a space for personal interactions and digital dialogue about mental health challenges. The meet-up, pop-up, and social media conversations demonstrate people's enthusiasm to change conventional perceptions about mental health, to connect with each other, and to work for social, economic and emotional justice.
PROJECT DESCRIPTION

“When the imagination is understood as a social practice, then the links between cognitive and social justice can begin to be envisioned.” - Diana Brydon (Kosmala 30)

My goal with *Disordered* is to break down some of the barriers that keep mental health hidden, and bring it out into the open with conviction. This project is an action against invisibility and shame, and an effort to build community. I started by forming a steering group of about 20 people called The Disordered Project Team. Together we designed and held three pop-up installations in public parks, during which between 100-125 people passed by, talked to us, took a sticker, made a paper sign, added a thought to a sharing board, or signed our email list. We distributed over 100 stickers at this time. After the pop-ups, we chose the strongest and most provocative thoughts from the public participation to reproduce on metal signs and vinyl stickers. So far a total of 20 metal signs have been installed in Fort Greene, Clinton Hill, Williamsburg, Bushwick and Astoria. 1500 stickers were recently printed as an in-kind donation to the project and will be liberally affixed and distributed to all who wish to participate in spreading community-sourced messages about mental health and society.

I use “mental health challenges” rather than the medical terms of “mental illness” or “mental disorders” as a political statement throughout this project and this paper. From the beginning, I wanted to draw a distinction between conventional ideas about “mental illnesses” and call into question how we think about health, illness and disorder. Furthermore, I wanted to raise the questions “How do we define health?” and “What is disordered in our society?” and connect the
answers. The name of the project, *Disordered*, emerged from this position, insisting on a collective challenge we all share.

The issues surrounding mental health are important to me because I’ve seen how these challenges and crises affect my students, friends, family members as well as myself. There are a number of issues on both sides of my family including eating disorders, bipolar disorder, depression and anxiety disorders. Various family members have been hospitalized, institutionalized, and at least one that I know of completed suicide. My mother has been on medication for bipolar disorder as long as I can remember, and so I grew up in fear of developing a mental health problem. It was not until my mid-twenties that I experienced my own major depression. I learned how my mental health is inextricably tied to my physical, social and spiritual health. It took years to work my way out and learn a new way of being. Through this personal process, I have grown not to feel ashamed of my depression and anxiety. In an effort to change public perceptions about mental health and offer an alternative message, I wanted to share what I have learned and encourage others to share their stories.

One major cornerstone of my recovery was relying on my body. Bodies and movement have played a large role in my art work, due to my past and present as a dancer and athlete. Being “a physical person” means that I’ve always trusted my experiential and visceral understandings of the world. Interestingly, though connected to the physical world, these intuitive understandings are unseen and immeasurable. I’ve also always been an “emotional person” or “sensitive person” who cries easily, is greatly influenced by the feelings of others around me, and is deeply affected
by the state of the world. Art has allowed me to validate my affective experiences, when societal norms tend to avoid them. In my work, I try to bring awareness to our choices, our actions and our capacity for change. With *Disordered* I wanted to explore the often invisible social, cultural and political causes of mental health challenges by creating physical spaces and material objects in public.

I started this project shortly after Trump took office. His campaign promise to “make America great again” unleashed unbridled fear and anger for many people. I noticed that many people in my life who live with mental health challenges were destabilized and re-traumatized by his assault on the rights of women, immigrants, people of color, people with disabilities, the LGBTQ community and the Affordable Care Act. Essentially, the most vulnerable people in our society are now experiencing even more anxiety than usual. Yet, the unease we are experiencing goes beyond the most vulnerable. People who have been comfortable in their lives all of a sudden were shaken by Trump’s victory and what it implied for our country. News outlets from NPR to CNN began reporting on increased depression and anxiety as early as February 2017. A psychiatrist penned an article for *Psychology Today* in April 2017 titled “How to Cope With Trump Anxiety.” If we look around, it is not too difficult to see that the US is experiencing a mental health crisis, which is very much related to our social and political crisis.

The connection between health and our sociopolitical realities is at the core of my project. Linking mental health to society exposes the erroneous ideas many people have about “mental illness” which contribute to the stigma around it, as well as the lack of agency we think we have.
Through conversation and art, I am trying to shift the burden from the individual to the society. *Disordered* questions commonly held beliefs, structures and systems with hopes to inspire personal, social and political transformations.

Part of my aesthetic approach comes from social practice art, also called community art or dialogical art. Through collaboration, a community proposes interventions that inspire debate or social activism. For me, social practice is art that rejects the gallery, values process over product, and is created through collaboration. Conversation was purposely centered in this project as the force that would drive everything else forward. As Kosmala and Imas put it, “Dialogical aesthetics can act as a catalyst for change, by revealing an experiential part of the world” (9).

The kind of participatory art to which *Disordered* most relates is what some art critics call socially engaged public art which began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some art historians like Claire Bishop, trace the lineage of social practice back to the Situationists and Fluxus artists of the 1960s (Klein 104). For example, some would point to Joseph Beuys, part of the Fluxus movement, who developed a theory of social sculpture, which asserted that art could include the process of living, and therefore society could be transformed through the art of dialogue (Jordan 2). Like Beuys, I believe that everyone is an artist, and what we create consciously can transform society, at least on a small scale.

From the beginning, I envisioned this project as tapping into the collective consciousness rather than sharing my own point of view. To this end, I put out the initial call through email and on
Facebook to see who might be interested in a community art project about mental health. About 85 people filled out the questionnaire, and about 25 of those people were in New York City and open to in-person meet-ups for discussion. I invited those 25 people to meet-ups, which I held each month from May through August. There were between three to six people each time.

The 13 people who attended the meet-ups and the seven people who joined later to help with the pop-ups and sign installations, form what I call the Disordered Project Team. The team includes 20 people who vary in age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and socio-economic status, and whose involvement is completely voluntary. We discussed the social, cultural and
political causes to our own mental health issues. We also shared personal stories and practices that help us maintain our well being. We developed and piloted activities that would eventually be incorporated into the public pop-ups, or temporary art installations. Together we designed and installed the pop-ups, stickers and signs.

