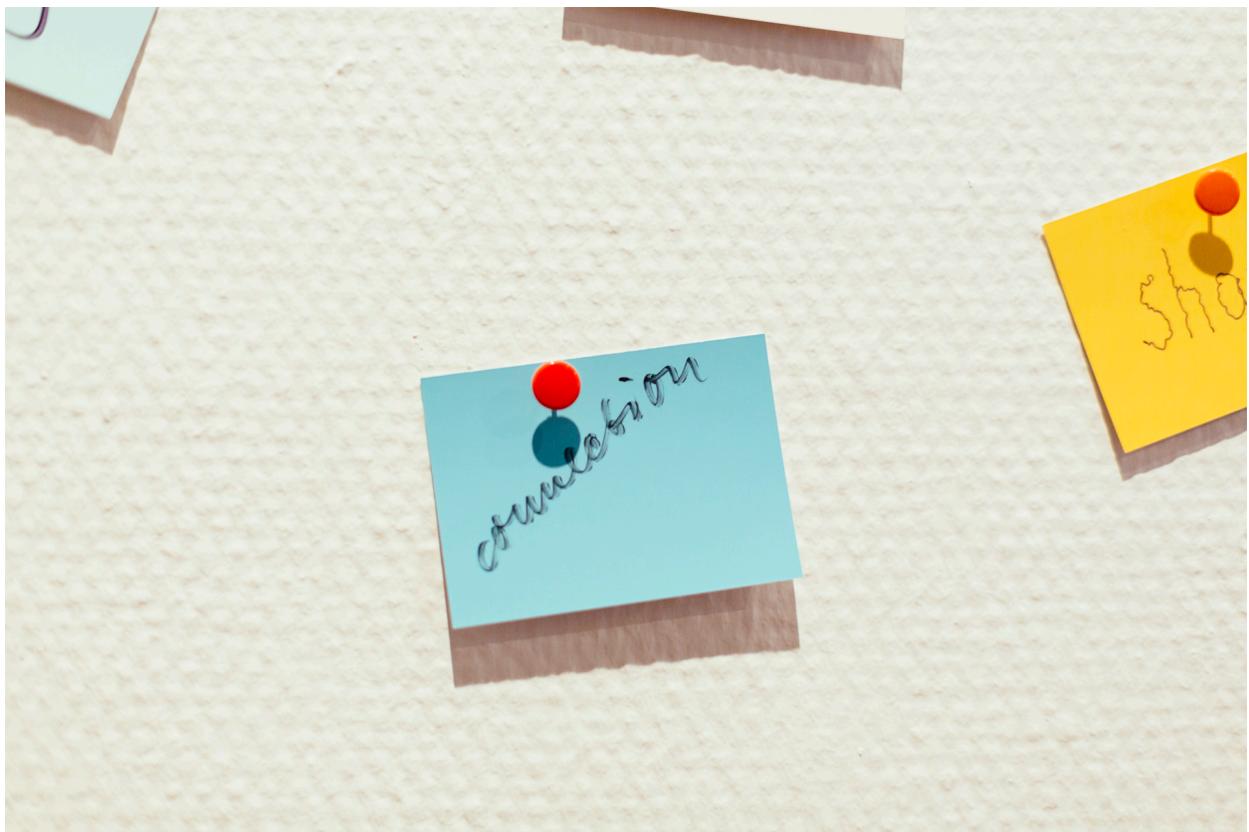


# Tender Points

I wanted to believe in quantification but, in the end,  
connection is the only real thing we always need. ]



## **what**

Springing from my desire to make our inner lives accessible to ourselves and to others, this project explores the perception and communication of personal pain and feelings. It uses the shared symbolic means of language and graphics, and the facilitation of conversation and traces—meaningful marks left behind—in public spaces. The project uses the design tools of graphics and interior environments and the sociological concept of a third place. A third place is a social surrounding that is separate from the home and the workplace, first and second places, respectively. By facilitating civic engagement and placemaking, third places are crucial for establishing a sense of place and contextualized identity (Oldenberg 2013).

