De-Sign: the semiotics of emotion
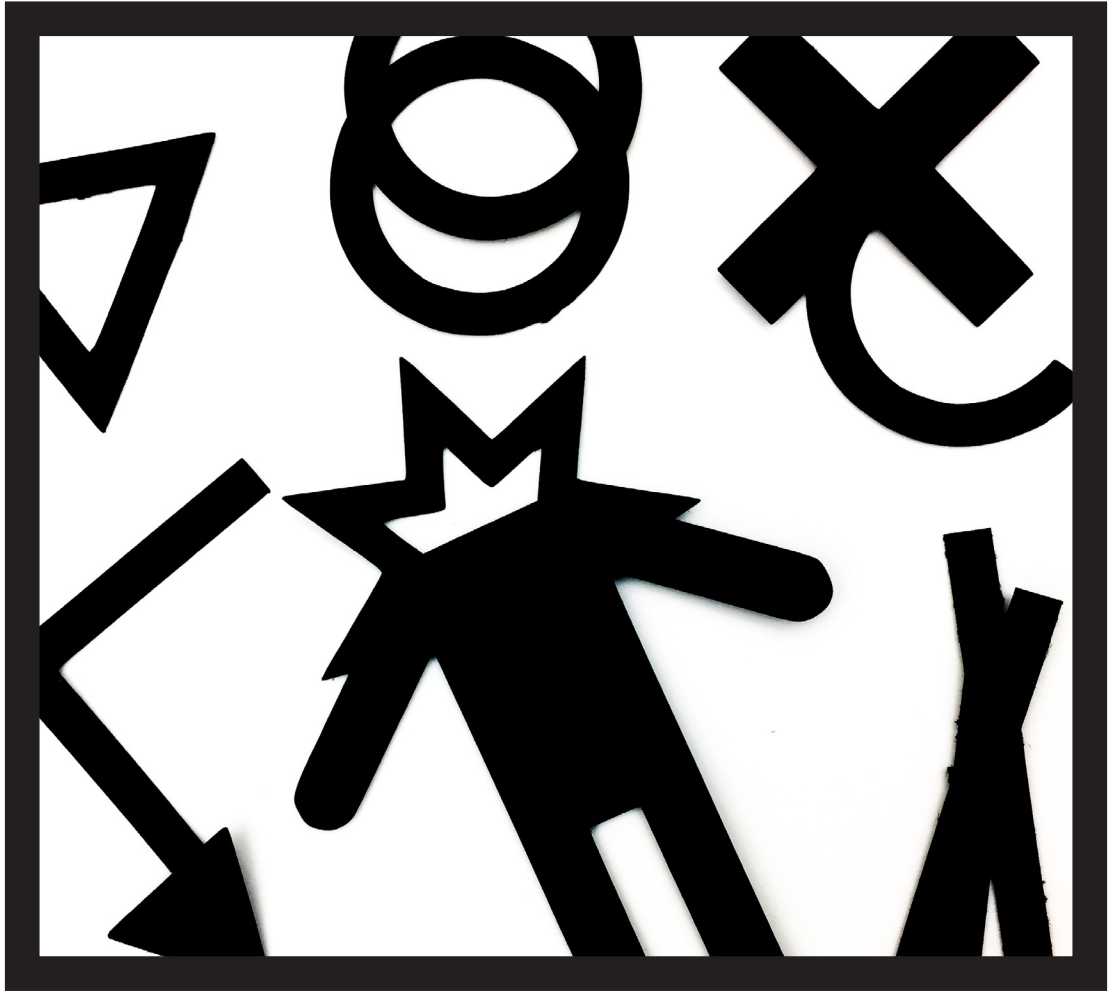
Josue Cruz
(hō-swĕ krōōz)

Prof. Randall Sexton
DSGD 150
GD Senior Studio
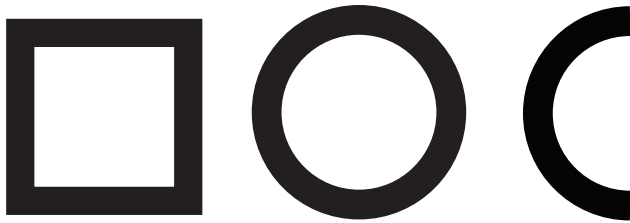
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De-Sign: the semiotics of emotion

Josue Cruz

DSGD 150
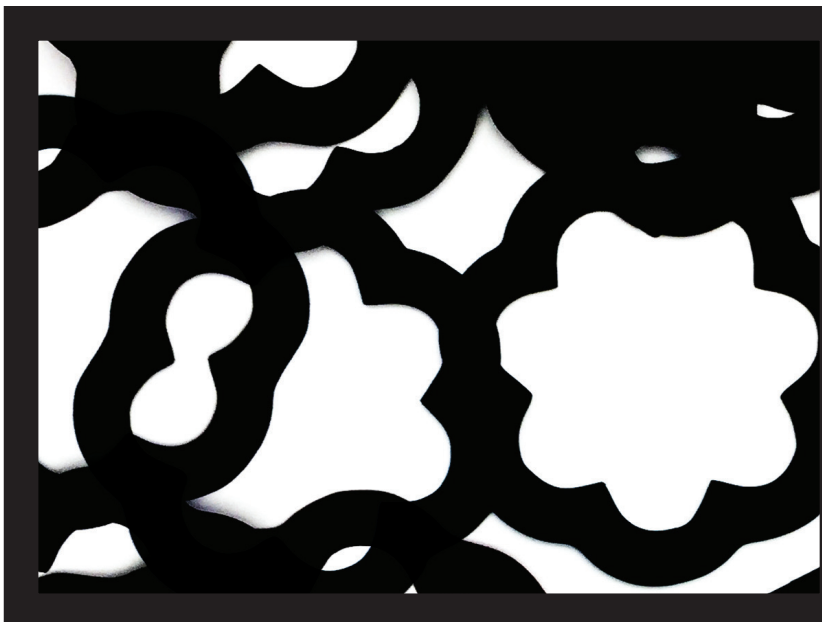GD Senior Studio
Prof. Randall Sexton

BFA Graphic Design

San José State University

Spring 2017

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Project description

This in-depth studies course focuses on research concerning current issues in visual communication/information/graphic design fi elds. This course is for procuring the undergraduate degree in BFA Graphic Design degree where the student will develop an individual design approach, process, and methodology for the application of graphic design solutions as the thesis project that will fulfi ll the criteria expected for graduation.