Social practice art is also referred to as interventionist art, a term familiar to me through my work as a member of The Illuminator Collective. We are a horizontally structured political projection collective that intervenes in public spaces to incite dialogue about urgent social issues. Sometimes we use our tool called the “People’s Pad,” which allows the public to write their thoughts about a topic, as we project it live onto the surface of a building. Through my four years in the collective, I’ve grown very fond of this kind of guerrilla intervention. Disordered inserted itself into public parks in order to transform the dynamic of these spaces. We set up our tables, laid out our paper prompts, and invited people to add their thoughts to a sign, creating a safe, non-judgemental space for people to talk and write about mental health. Though passerby were cautious at first, people looking for an outlet for their thoughts saw our intent and stopped to add their sentiments to our prompts. One by one, we hung their paper signs on a rope, creating a temporary collective exhibition in the parks. In this way, Disordered enacts Henri Lefebvre’s assertion that we must revolutionize the realm of the everyday to ensure our quality of life is not overtaken by capitalism (Kosmala 214-216).
Disordered goes beyond completely process-oriented projects by creating art pieces to reflect the conversations back into the communities in which they happened. This part of my aesthetic approach comes from another kind of guerrilla art: street art. When I began this project, I knew I wanted to create street art pieces, but I did not know what form the art would eventually take. Like the Illuminator’s projections, street art occupies our everyday spaces with something new, interrupting things as they are. In a similar way to the pop-ups, the stickers and metal signs transform a space with a noncommercial message. It asserts itself as important information, worthy of hanging on a street sign post or wall.
The choice to make physical pieces that live in public spaces is intentional. This information age we are living in provides constant distractions, addictions, and feelings of panic and inadequacy. I believe our reliance on the virtual, digital world is a contributing factor to our mental health challenges. Although I am leveraging social media to spread images of the pop-ups and art pieces, the heart of the project is in the real world, with conversations between physically present people, and material objects. *Disordered’s* tactile publicness reminds people that they are not alone in feeling bad, which hopefully contributes to more empathy and human connections.
When we started meeting in May, I shared with the small groups my street art inspirations in paste-ups, posters, pamphlets, yarn-bombing, sewn fabric pieces, paper pieces, stencils, and signs. We explored the idea of art pieces that could connect together (to collectively form a whole), as well as pieces that we could collaborate on. The team wanted a multifaceted approach rather than choosing only one medium. So, we initially decided to do paste-up posters, signs, stencils, stickers, and a mural.

During the meet-up phase, we also developed prompts to solicit the public’s ideas about mental health and society. These prompts were spray painted onto paper signs for the pop-up
installations, and would be hung on a clothesline for passersby to see. After the pop-ups, we would select the strongest phrases shared by the public to reproduce in the various media, which was later narrowed down to stickers and metal signs.

This project had to exist without walls, be that paywalls, the walls of a gallery or socially constructed walls. *Disordered* had to be accessible to everyone, since mental health problems touch everyone. I wanted to challenge traditional practices of art creation and presentation with the aim of democratizing art and society. I believe that anyone can make art, everyone should be able to enjoy art, and that art can change culture. In this sense, I see my cultural practice as a public service. We can not know when social experiments will create new forms of social organization, but I believe, like the editors of *Public Servants*, that art plays a key role in activism, education and community building (Burton et al. xi-xxiii). The *Disordered* stickers and signs will not alone transform structures and systems that make us unhealthy, but they will contribute to changing the minds of people who can revolutionize those systems and structures.

**RESEARCH ANALYSIS**

Social practice

In 2015, I was an unofficial collaborator in Jeanne Van Heeswijk’s *Public Faculty #9*, in which we stood on street corners in Queens asking people, “Do you feel connected?” I was inspired by this way of working, and over the last few years, have incorporated various kinds of participation, collaboration, and interactivity into my practice.
My initial concept for this project was to crowdsource people’s advice, words of solidarity, and mantras around mental health via social media, and then reflect that back to people through street art. However, at the first meet-up in May, the small group of people I had gathered voiced their disdain for social media’s ability to take us away from real life. We discussed the irony of social media is that it makes us less social. We feel it alienates and isolates us from one another, while making us feel insecure and inadequate through addictive technologies and advertising. In essence, we concluded that social media is bad for mental health and social connection. This realization meant that we would pursue a participatory approach through public pop-ups as opposed to an interactive one through social media.

After meet-up participants shared their personal stories, they reflected on how nice it was to speak freely without the fear of judgement. I then recognized that face-to-face interactions were integral to the project due to the subject matter: Talking about mental health normalizes and destigmatizes it; and having these conversations in public as participatory art makes this serious

1 Heidi Boisvert’s research has shown how intelligent technologies are numbing our biological selves. The reward centers of the brain are over-activated by technologies including likes on Facebook & Instagram, text message alerts, and video game scores. Her work indicates excess cortisol in the brain burns out the adrenal glands which help to regulate emotion and impulses. Perhaps more alarming, a study of long-term Internet addiction in adolescents showed changes in gray matter which affected their cognitive abilities related to motivational stimuli, reward pathways and choosing appropriate behavior. Boisvert sites a study of sixth-graders in which less face-to-face time and more screen time decreased their ability to read body language and empathize with others. (62-63).

2 The podcasts Team Human and Note to Self consist of conversations about ways we can increase human connection and reign in the rise of machines in our lives (Rushkoff & Zomorodi).

3 Recently some of the engineers and designers who helped build the addictive technologies used to mine our data through social media have come out against their own work. James Williams and Tristan Harris left Google and founded an advocacy group called Time Well Spent to get big tech companies to change their persuasive designs that keep us going back for more. They also want to raise consumer awareness and create new business models that don’t use technology to manipulate and control us (Lewis).
topic approachable and even a little fun. The experiential quality of human connection strengthened the power of *Disordered*.