Graphic worksheets that ask the participant to reflect upon their current emotional state are placed in a simple, colorful physical environment – all designed to appear childlike and welcoming. Both of these seek to encourage people to take the time to sit or lay down and work on this reflective exercise with care and play – it was important to elicit thoughtfulness without overtly requesting anything overwhelmingly detailed from the participant (van Leeuwen and Westwood 2008).



Figures 1 & 2. Opening photographs at Listasafn Kópavogs - Gerðarsafn on April 28, 2018.

## context and motivation

From the beginning, I knew I was interested in self development and growth and psychology in the context of using it therapeutically. I tried a lot of avenues to find the door to my topic of interest. During my research process, I read literature ranging from classic psychology writings by Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Donald Winnicott to contemporary papers applying classic psychology concepts in the context of design and adult play. I conducted research surveys and interviewed practicing psychotherapists. Most importantly, I spent a lot of time speaking to people about their experiences with their emotional lives and their coping mechanisms.

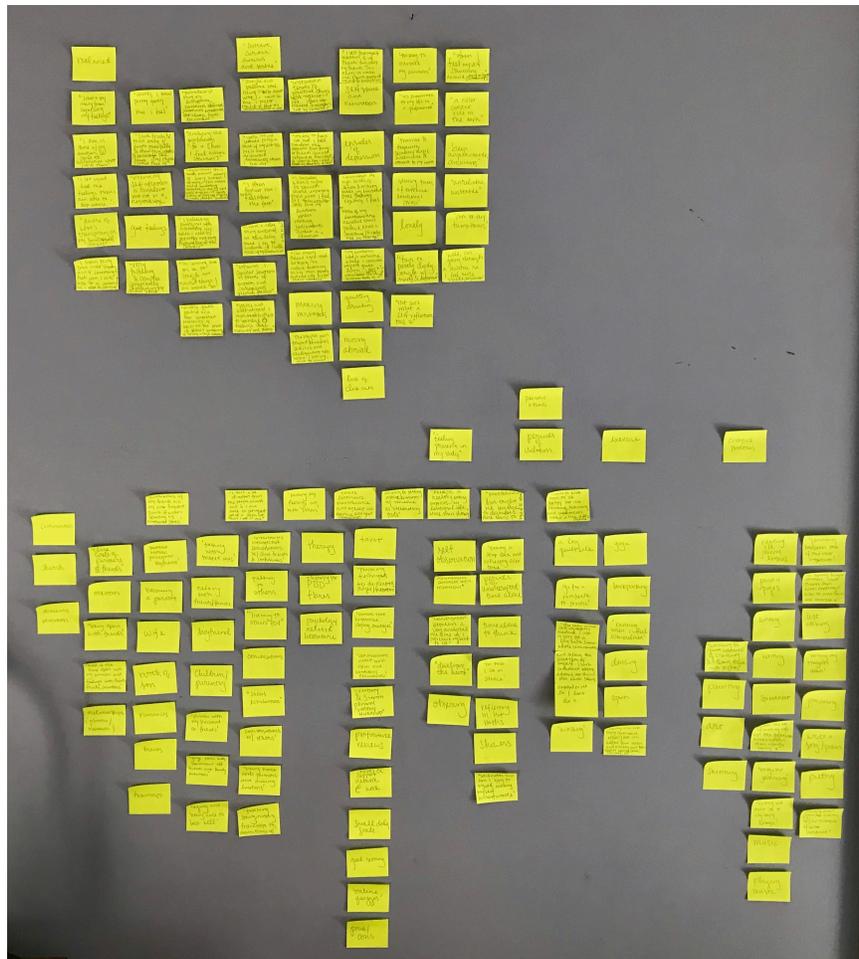


Figure 3. Accumulated and sorted research data.