Faculty Advisors

Prof. Randall Sexton

Prof. Connie Hwang

Prof. Chang Sik Kim

Project Advisors

Corinne O Takara

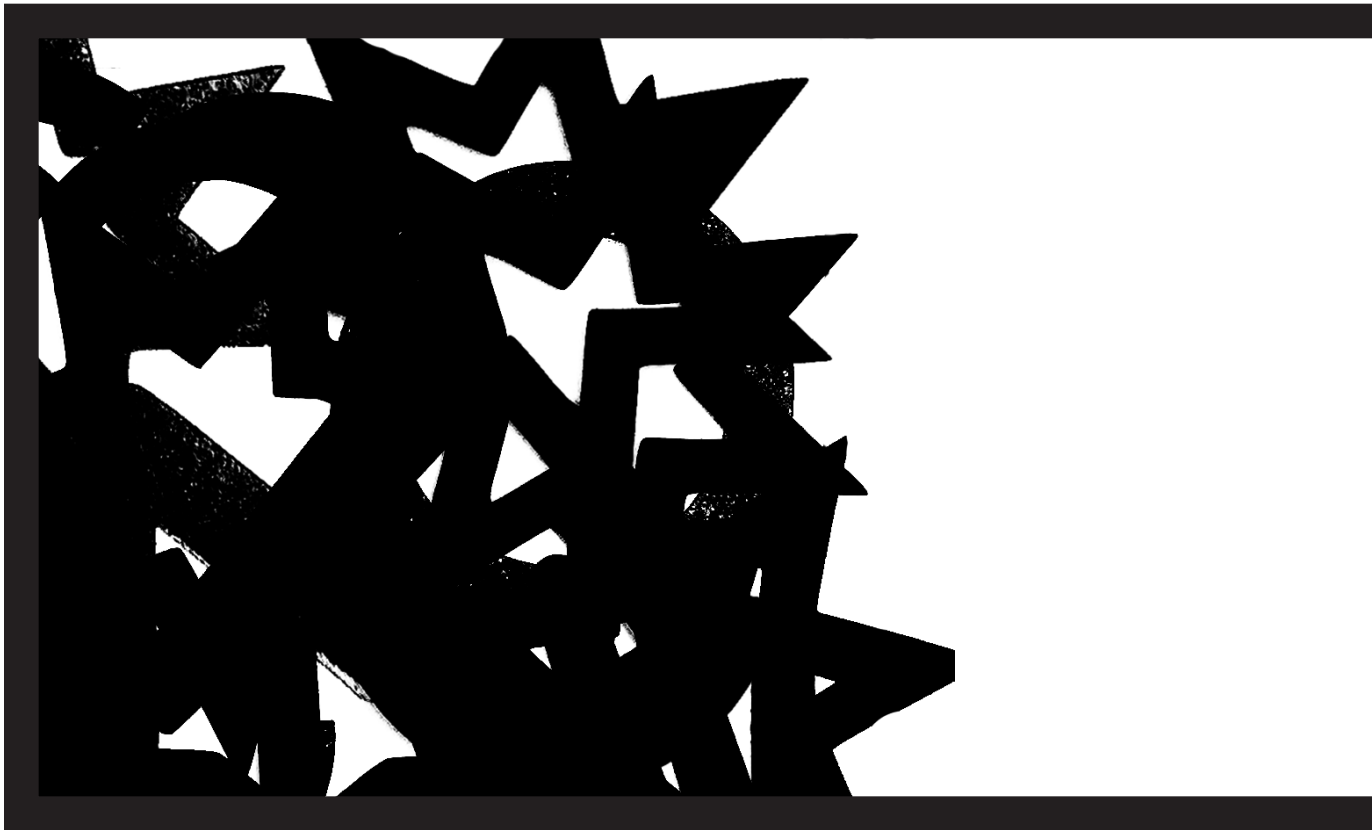Dr. Andrew Wood

Special Thanks

Joe Miller

Abstract

Visual systems are designed to be conventional. With signage, such as symbols and pictograms, it becomes pertinent to create visuals that are easily understood and, ideally, objective in regards to the message it is trying to convey. Ambiguity and subjectivity are qualities of failure when attempting to make a sign that needs to be processed quickly while also being legible to a wide audience. The majority of these signs are used to represent the simple, typical, or mundane.

Functions or rules that we face every day, e.g. speed limits, safety warnings, instructions, navigation. When the functions become novel and more specialized, the signs become more complex, opening up the symbol to interpretation, left to be stripped of its intended meaning.

At the most extreme end of novelty we fi nd that which has never needed to be visualized: the abstract. Concepts such as emotion and feeling are very much part of our day-to-day; it is experienced by everyone on this planet and thus universally understood. Yet, feelings are extremely volatile when attempting to design a single visual that refl ects collective human emotion.

Emotion is entirely situational and dependant on environment, mood, and circumstance. A happy face (along with the barrage of emojis available to us today) may be representative of the physical attributes of these emotions, but they do not do justice to the individual human experience of feeling.

So what does **emotion** look like?

EXHAUSTED CONFUSED ECSTATIC GUILTY SUSPICIOUS

ANGRY HYSTERICAL FRUSTRATED SAD CONFIDENT

EMBARRASSED HAPPY MISCHIEVOUS DISGUSTED FRIGHTENED

ENRAGED ASHAMED CAU... ...SSED

OVERWHELMED HOPEFUL LO... ...OUS

BORED SURPRISED ANXIOUS SHOCKED SHY

Today I Feel

LOVESTRUCK

'1996 Creative Therapy Associates, Inc 1-800-448-9145

Today I **feel**…

When I was a kid, my family had this funny magnet that hung from our refrigerator door. I remembered being obsessed with these little characters and amused by how varied and expressive all the faces were. The purpose of the magnet was intuitive and direct: to simply move the little planchette-like square across the board in order to find the emotion that rightfully expressed your current mood.

I would always find myself coming home from school and making a change to the board. It would be stuff like, "Happy" today because I had a great day at school, or "Frustrated" the next because I got in a fight with my brothers. But what was not so apparent, at least not until I started working on this project, was that I wasn't the only one moving it. I would come across the board and sometimes find that the marker wasn't on the same face that I had left it on earlier. In a household of six, someone else besides myself also felt emotion.