Figure 5: talking to participants

In addition to Jeanne Van Heeswijk’s work, *Disordered* was greatly inspired by the simplicity and depth of Candy Chang’s *Before I die*, which invited people to complete the sentence “Before I die I want to…” We tried to create prompts as open as hers, while still focused on our goals around mental health and society. Bridget Bartolini’s *Five Boro Story Project* uses community storytelling to connect people, build outer borough pride, and advance social justice and love. In
particular, I have experienced how Bridget invites people to share their stories on building-shaped paper and fabric, which she strings up on street corners and in parks. Suzanne Lacy’s *Between the Door and the Street* was created with the help of an advisory board of 20 women. I looked to this when enlisting the involvement of the people who became the Disordered Project Team. I was keen on the idea that a small group could prepare to engage a wider public in discussions around mental health. I was also lucky to experience Paul Ramírez Jonas’ *Half-Truths* at the New Museum this summer, which plays with themes of trust and collective understanding. The same goes for his piece *Public Trust* in which participants made promises in public, which were then juxtaposed with public figures’ promises. I admire the care with which he designs his public interactions, the detail given to each element. I did my best to make the pop-ups attractive and inviting, the paper sign prompts beautiful to emphasize the value of the public’s participation.
In the spirit of the book Beautiful Trouble, assembled by Andrew Boyd, Disordered also connects to the practice of using art as activism. We use the principles outlined in the book of “Balance art and message,” “Kill them with kindness,” “Praxis makes Perfect,” and “Take risks, but take care.” Using our bodies in direct action, we occupied space in public parks for our pop-ups. The Disordered Project Team took collective action by planning and holding those pop-ups and by leveraging risk (32-33). By using parks to have discussions and make signs, we asserted our right to be there. Similarly, the sticker and sign installations are done without permission, as a direct action and occupation. We believe we have a right to reclaim our streets.
in the name of raising awareness about the connections between mental health and society (78-79). Disordered also repurposes the green metal sign posts to share our messages (80). Of all the theories in Beautiful Trouble, Disordered relies most heavily on “The commons.” This project advocates for protecting and expanding our common wealth to address mental health issues (220-221).

Because of my emphasis on collaboration, the conversations shared at the meet-ups and pop-ups were part of my research. The Disordered meet-ups allowed for deep conversations to take place. We shared stories, asked each other questions, and contemplated various scenarios. Through collaboration with the Disordered Project Team, my initial ideas about the topic and project evolved over time.

In contrast to the meet-up conversations which often focused on large systemic issues, the pop-up conversations frequently revolved around how there should not be any shame associated with depression, anxiety and other mental health issues. The pain of the stigma these people had felt, either directly or via family or friends, was palpable. This anti-stigma stance is reflected in many participants’ responses on the paper signs, and eventually in the metal signs. These personal messages take a political position, standing in opposition to the culture of shame we live in.
In her TED talk, Brené Brown, who studies human connection from a social work perspective, found that shame, which she describes as the fear of disconnection, is the thing that destroys interpersonal relationships and social connection. To fight shame, Brown says we need to fully embrace vulnerability as a part of being human. She asserts that vulnerability is emotional risk, or in other words, courage. Brown adds that we have to talk about shame because empathy is the antidote to it.

Several of the Disordered Project Team members told me how being involved with the project opened up conversations with their friends, family and co-workers in ways they had not
expected. In some cases people admitted their mental health issues to team members, and in other cases the team members were able to tell someone about their own challenges. One team member shared,

“Because of working with you I decided why not disclose my illness with this new friend of mine. I had nothing to be ashamed of. If anything it would help her understand me better or if she had a negative reaction I would know this was not someone I'd want to spend any more time with. It turned out that she too was dealing with her own form of depression. She was actually happy that I brought it up because now she knew she had someone to talk to.”

This attests to the power of Disordered’s social sculpture to shift consciousness and transform society. It also exemplifies what Brené Brown advocates: by embracing vulnerability, people built stronger connections with each other through empathy.

The connections between lacking mental health care, self-medication, law enforcement and incarceration surfaced on the sharing boards during the pop-up phase. I wasn’t too surprised by this, since police brutality against people with mental health issues was in the news during the life of this project. In July, The Intercept released an article about the Chicago Police Department’s use of SWAT teams to respond to suicide attempts and mental health episodes over the last five years. In 2012, the city of Chicago closed 12 of its mental health clinics and privatized the six that remained. Since 2013, CPD dispatched SWAT teams over 38 times for mental health incidents, which escalated the crisis and increased the likelihood of a lethal outcome (Lazare). In New York City, two black men in their 30s, Dwayne Jeune and Miguel Richards, were shot and killed by the NYPD in July and September of this year. According to
The Washington Post, one quarter of the 874 people shot and killed by police in the US in 2017 so far were dealing with a mental illness.

Figure 8: Sharing board
Mental health

A large part of my early research revolved around mental health, from both radical and traditional perspectives. On the radical side of things, I discovered The Icarus Project, self described as “a support network and education project by and for people who experience the world in ways that are often diagnosed as mental illness.” They focus on advancing social justice as a path to healing and liberation. Their guide book, *Madness and Oppression: Paths to Personal Transformation and Collective Liberation* leads the reader through identifying how oppression affects us, how to cope with it, and how to address it. Although I was not leading a support group, their work inspired me to delve deeper into the ways oppression affects our health.

I found that oppression, including racism, sexism, patriarchy, ableism, heterosexism, etc., has been shown to have negative effects on the mental health of its targets. Studies have shown how psychological and political acts of oppression take place on various levels including intrapersonal, interpersonal, via social group, state and internationally. The asymmetrical power relations of oppression can occur through a number of identities and intersections between them (e.g. race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability status). Research has shown how social group oppression can become internalized oppression, which has been linked to lower self-esteem, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, risk-taking behaviors, body dissatisfaction, disordered eating and somatic symptoms (Holmes et al. 314-315). Studies have also demonstrated that discrimination-related stress increases blood pressure, which is linked to increased mortality. Discrimination-related stress also raises cortisol levels, which is associated with obesity, depression, decreased immune function, cancer and death (Jacobs).
I believe that in the United States a very large part of our suffering and worry has been created and cultivated through a history of individualism, capitalism⁴, racism⁵, and other forms of oppression and inequality. In other words, I believe that priorities in the US are “disordered,” and this greatly affects our well-being in a negative way. I believe that thinking critically about health and society can not only help us to feel better, but can also help us deconstruct harmful systems and build sustainable supports for humanity.