It was never apparent who was moving the magnet, and perhaps when I moved the marker, my family was unaware that it was me. Despite the anonymity of these movements, one thing that was certain was that we knew how someone in this family felt. Showing others how you really feel can be difficult. Even now within my own family, we still aren't the best at communicating across our emotions. Yet, back when we had that magnet, we had access to a medium of expressing ourselves visually, using the meaning of the faces to better understand how we feel.

Semiotics

We use visuals to express ourselves constantly, either for personal communication or something more universal. We have more emojis than we know what to do with and we surround ourselves with pictograms in order to better understand our environment.

We are able to connect signs and symbols to ideas. We recognize the meaning behind a frown as having a negative connotation, but our ability to decipher whether the frown is a sign for sadness, discomfort, or disapproval, is something more nuanced.

We all have this superpower that allows us use previous experiences in order to make sense of our environment. This ability to use recognizable patterns and previous contexts in order to read a sign is the focus of semiotics, the study of signs & symbols.

Emotions are harder to decipher. As stated before, in semiotics, we depend on a series of connecting patterns and contexts in order to make sense of our environment.

But what does this have to do with **emotions**?

Emotions are harder to decipher.

As stated before, in semiotics, we depend on a series of connecting patterns and contexts in order to make sense of our environment.

Notice the above images. The image on the left is clearly that of a dog. The contours of the body and legs, the shape of the head, tail, and ears. These are the patterns that define our understanding of what a dog is. If you have ever seen a dog, then that experience would provide context for deciphering this sign. We can even recognize the image on the right, because despite its simple shape, it still holds true to the patterns we have previously defined.

Now note the images on the opposite page. The top image is now harder to define. When we don't have all the context we need the image becomes difficult to read. Some of the patterns we recognize, such as the sunken top or the brim, allows us to assume that this might be a hat. Once given the hidden context , we now know that this is an image of a python digesting the dog from the previous slide.

Emotions are personal to the individual; being an abstract concept, we don't have the same visual context and patterns to rely on as we do with simpler concepts.
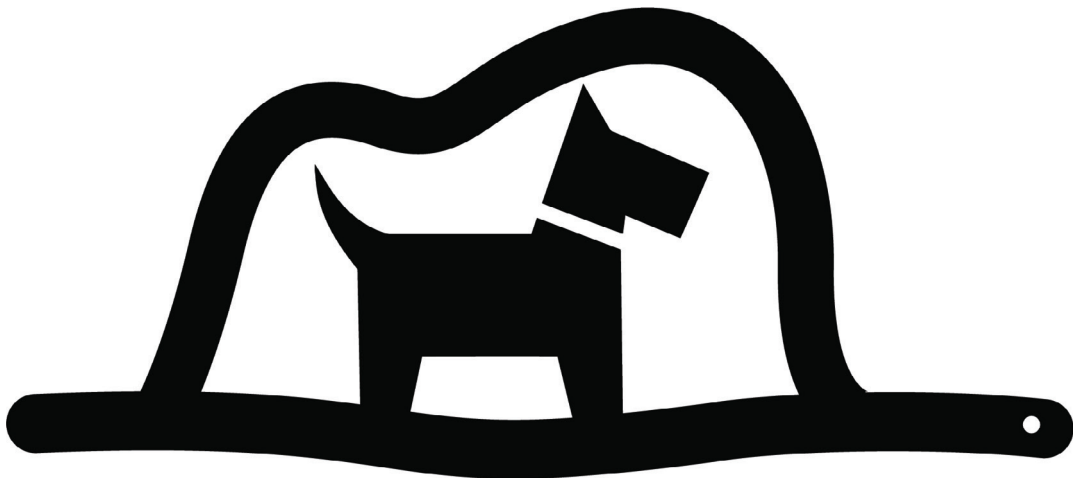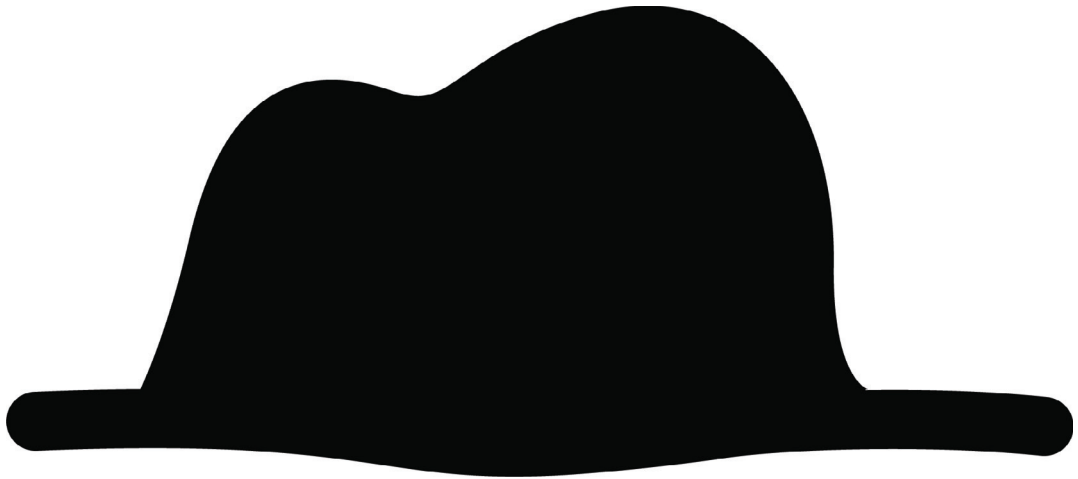
Thesis statement

Signs and symbols are understood easiest when the patterns and contexts are widely understood and simple. This is why pictograms are so great at representing simple **objects** and ideas; the pictogram requires little context and references universal patterns i.e. people, stairs, cars. Facial **expressions** are also signs that are easy to understand, even when they are expressing more complicated ideas i.e. laughter, astonishment, disappointment. Yet, once the objects start getting more complicated, or start to describe more novel **actions**, then signs and symbols are harder to decipher. The more complicated the idea, the less patterns and context we have to understand it's meaning. In this case the context is most important as it helps us refi ne the patterns we need in order to make sense of the sign i.e. mammograms, no steam, bobsledding.

Emotion is found at the very end of this spectrum, opposite of the simple. There is way more context needed in order to understand emotion because the emotion relates to the individual. Without the ability to read minds, we have no way of telling what emotion means to a person and what it potentially might look like when given a medium to visualize their feelings.
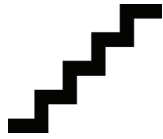
So what does

fear   hope   excitement

joy   anxiety   depression

look like?