This research informed some of my early conversation starters in the meet-up groups. I asked them to talk about the social, cultural and political systems that affect their mental health. It seemed as if each person had experienced some form of oppression, if not several. When prompted to complete the sentence “Anxiety is…” one team member wrote “…normal in a sick society.” This statement provoked a lot of discussion within the Disordered Project Team. It led to questions like ‘when did society become sick?’, ‘how is it sick?’, and ‘is there anything we

⁴ Jeffrey Smith says we’re living in an age of “anti-depression” because the modern workplace demands for productivity and efficiency don’t allow for any slowing down (Cvetkovich 146). Moreover, we are also less able to leave work since it exists on our phones and laptops wherever we go, erasing the boundaries between work and leisure time. Furthermore, our digital labor in social media during our leisure time is a source of profit for businesses. If we consider all the hours we are contributing affective labor, compensated or uncompensated, sleep starts to look like the only escape from capitalism, and thus from alienation. Indeed, sleep is the focus of Jonathan Crary’s book ²⁴/⁷. He argues that the 24/7 state of modern capitalism has now engulfed our social lives. He claims that although these information networks are made to look and sound like social connection, our time online is actually a suspension of living (9). Because they have not found a way to commodify sleep, the global capitalist market has been working at eroding the time we spend sleeping (11). As Crary notes, after a short amount of time, sleep deprivation produces psychosis and neurological damage (6). The Japanese even have a word for death from overwork, karōshi, which includes suicides and deaths related to heart attacks, strokes and other conditions related to stress and long work hours. Though Japanese employees typically work longer hours than we do in the US, stress related to work and economic burdens, is a big issue for people in the US as well (McCurry).

⁵ David Williams lays out a case for how race, which is closely tied to economic inequality, is a major factor when it comes to health. Even when comparing Whites and African Americans at a similar economic status, there are huge racial differences. Williams therefore advocates that in order to address racial inequalities in health we must confront economic inequalities (Auerbach and Krimgold 74).
can do about it?’ Some people really liked the statement because it was provocative, others thought it was too negative. When it came time to choose some statements for the first round of stickers, I wrestled with including this phrase. In the end, I decided to answer the ‘how is it sick?’ question with “Oppression makes us sick.” and “Racism makes us sick.”

At the pop-ups, we offered six different sticker phrases and designs. At the conclusion of each pop-up, we would take a count to see which designs were chosen the most. Each park had a different favorite sticker, which I am sure has something to do with the different populations. But since this was not a scientific study, and we did not collect demographic information, I can not
say for sure why certain stickers were more popular in each neighborhood. Overall, we
distributed over 100 stickers across the three pop-ups, and the most popular sticker was “Racism
makes us sick.” and second most popular was “Oppression makes us sick.” Although the top two
stickers were phrases I wrote and did not reflect the prompt format, when it came time to print
the vinyl stickers, I decided to reproduce them.

The question of whether we have agency to change our “sick society,” is a topic that surfaced in
a number of ways. Ann Cvetkovich’s book and corresponding project Depression: a public
feeling, develops a case for “political depression,” a state in which tactics like direct action and
critical analysis don’t help us feel any better about the state of the world. Cvetkovich’s project
sought to embrace negative feelings in order to generate hope needed for political action (1-2).
She suggests that the unresolved traumas of our past, combined with the slowness of change
makes it hard to acknowledge the emotional affects on our everyday life (7).

Kriss and O’Hagan describe political depression as an “interiorization of our objective
powerlessness in the world.”

“Political depression is, at root, the experience of a creature that is being
prevented from being itself; for all its crushingness, for all its feebleness, it’s a cry
of protest. Yes, political depressives feel as if they don’t know how to be human;
buried in the despair and self-doubt is an important realization. If humanity is the
capacity to act meaningfully within our surroundings, then we are not really, or
not yet, human.”

So how can we be human again, change things for the better, and truly address the causes of our
suffering? Based on my research and interactions throughout this project, I believe it will take a
multifaceted approach from as many different angles and levels as the sources of oppression and trauma in our society. This means fighting oppression internally, between persons, in our communities, and in larger arenas if we are to become fully human.

Figure 10: Anxiety-healthcare sign

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation does research, funds programs, and advocates for health equity and a culture of health. In order for all people to have equal opportunity to health, the RWJS suggests we must work on environmental health (quality housing, access to healthy food,
safe places to exercise), disease prevention and health promotion, reducing health disparities related to race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, and addressing social determinants of health (ensuring people have good homes, schools, and neighborhoods).

Though addressing the causes of our suffering is key, I entertained the idea that physically making the signs could also be a source of healing. Regardless of how one conceives of the causes of mental health challenges, it still affects the body, and thus, we need physical or somatic healing, whether that is medication, exercise, meditation, energy work, or something else (Cvetkovich 113). Somatic therapies can also include daily rituals like walking, writing, or crafting. The idea is that a physical movement can help to release a psychic or spiritual blockage (Cvetkovich 114). I kept this in mind as I was creating Disordered. I liked the idea that making something with our hands and bodies could be a point of healing.

Jacqui Alexander proposes a “rewiring of the senses” to fight oppression. We can rethink political practices to include and address feelings, moods and energies by applying the African concept of ase, the life force or energy present in every being. Alexander suggests that we spiritualize the political to help us heal. She points to African-based cosmologies that see all human beings as important and connected. In a secular way, this would mean an insistence on every person’s importance to the collective (Cvetkovich 135-137). I believe in a connection between all living beings, and that a spiritual approach to addressing society’s ills is beneficial. I tried to bring this idea into the project with the prompt, “Your mental health is everyone’s
concern because…”. Although the responses were often similar, the top voted response was “...you are a part of us.” which reflects a spiritual connection.

On the more traditional side of mental health, an early apprehension of several team members was how to handle people in crisis who may approach the project. A similar concern of mine was making sure people knew this was an art project, and that I am not a mental health professional. Because it definitely seemed possible that someone in crisis would want to participate in the pop-ups, I took the Mental Health First Aid certification course on May 19th. The trainers informally defined mental health crises as difficulty in living, loving and laughing. We were taught to identify the signs (physical, visible) and symptoms (what a person experiences) of various mental health crises. In my notebook I wrote something they stressed, “Never give up trying to help.”