Objects

Expressions

Actions

Emotions

? ? ?

simple
clear
objective
universal

complex
abstract
subjective
personal

Methodology

Since emotions are relevant to the individual the project will need to rely on the participation of the public. This means that the individual, not the designer, will be creating the visuals of how what emotion looks like. In order for the participant to create their sign, they would need to be given a medium in which they could easily create a visual without prior experience. While they could be given a pencil and then asked to draw their emotion, not everyone may feel comfortable with drawing.

Thus a different method was explored. In Henry Dryfuss' symbol sourcebook, The author reduces pictograms and signs to their most basic shapes. By using the shapes we can supply the participants with a physical and straightforward method of image making. The use of the shapes also allows for a constant in this activity. This allows each participant's submission to have some amount of relevancy to each other.

The participants would then be given one of the six emotions to represent with however many different shapes they thought would be appropriate. There was no limit in time or in the amount of shapes used.

Once the form was create, a short statement was collected from the participants. They were asked to describe the experience that influenced the form that they had created. This would supply the context that we desperately need in order to make sense of these signs.

Excitement · Excitement · Depression
Fear · Joy · Fear
Anxiety · Depression · Joy
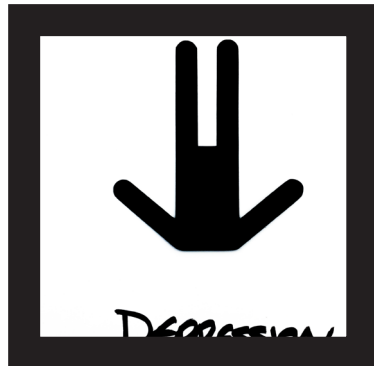
Initial results

The fi rst batch of results displayed how varied the confi guration of shapes can be. Yet, upon further observation, we can compare the differences to the similarities. Some results were expressive and abstract, while others attempted to be literal in representing their experiences.

By creating a side-by-side comparison of the different signs, we can taking note of the relevancy of shapes as well as any common themes found between signs.

Fear

These two examples of fear show two literal representations of their experiences. In the top image the participant used the shapes to make a firing gun. The bottom image uses line to indicate the force of the attacker.

Excitement

These two images are more abstract in their representations. Excitement lends itself to being more of an internal feeling rather than a physical experience.

Depression

These two images share similarities with each other. Both explore the idea of being upside down, yet one uses 16 shapes to make their sign and yet the other only needs one.

"I live in the East side so I have a fear of getting shot. So I made an angry man with a gun. That's my fear."

"I thought about different moments where I experienced it [fear]. One recently was just walking home by myself at night. My biggest fear is being attacked."

"I thought about a time when I was dancing a lot. Before I dance I get a sort of adrenaline that gets me pumped."

"When I'm depressed I always feel like I'm upside down. Like it just feels like everything is flipped upside down."

"The day I got accepted into the BFA. For me, all that fear of not being accepted just went away."

"When I get depression, like I can't think of anything. I feel stuck. Going deeper and deeper, and more down."

Application

In downtown San José the city attempts to connect with its citizens by creating a campaign with the intent of engaging community pride. Shown on the opposite page, the "Find Your Place" campaign shows imagery of the city paired with statements like "I found my place" or "I create in this place". The statements are exploring concepts that are universal and could be said about any city in the world. The worth behind the campaign falls flat, and lacks substance.

Rather than having the city define how its residents feel about it, why not have the residents be the ones that express themselves? This can result in raising public awareness of concerns or appreciation of the city— sourced straight from the residents.

In order to do so, we need to reframe the focus of the methodology.

How do you feel?

How do you feel **here**?

De–sign The semiotics of emotion

1 Think about a time in San José where you have felt:

Anxiety

Definition:
a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome.

2 Share a short story of how you experienced this emotion.

_____

_____

_____
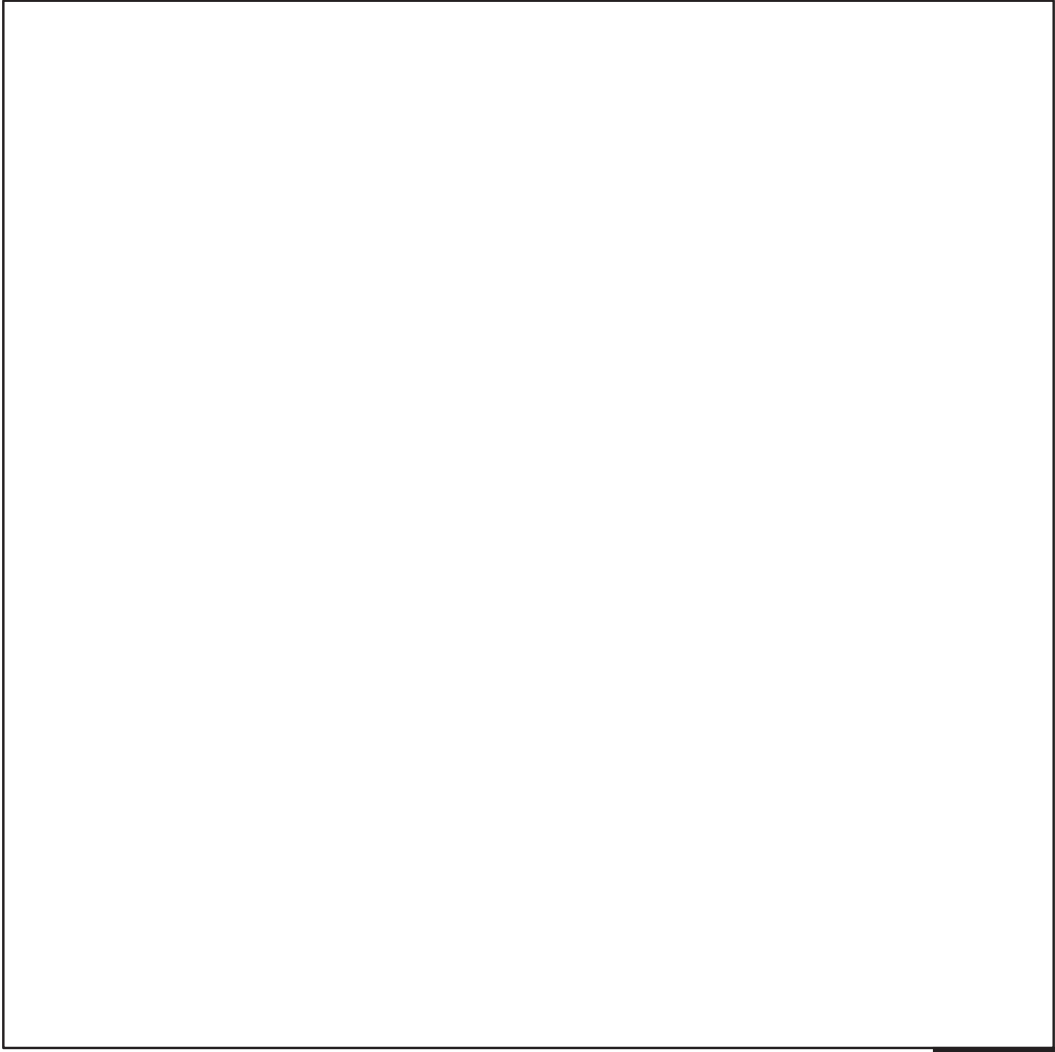
_____

_____

_____

_____

3 Visualize this experience in the box on the right. Create an image using any of the different shapes. Use as many as you like but <u>do not fold or rip the shapes.</u>

4 By checking this box I understand that my submission will be <u>anonymous</u>, but my story and shape will be made public.

☐ I'm allowing the use my entry for the **De–Sign** project.

Date: _____ Submission # _____

Optional

☐ Under 12 years old   ☐ 35–44 years old
☐ 12–17 years old   ☐ 45–54 years old
☐ 18–24 years old   ☐ 55–64 years old
☐ 25–34 years old   ☐ 65–74 years or older

How do you **feel** in **San José** ?

In order to collect the public's answer to this question, the activity needed to be refined. A worksheet was developed in order to facilitate the process of collecting submission. The worksheet defines each emo-tion and includes clear instructions so that participants could work on their own without interference of anyone else.

The worksheet contains a space to write about their experience, and then a space where they can build their sign. Participants are assured that their submission will be anonymous, but asked to give permission to use their work.
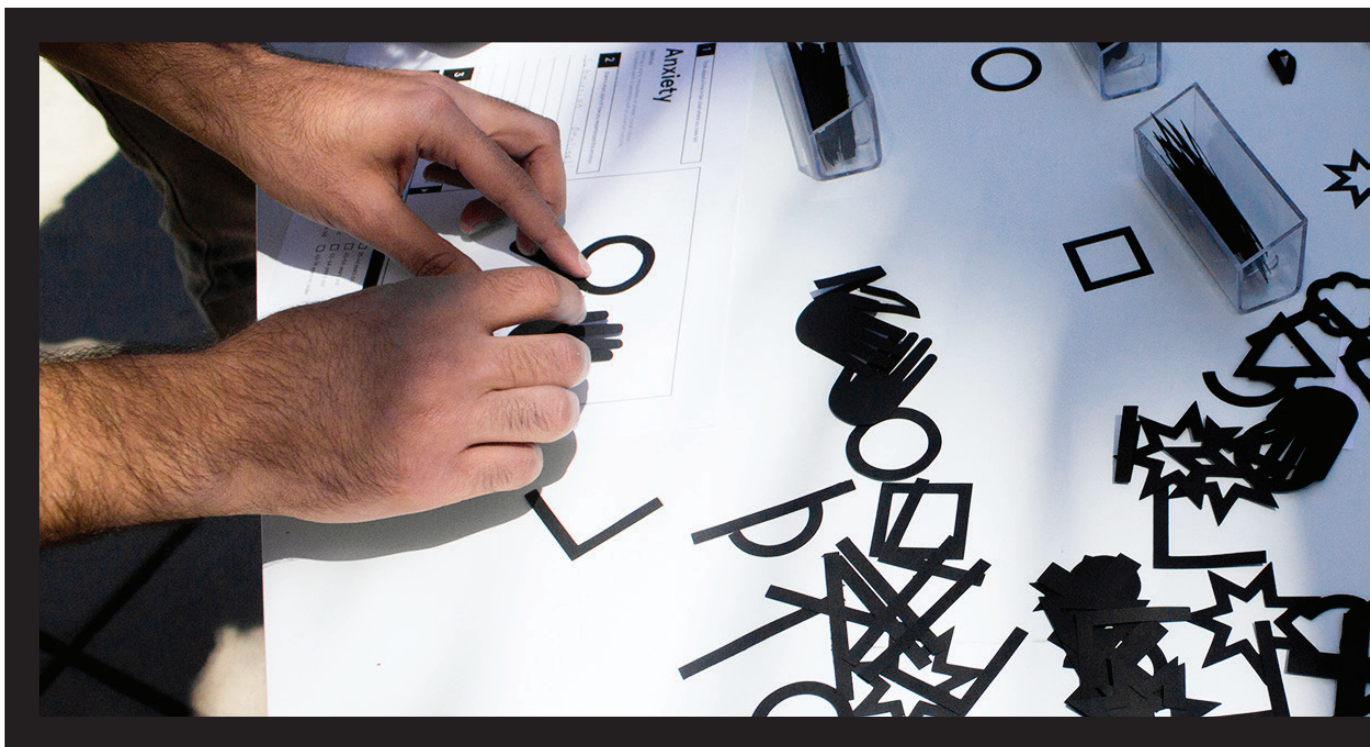
Results