During the second meet-up in June, one of the participants had an episode or attack that lasted over an hour. Recalling my Mental Health First Aid training, I stayed with him, listened nonjudgmentally, and offered to help. I assessed that he was not at risk for hurting himself or others. He eventually regained his composure and declared that he is diabetic. He explained that due to traveling, he was off of his normal schedule with insulin and eating meals, and apologized for the episode. This event gave me pause and led me to deeply question my ability to handle a project which confronted sensitive mental health issues in public. In the end, the incident demonstrated my commitment to addressing these issues in both a personal and systemic way. I was reminded of how important compassion and patience are in relationships. My friend thanked
me for being there and not leaving him alone. I thought, if only every person who is having some kind of health issue had a friend at their side, what a difference it could make. The experience also demonstrated how intertwined mental and physical health are. In researching insulin shock, I learned that the signs and symptoms are almost identical to panic attacks and psychotic breaks.

Finally, my research also included looking into the various public health campaigns aimed at destigmatizing “mental illness.” Many of these projects were created by celebrities including the Heads Together campaign started by The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry, the Born This Way Foundation started by Lady Gaga, and Bring Change to Mind started by Glenn Close. There have also been social media trends related to celebrities coming out about their own mental health issues, such as #InHonorOfCarrie for Carrie Fisher. Disordered simultaneously aligns with these campaigns in their quest to destigmatize mental health issues, while it separates itself from the highly-produced, high-profile, and apolitical status of them. Instead, Disordered asserts a DIY aesthetic, a grassroots model, and a highly politicized position. The most related public health campaign is the Mural Arts Project (MAP), an arm of the Thrive NYC program, started by First Lady of NYC, Chirlane McCray. While Thrive NYC promotes mental health education and expanded access to care, MAP included community discussions and collaborative mural painting.

Street Art

Tatyana Fazlalizadeh’s Stop Telling Women to Smile series, deeply affected me when I first encountered it in the streets of Bed-Stuy where I used to live. As a woman who is often street
harassed (and told to smile), seeing these portraits of women accompanied by their bold statements filled me with joy. It was this sense of “It’s not just me” that I wanted Disordered to capture. In a different vein, the Protect Yo HeArt stencil project presents a simple message as a friendly reminder. Although Disordered’s messaging is more varied and provocative, I think it works in a similar way to both STWTM and Protect Yo HeArt. Another inspiration is Bkindart’s (@bkindart) Random Art of Kindness. Her stickers and paste-ups feature beautiful designs that include messages like “Practice Kindness.” In addition to putting them up around Minneapolis, she sends them to people doing good in the world, as a way to thank them for their kind hearts.

My advisors suggested that I look into Gregory Sholette’s collaborative REPOhistory project which involved metal street signs and maps to spread the “unknown or forgotten histories of working class men and women, of minorities and children.” When I spoke with Greg on the phone, he told me that they spent years going through bureaucracy — community boards, the DOT, NYPD, etc. — to get permission to install their signs around New York City. Even after receiving permission, then Mayor Giuliani threatened to take them down, and other people did remove them in disapproval. In light of this information, I decided to go guerrilla style with the Disordered street signs.

Although I have seen a few pieces of art, usually on a piece of wood, fixed to street sign posts, I have never seen guerrilla metal signs in NYC. Camo Lords install “ghetto style proverbs” on metal signs sharing positive lyrics from rap songs like “Appreciate The Moment, There’s No
Guarantee.” We decided to embrace this sentiment, and accept the risk that comes with this ephemeral art form.

PRODUCTION PROCESS

Disordered had three major phases: small group meet-ups, public pop-up installations, and street art. Each stage involved a design process including brainstorming, prototyping, and iterating.

Meet-ups

The meet-up phase went as planned, although that included the uncertainty of who would attend, how involved they would be, and what we would plan together. I held one each month from May through July, and two in August. There were between three to six people each time, with seven of those people attending at least two meet-ups. In a city like New York, where everyone is ridiculously busy, the fact that people were willing to make 2-3 hours of their evening or weekend available on a purely voluntary basis for an art project about mental health was an accomplishment in and of itself. When I expressed my concern that I might be asking too much of them, they assured me that they wanted to be a part of this, and therefore asking for a few hours of their time was not an issue.

After deciding that we wanted to solicit the public’s ideas in-person, rather than through social media, we began thinking about how we could do that. We began developing prompts inspired by Candy Chang’s Before I die. We agreed that the pop-ups would be the best time and place for asking the public to respond to our prompts, in contrast to a project like Before I die where...
people could encounter it anytime in the streets and participate. We thought that with a topic as sensitive as mental health, we wanted to be able to facilitate the thoughts being shared through conversation. I started the prompt development process, but many of my ideas were difficult for people to respond to, too long, or were not eliciting positive responses. The team members came up with some of the better prompts, including “Depression taught me…” and the straightforward “Depression is…” and “Depression is not…” which were included in the pop-ups, as well as the street art.

At the meet-ups we also discussed making these prompts visual in some way, since handing people a worksheet was out of the question. We experimented with form, using stencils and fabric, both of which took too much time to make. Since New Yorkers don’t stop for much, we knew we had to create a quicker interaction. We tested out different fonts, decorative borders and sizes of paper.

In August I asked a few people who had trouble making it to the meet-ups if they wanted to contribute art in the form of decorative borders to the project. Up until this time I had been pulling border designs from the internet, just to have something framing the text. One person, Matt Fricano, accepted and began working on a few decorative borders. He emailed me several options in sketch form, of which I selected three. His designs were incorporated into the stickers, paper signs, and metal signs, giving Disordered a consistent visual style.
Eventually, the team decided on using the AG Book stencil font, Matt’s custom borders and 11x14 inch paper. Through email, they helped me choose the final prompts, as well as the name of the project. I then cut stencils, built a wooden frame to hold them down while spray painting, and turned my back patio into a workshop. I was not very good at painting in the beginning, but I improved over time, learning to keep a consistent distance and speed.

When we started meeting in May, I wasn’t sure what types of art pieces we would make but I envisioned making them together. In the end, for various reasons mostly due to scheduling and a tight timeline, I took on most of the design and execution of the paper and metal signs. However,
the team offered many great ideas, such as making the paper signs as attractive as possible to
better attract the general public during the pop-ups, as well as feedback on the sign, sticker, and
pop-up designs. It was one member’s idea to draw with chalk on the sidewalks, and another
member’s idea to offer snacks, both as ways to draw people into the pop-up discussions. I did my
best to involve the team in as much of the decision making as possible, but the limited
face-to-face time, and reliance on email was not ideal.