The activity went public on the 7th Street quad of the San José State University campus. By creating a makerspace in public, participants were able to fi nd an open and welcoming environment. In an activity that asks for personal stories, it is important to give participants a clear understanding of what they are participating in. Visitors were educated on the basics of sign, and shown submissions from the initial results.
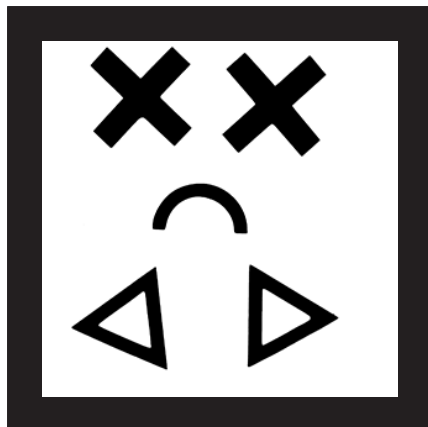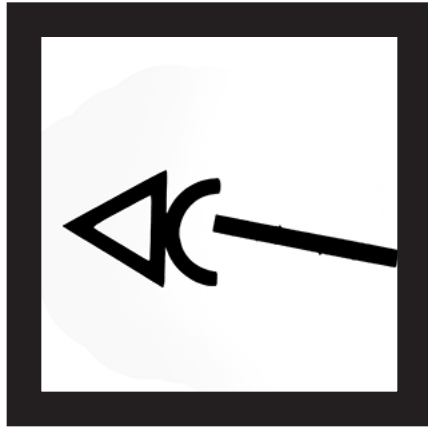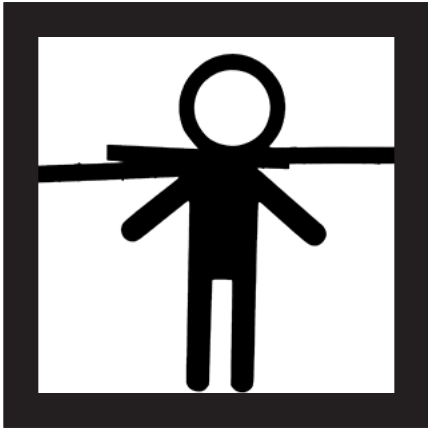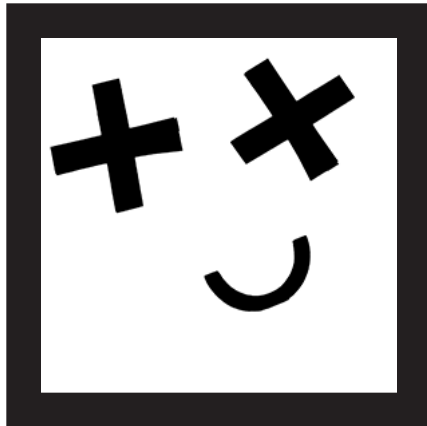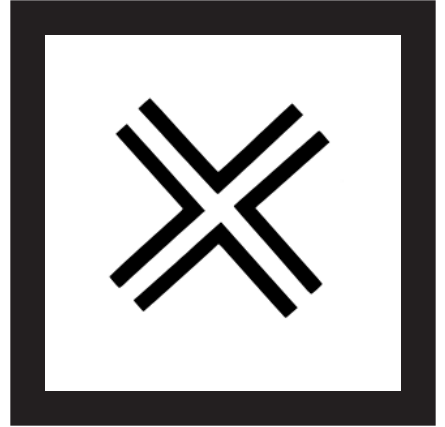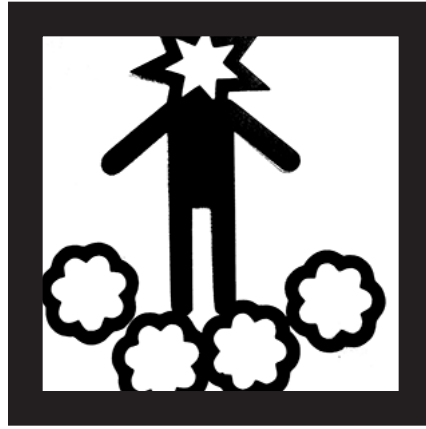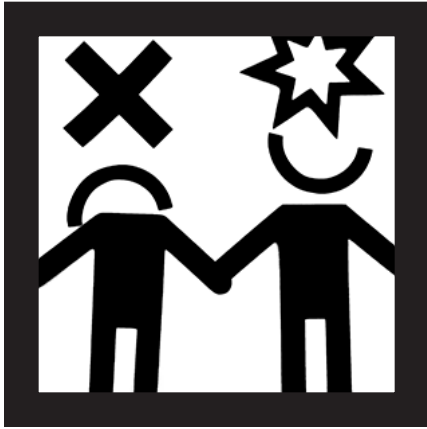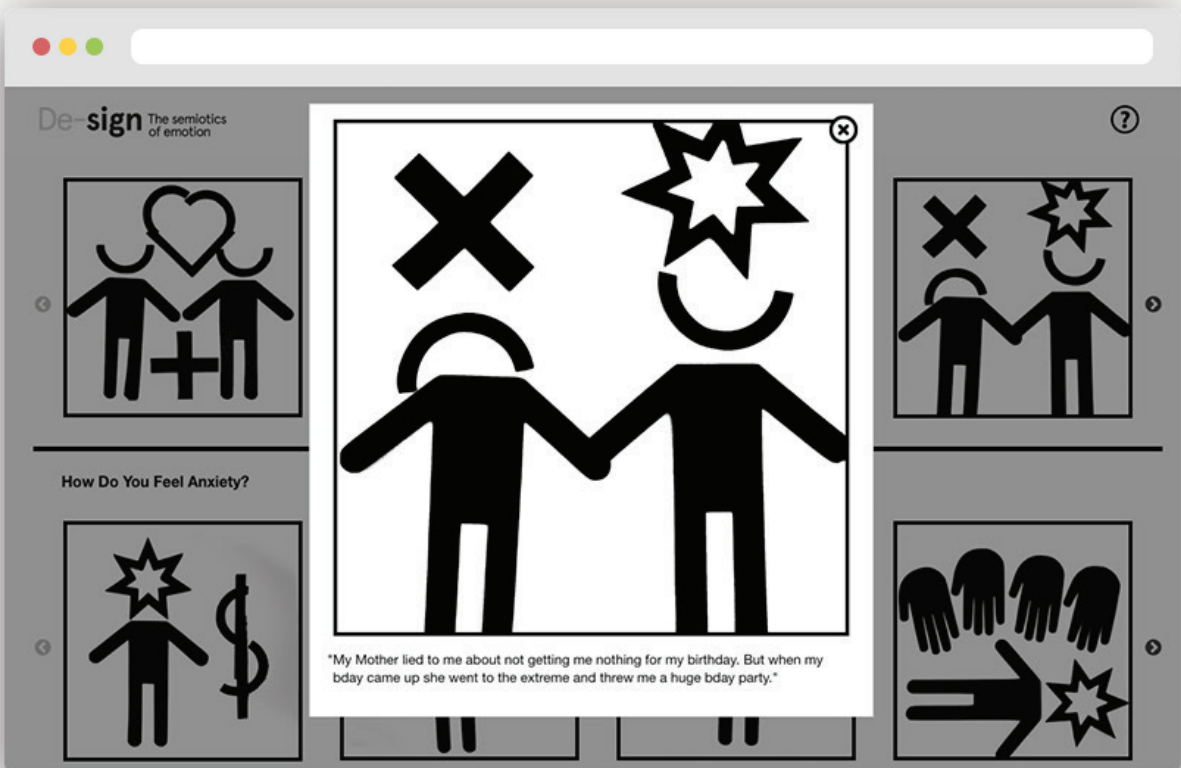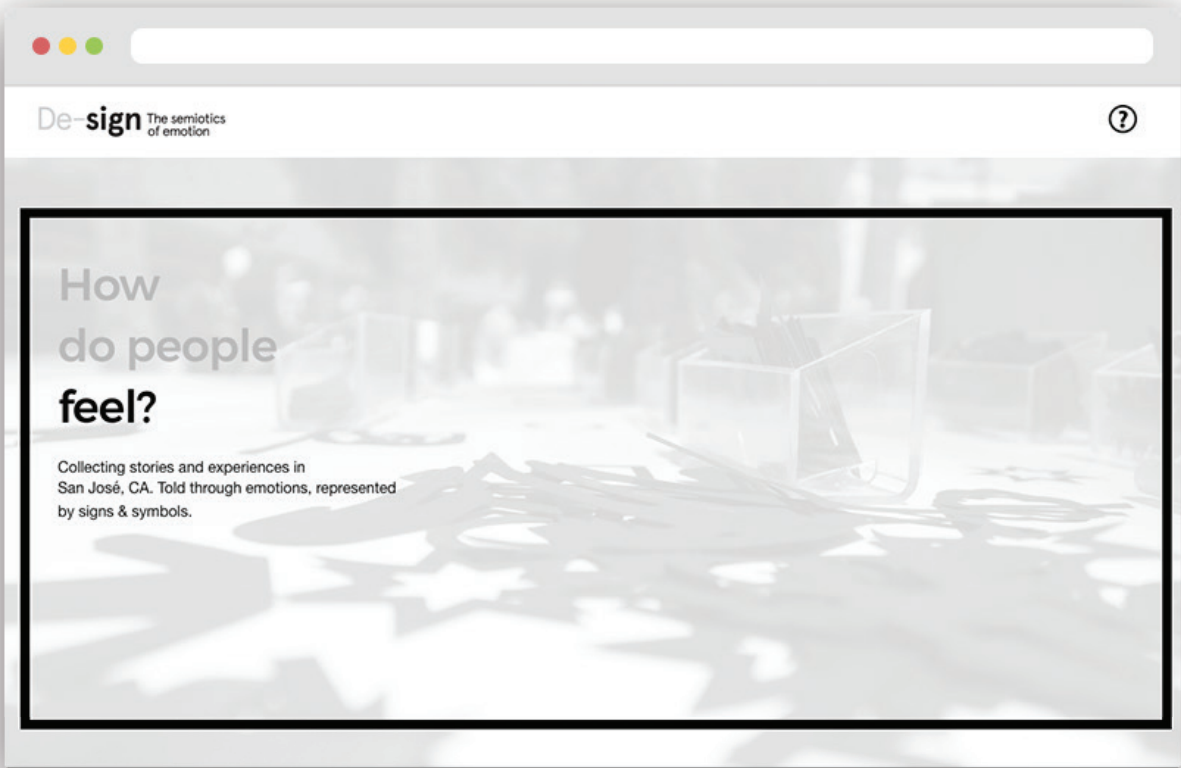
Database

The collected information is uploaded to an online database dedicated to sharing the stories and signs submitted by the participants. The sections are divided by emotion. Through the database, visitors can gain insight on how people feel within their city. The visitor can scroll through the stories and make comparisons, perhaps fi nding stories that resonate with the visitor as well.

www.design.josuecruz.com/de-sign.html

How
do people
feel?

Collecting stories and experiences in
San José, CA. Told through emotions, represented
by signs & symbols.

How Do You Feel Anxiety?

"My Mother lied to me about not getting me nothing for my birthday. But when my bday came up she went to the extreme and threw me a huge bday party."

Interaction

Lastly, in order to bring the campaign out into the public a series of interactive signs were developed. Much like the "Find Your Place" campaign mentioned earlier, the signs will be placed in prominent areas such as bus stops or on the sides of buildings and shops.

The public can read more on what the project is about, and then are prompted to use their phones in order to see a feed of submission created by other San José residents. As augmented reality becomes more popular, it will become a more native part of future phones. This interaction not only makes the experience fun, but allows the public to learn about the experiences and issues of other residents.
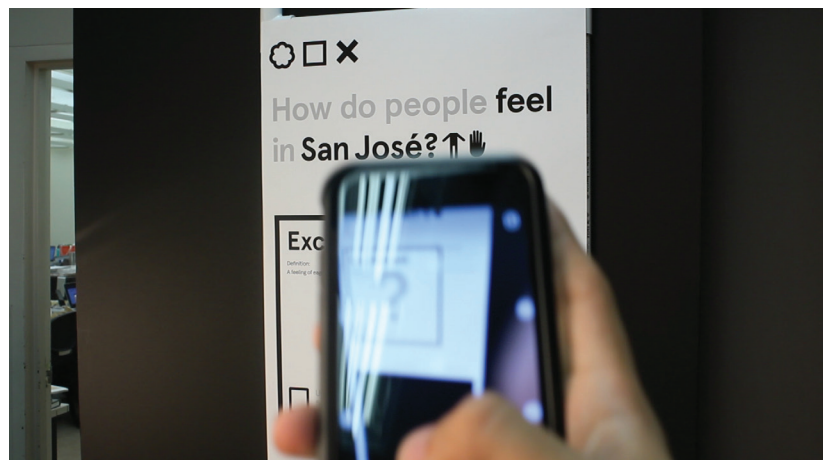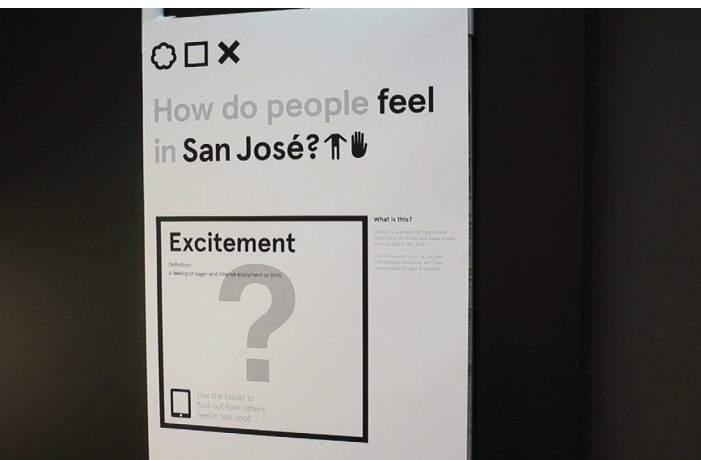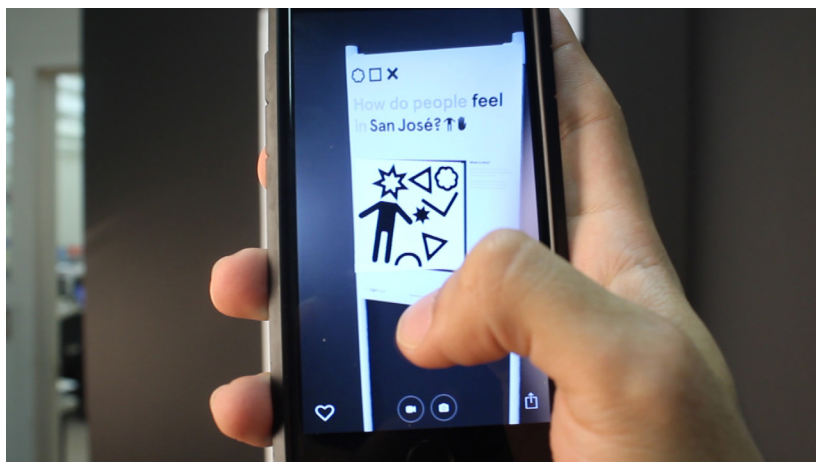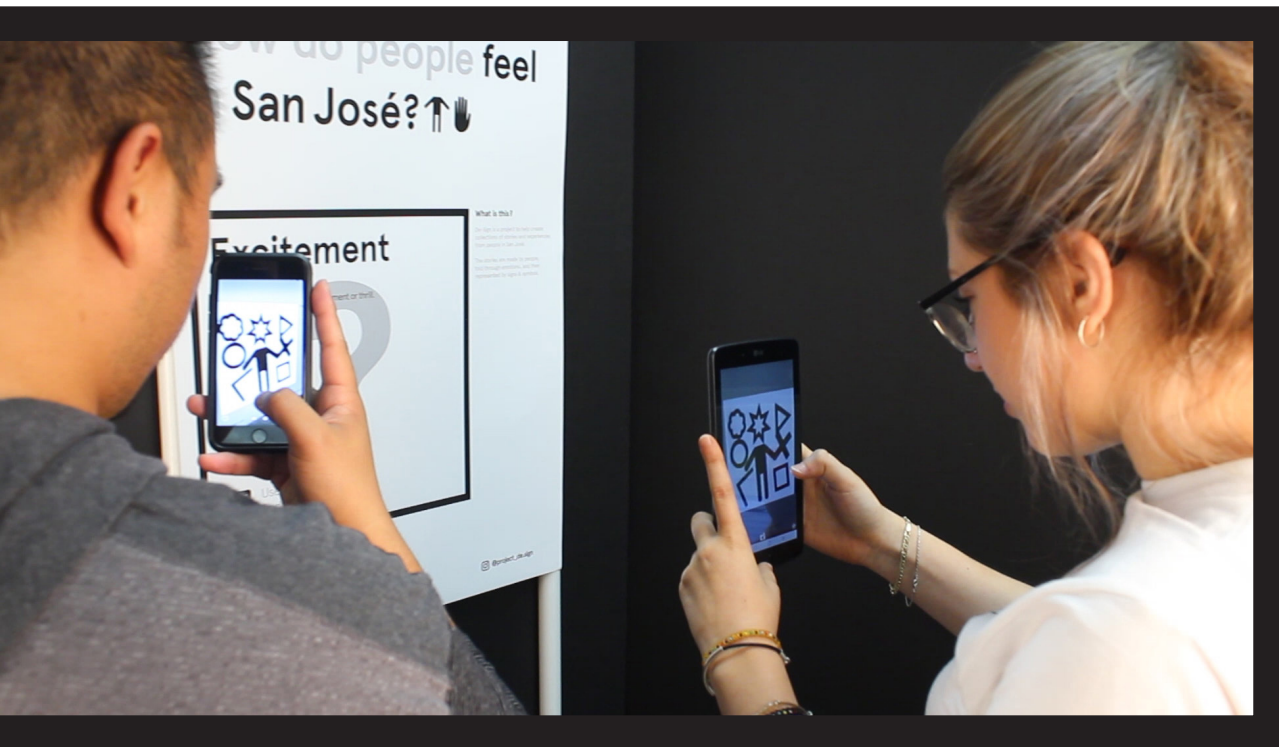
Conclusion

Our ability to fi nd meaning from sign is an amazing super power. Yet even this ability cannot help us understand what any of the signs from this project mean without the help of the context that was also collected. The stories that we share allow us to see patterns that help us understand each other as people. Add that to the context of a shared experience, and then soon we can get one step closer to understanding how we feel and what emotion looks like.

Bibliography

This Means This, This Means That,
A User's Guide to Semiotics

Sean Hall / 2007

A step-by-step introduction to semiotics, this book refines semiotics into 76 concepts. The book helped define the usage of semiotics within culture as well as its historical significance. Hall's book is also a tool, with every section of the book presenting a semiotic inquiry to the reader.

Signs in Use, An Introduction to Semiotics

Jørgen Dines & Svend Erik Larsen / 2002

Signs in Use provides an extensive look into the specific pieces that make up our understanding of meaning. Providing definitions, the book helps the reader under the concepts such as the functions of semiotic competence, and our usage of code (pattern and how we use it to make sense of our environment.

Symbol Sourcebook, An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols

Henry Dreyfuss / 1972

Very much a picture book, the sourcebook is a reference with a wide range of symbols used in a wide variety of contexts. Dreyfuss defines the basic forms that make up pictograms and divides them into 16 categories.

Pictograms, Icons & Signs A Guide to Informational Graphics

Rayan Abdullah & Roger Hübner / 2006

The spiritual successor of Dreyfuss' sourcebook, Abdullah and Hüber provide a more modern look into signs and symbols. Along with its introduction to semiotics, the book also contains case studies of pictograms designed by international agencies.