When we were struggling with choosing one phrase and one design to print on stickers for the
pop-ups, and one team member suggested printing them on label paper so that we could print
several designs (rather than paying a sticker company to print 250 of one design). When I
couldn’t find the right size label paper, another team member said that he would take care of the
stickers. He asked a friend of his who has access to label making equipment at his job to print
our stickers for free. We were able to print six different designs, an A/B/C/D/E/F test to see
which phrases and designs people liked the most. He printed around 150 stickers for us to give
away at the pop-ups. This was a great opportunity to learn what people responded to.

My collaborators were invaluable. From being as enthusiastic as me that Disordered is a project
the world needs, to advice on designs and prompts, to helping pull things together for the pop-up
phase, these people really drove the project forward. With more planning and a longer project
time frame, they could have been more equal collaborators on preparing the materials for the
pop-ups (like painting the paper sign prompts), and if I were to do this project again, I would
design it that way.
Pop-ups

I originally wanted to have the pop-ups, or public temporary art installations, in all five boroughs. However, as I began to plan the logistics, it began to feel too ambitious. I reduced from five pop-ups in five boroughs to three pop-ups in two boroughs. I chose Queens and Brooklyn mainly for convenience, but also guessed that compared to Manhattan we would have less interference from the authorities, since we would be operating without permission.

The first pop-up was in Fort Greene Park. Two Disordered Project Team members met me an hour early to set up. As I was hanging the rope on which we would be hanging people’s paper signs, a parks department worker approached me and asked for my permit. I said that I didn’t know that I needed one, and she assured me that even birthday parties needed them. She bombarded me with questions as I slowly tied the rope to a tree. After all the planning and prepping for this moment, the reality that she was telling me we could not go ahead hit me, and I burst into tears. At the sight of my obvious distress, she softened her approach and finally let me talk about what we were doing. She then said, “Ok, you do your thing, but if any other parks person asks you for your permit today, tell them you already gave it to me.” We lucked out that day.

After that near-disastrous experience at the first pop-up, I researched permitting in city parks for the upcoming events. I found out that permits are needed for parties of over 20 people. So in fact,
we did not need a permit because we never had that many people at once stopping to participate. This served as a reminder that people will use their power however they like. Secondly, permits take 20-30 days to be approved, so even if we did need them, obtaining them in time for the next two pop-ups was impossible. We went ahead with the next two pop-ups as planned, hoping we would not have a similar or worse experience. On the contrary, during the 2nd pop-up in McCarren Park, both parks department workers and police officers passed by our tables multiple times, nodded, waved and smiled at us. We saw no parks department workers or police in Rainey Park.

At the first pop-up we also learned how to start conversations with people walking past the table. When we led with a project about mental health, people would often keep walking. However, when we led with a participatory art project or free stickers, people would approach us and the tables. We also determined that asking simple questions helped to engage people. I often asked people if their friends and family members talked about mental health issues. When they said yes, I could ask the follow-up, what do they talk about? Or when they said no, I could ask, why do you think that is? These questions led into deeper conversations about mental health and society.
We also made small additions after the first pop-up. We realized we were missing signage, so I cut new stencils with the name of the project and painted signs for the second and third pop-ups. We noticed that many park goers were walking dogs, so I bought some dog treats. This became another way to get people to approach our tables. Since I had secured someone to photograph the second pop-up, I added a public photo notice as well.
The prompt “Wellness includes…” was the most popular paper sign that people completed at the first pop-up. We discussed why this was the case, and decided it was the least political, and least stigmatized since it did not reference mental health, depression or anxiety. We decided not to include it at the next two pop-ups and replace it with “Mental health justice means…” Although this was very similar to one of the sharing boards, I wanted to encourage people to imagine a better world.

Figure 13: Rainey Park pop-up
At each pop-up there were participants who stood out. At the Fort Greene pop-up, a couple was passing the tables, reluctant to approach us. I quickly said, “We’re not trying to sell you anything, it’s an art project.” After taking in what we were doing, Rachel Stephenson was so elated by our project that she literally took one paper sign of each prompt to complete with her boyfriend. They chose the paint colors they liked best, grabbed a few markers and went to work at a picnic table nearby. After a while they returned, beaming with their contributions. Her statements struck me as someone who has been through a lot, managed to stay positive, and who wants to share what she has learned to help others.

In general, the pop-up phase was exciting and successful. The people who stopped were enthusiastic about the project. I was surprised by how open people were about their struggles, and reassured that this was important work. We had children as young as nine who stopped by (probably initially for some snacks), but when I asked them if they had heard people talking about mental health issues like anxiety and depression, they said yes. Some teen girls, aged 13 and 14, said the project reminded them of a friend who completed suicide. We also had new mothers with postpartum mood disorders, and older adults who discussed the ups and downs they had experienced through their lives. Sometimes when there was a small gathering of people, they would communicate with each other instead of only talking to me or the Disordered Project Team members. Some people would participate after reading the signs made by others. The pop-ups were a perfect illustration of Stephen Willats’ socially interactive model: a social practice in which the artist and the viewer collaborate through a dialogical process mediated through creation (Kester 92).
Production of metal signs and stickers

After the pop-ups, the next phase would be to instantiate the most powerful responses to the prompts as handmade metal signs and mass-produced stickers. I went through the 100+ responses gathered through the meet-ups and pop-ups and chose my top three for each. I created a google form and asked the Disordered Project Team members to rank the responses from 1 to 3. Most of the phrases had a clear winner, but there were a couple instances in which I broke the ties. In an ideal collaboration, with more time, we could have discussed the ties and come to consensus but with our short time frame, I had to make a decision as an artist with a vision and move forward.

In production of the signs, Eric Herman helped me buy, transport and cut a 4’x10’ feet sheet of 24 gauge galvanized steel sheet metal, which I selected for its ability to withstand the elements. Building from the designs used for the paper signs, I repurposed certain elements to create a unified aesthetic for the nine new stencils with the chosen phrases. I experimented with colors and coatings on the galvanized steel, finding some combinations that highlighted the message and others that intimated street signs. This process was different from painting the paper signs. I occasionally wrecked parts of the design as a result of not waiting for the paint to completely dry. I also learned that you can not spray paint when it is even a little windy. During the sign production phase, I was hyper aware of the wind as well as the rain and humidity, and would schedule entire days around taking advantage of clement weather to create clean, even coats of paint on the metal. Because the metal signs were slightly larger than the paper signs, I developed
two new techniques for holding the stencils in place. When I wanted a painted border, like DOT street signs, I used binder clips. When I did not want a painted border, I used floor tiles that I found laying around as construction waste.

When the signs were ready, we formed groups of three or four to install them in the neighborhoods where we held the pop-ups. The first installation was on a Friday night between 8-10pm, on November 3rd, in Williamsburg. The nightlife provided a cover for us, and no one seemed to notice or care about what we were doing. The second installation was on a Sunday morning between 7-9am in Fort Greene and Clinton Hill. It was quiet, with very few people around to notice what we were doing. The third installation was on a drizzly Monday morning between 7-8am in Astoria. The light rain was a motivator for us to work quickly, and we also traveled by bike, so we were able to move through Astoria swiftly and cover more ground than we had previously by foot. We hung more signs in less than half the time it took in Williamsburg or Fort Greene. On average each sign took about a minute to install. Usually two of us worked on fastening the nut and bolt with our hands first, then we tightened more with a ratchet wrench, and finally we applied nail polish to the nuts & bolts to make it harder for people to remove them. I had warned the installation crews that the police could stop us, so we always had one person acting as look-out. This worked well, and thankfully we had no issues.

We did learn some things about street signs during the installation phase. One thing we noticed is that the majority of sign posts are angled towards the street, not the sidewalks where our primary audience would be. Again, this seemed like such an obvious thing (street signs are made for
driving & parking cars), but is not a detail one normally pays attention to. Due to this, we learned to look for stop signs and do not enter signs, as those are usually perpendicular to the street.

The illegality of the sign installation added a conundrum. If we installed the signs in high foot trafficked places, they were also likely to be seen by the DOT or NYPD who might remove them. When I checked on the first batch of Disordered signs we installed in Williamsburg about a week later, three of them had been removed. These three signs were located in the most visible areas, including right in front of the Bedford L station. We considered this double-edged sword while installing in Fort Greene and Astoria. We decided to split the difference, putting some in busy locations and others in less traveled places. The pedestrian heavy locations are the ones that have shown up in social media first, but hopefully the more remote locations will remain and be discovered for a long time.

The selected phrases that did not make it onto metal signs went onto new stickers. One of the Disordered Project Team members suggested that I try to get the stickers donated to the project. I drafted a letter and, after soliciting feedback from the team, sent it out to seven companies. Of those seven sticker companies, four responded favorably in some way, but only one offered to print the stickers for free (if we paid for shipping). This most generous offer was made by Sticker Guy! located in Reno, Nevada. Since we needed to conform to their standard sizes, one team member (who has a graphic design background) helped me tweak the previous sticker designs to fit the smaller size. Sticker Guy! also offered us a very narrow free space which we made into Disordered project name stickers. They printed 1500 vinyl stickers for us free of charge. Again I
was indebted to the Disordered Project Team for their ideas and talent. If I had not pursued and
received this in-kind donation, we would have paid for far less stickers and probably only one
design. It never hurts to ask for help!

*Disordered* was now officially a sticker and metal sign street art project. However, it must be
acknowledged the that original scope of the project included not just signs and stickers, but
paste-up posters, stencils, and a mural. The paste-up posters were to be screenprinted, a
technique that two of the Disordered Project Team members are skilled in. In August, a team
member instructed me on the first part of the process. But due to the workload of organizing the
pop-ups, learning and practicing screenprinting had to take a back seat during the pop-up phase.
The more I thought about all the materials and equipment needed to do screenprinted posters, not
to mention the more intensive installation process we would have to undertake, I decided it was
beyond the scope of this project. Similarly, stenciling directly onto surfaces would put us at
greater risk of arrest by the police, and I decided to drop the stencil component.

As for the mural, in May I had reached out to the Welling Court Mural Project, which consists of
over 150 murals over several city blocks in Astoria, Queens. Garrison, the co-founder and
director of Ad Hoc Art, responded positively, but told me to get back in touch with him when I
had visuals I could share. I passed by their street party in June just to put a face to the name. In
chatting with him, I mentioned that I am a member of The Illuminator collective, and he
immediately seemed to take me more seriously. I walked away feeling very confident that he
would give us a wall to paint a mural. After the pop-ups, I sent him photos of our poster and
sticker designs. He again said they would support *Disordered*, but he never sent the dimensions or location of the wall. I followed up a few times, and he usually responded, but without any details. At the end of October, I decided to stop pursuing it while we wrapped up the metal sign and sticker production and installation. My plan is to reconnect with him in the spring to see if we can do the mural then.

Over the entire *Disordered* project process, I learned various practical things about this kind of socially engaged public art and these particular street art forms. More importantly, I learned that there is a huge need to talk about mental health in our society, especially in the context of social justice. I also gained self-confidence by taking risks like working in new mediums (stencils, spray painting, street art), starting public discussions about a stigmatized topic, and relying on others to pull this off. Though it was challenging to coordinate and collaborate with the Disordered Project Team, I could not have done this project without them. In fact, I found that people’s enthusiasm and support pushed me forward every step of the way. The collaborative aspect of the meet-ups helped me organize and execute the pop-ups. The public participation at the pop-ups gave me the courage to forge ahead with guerrilla sign art. Installing the signs urged me to share on social media. Making myself vulnerable and taking risks was essential to the success of this project, in both a personal and practical way. I had to practice asking for help. This experience assured me that we need each other and that we need to work at being human if we want to overcome any of our many obstacles.
Overall, this experience emboldened me to experiment with new mediums if that is what the project calls for. It also solidified my belief in the ability of social practice art to transform consciousness. I expect participation and collaboration to remain a central part of my work moving forward. Although social practice pieces demand a lot of time and energy, they are well worth it. I now understand why some of Jeanne Van Heeswijk’s pieces have taken years: to completely engage with a community and topic, and bring that project to fruition, it takes time. As Beuys would suggest, life is our opportunity to create consciously in an effort to transform society. Or as Ann Cvetkovich would say, “They taught me that depression is ordinary - as is its “cure,” which resides not in medical treatment but in the art of daily living” (161).

AUDIENCE AND EXHIBITION

Disordered aims to reach people who live in New York City and are affected by mental health challenges, whether directly or indirectly. It does this by existing in public spaces that are accessible to all people. The project promotes discussion of mental health directly through the meet-ups and pop-ups, and indirectly through the ambience it creates in the streets (and wherever else people affix the stickers) as well as through social media.

Living in urban environments like New York City, the streets become an extension of our home. In this sense, street art can be seen as volunteerism to decorate, as opposed to vandalism (Kuittinen 13). Or, another way put, the intervention makes a more livable place for those who inhabit it (Kosmala 10). I agree that encountering something unexpected in the physical
environment offers “a prism through which the everyday environment can be perceived differently” (Kuittinen 14). Disordered deliberately and forcibly exists in the public space, asking subway riders to consider their anxiety before their commute. However, for good or for ill, public space in 2017 is both physical and digital.

Despite the decision not to solicit people’s ideas through social media, I did share photo documentation of the pop-ups, my production process, and the final pieces on my personal Instagram, Facebook and Twitter accounts, making a point to always use the hashtag #Disordered. Many people have liked, shared, commented and messaged me, expressing how much they love the project, thanking me for doing it, wanting to contribute, and asking when I will bring Disordered to their cities or states.

All of the stickers and signs bear the name Disordered though there is no hashtag symbol in front of it. The team agreed that people will add the hashtag on their own, so it was unnecessary for us to overemphasize it. When others use #Disordered (as we hoped they would), we can find the shared images on social media. Despite eschewing hashtags, a social media feed or even a website, the Disordered project has begun to organically circulate in the digital space of social media.
Less than a week after installing signs in Williamsburg, Brooklyn Street Art (@bkstreetart) shared a photo on Instagram, which got close to 2200 likes and many comments. They have 138K followers who might have seen the post. Photographs of signs in Fort Greene and Astoria have also been shared on Instagram since installing. Some of the stickers have shown up in IG as well. One of my coworker’s friends hadinstagrammed a sticker, and she screenshotted it to show me, since her friend’s profile is private.
One of the early stickers I put in a bathroom stall also led to a conversation. I imagine there will be more wall dialogues in other places where we will adhere the new stickers.
After receiving the shipment of stickers from Sticker Guy!, I posted on IG that anyone who wants some stickers should reach out. So far I have been contacted by people in NYC, other states, and even other countries asking for stickers. Similarly, one Disordered Project Team member said some of his friends have been talking about replicating the project in another country as well. The fact that we have been able to reach as many people as we have and inspired others to get involved without a thorough press campaign, gives me hope for the future of Disordered as well as for humanity. Having done this nine month version of the project, I feel confident that we could apply for grants to replicate it in other places.

It is through intervening with unsanctioned art in public spaces that we can open up the discussion about how mental health is a societal issue. Adding our community-sourced messaging to the visual culture in New York City is an act of resistance against the silence and stigma around mental health challenges. Disordered puts prosocial messaging in the streets to spread a new way of perceiving mental health and social justice issues. I believe that we must first imagine other realities in order to shape them. So, we interrupt the chaos of everyday life with expressions of the collective on stickers and signs to advance the ideas of ordinary people, who reject shame, promote dialogue, and inspire transformation.
Appendix A: Early prototypes and meet-ups

Post-its and notes from the first meet-up
July meet-up

First two prototypes
Anxiety is
nothing to worry about,
but how we get our health care is.

Depression taught me
that anyone is vulnerable
that it's ok to ask for help
that I'm not alone
that my mental health is important
that I should take care of myself

Testing prompts and borders
DEPRESSION TAUGHT ME
That positive relationships are essential to my wellbeing, and to focus on my existing relationships as well as fostering new ones from a positive perspective (surrounding myself with people who are good for my wellbeing).

Everyone has some kind of mental health issue.
Some people are just more in tune with it. Let’s not stigmatize, let’s be supportive.

ANXIETY TAUGHT ME
That I can control where I choose to direct my attention, my focus.

Anxiety is not who I am or who I’ve chosen to become.
It’s the wall that separates me from a social society.
Appendix B: Paper sign and sticker production

Preparing stencils

Wooden frame for spray painting
Mass production on my patio

Protecting my health  detail of two-tone work
label prototype stickers

stickers after they were cut apart
Appendix C: Pop-ups
Rachel Stephenson and me.
Anxiety taught me

A kind word can save a life! Say hello!
Depression taught me:

La depresión me enseño que todas las situaciones vienen con un aprendizaje. Uno no está solo y debe recorrer lo que quiere y soporte que necesita.

We must look honestly, openly, lovingly at what we feel—share with others—we never realize how similar our journeys are—we are never alone.
Anxiety is not something you can turn off/on. My mental health challenges taught me to not hide what I feel. Pretend I'm okay. To be compassionate and patient and honest to share my struggles because it's the only way to heal. "If you've been through Hell and back make sure you get back to tell your story."
Appendix D: Metal sign and vinyl sticker production

Cutting sheet metal

Drilling holes
Binder clip method

Tile method
ANXIETY TAUGHT ME TO SLOW DOWN.

DISORDERED
Signs ready for installation
Initial sketch for title sticker

Final design for title sticker

Vinyl sticker designs ready for printing
Appendix E: Metal sign and vinyl sticker installation
Depression is a battle that no one should fight alone.

Depression is nothing to be ashamed of, but the systems of oppression in this country are.

Disordered: conversations about mental health and society
ANXIETY IS NORMAL IN AN UNJUST SOCIETY.

DEPRESSION IS NOT WEAKNESS.
DEPRESSION TAUGHT ME THAT EVERYONE IS VULNERABLE.

ANXIETY IS NORMAL IN AN UNJUST SOCIETY.
Do not lean on door

Oppression makes us sick.
Appendix F: List of participants

Bibliography