The following patterns quickly emerged from my data, pictured in Figure 3:

- Coping mechanisms range from community-based (e.g. church, academia) to completely solitary (long silent walks, sitting in silence, meditation).
- One-on-one mediated coping was by far the most common way people sort through stress, emotional turbulence, and difficult decisions. People most often speak with loved ones (i.e. family, friends, and partners) and some sort of writing to sort out how they feel. “Journaling” came up often but I was not able to discern how regular of a practice these writing exercises are, or whether they spike in response to stress.
- Those with seemingly healthy and balanced emotional lives typically had 3 clear patterns in their responses: 1) They check in on their own interior life without judgement—e.g. they “let” themselves feel what they feel, rather than treating their interior as “secondary” to their careers or other pursuits. 2) Related to one, they check in regularly with themselves, thus forming a relationship with their interior self that they take care of. 3) They have a strong support network of loved ones, friends, and / or work life.

I began exploring calendars, tarot, self-audits, daily rituals and how we make connection and meaning over time. Walks and journals, baths, and long conversations with friends. It took me a while to find a way into this information and to respond to it through design, but the defining spark came from shadowing in clinics.

When shadowing doctors and psychologists in American and Icelandic clinics, I often saw patients struggle to describe their pain or how they felt because they lacked the words to do so. In my exit interviews with them, the same patients who struggled to communicate during the patient-physician encounter often told me that their hesitations stemmed from the one-on-one pressure of the moment. Even if the patient knew exactly how they felt or what symptoms they were suffering, giving a direct answer aloud to another person brought the intimacy of sharing one's pains to the forefront. Knowing one's pain and sharing it are two different processes. In a way, these patients lacked preparation for the moment of sharing—they had not yet translated their pains and experiences from the material of their own thoughts into a material shareable between humans through interaction (Arthern and Madill 2002).

From this research, I knew I wanted to create a project centered upon personal reflection and sharing. The output of the reflection had to facilitate its own sharing. This directed me towards probes. Probes are designed material objects, typically bundled into packages, given to the potential users to document their private lives, contexts and experiences under a specific directive. Probes require participants to spend time exploring their external surroundings and generating traces that are then shareable with others (Mattelmäki 2006). After researching the use of probes in academic design literature, I sought to provide playful tools for navigating our emotions, pains, and thinking patterns – intangible yet key factors that define our daily lives. In essence, I wanted to make simple tools that open people up to their own inner lives; tools that function as a place where people can language, process and reference their own felt experiences and perceptions.

## **creative vision and process**

Although individual, our felt experiences bind us together. We grow closer to others and form intimate bonds through the process of intimate self-disclosure. I knew the final show would be in a public museum—a third place with functions that are well-established in contemporary culture. I wanted to expand upon what people typically talk about and connect over when they are in a public museum—a space where people often come to reflect upon contemporary culture as processed through the eyes of an artist (Eliasson 2016). I hoped to open up what people felt they could talk about in such a space by giving them a metaphoric mirror to look at their own selves as the centerpiece of my work.

Encouraging people to talk openly and publicly was thus my primary challenge and designing every aspect of the exhibition to encourage a sense of comfort was paramount. I thus focused upon play. Play provides children with the means to manifest their understandings of the world – a space to play, to fall and cry, to bond and connect (Leeuwen and Westwood 2010). It offers the opportunity to stretch ideas, develop perspective, and situate one's self in relation to others without fear of failure or the pressure of perfection. It mediates inner experience and outer reality (Arthern and Madill 2002). Surprisingly, most of us do not engage with play as adults – the time of life when stakes are highest and a safe space to reflect and experiment would be incredibly useful (Timulak 2015).

## **interpretation and future**

Now that I have shown this project once, I now firmly know I am far more interested in the interplay of qualitative and quantitative data where quantitative data falls short, i.e. my main, and perhaps only, concern is facilitating intrapersonal and interpersonal connection (Brandt 2006). My accumulation of comparative data is a side effect of this data generated through design and play. This work has several elements of my continued interests in color, signage, minimal aesthetics, psychology, self-help, therapy and conversation as the conduit for connectivity.

My next steps are to create a GIF out of the worksheets I have from my MA show; to conduct more workshops in London, where I will be spending this summer; and hone in on how to design and create a pop-up emotional 'third place' in such a busy city where the focus of life is the rush of it. I'd like to continue to refine the graphic worksheets themselves and also produce a bound booklet of blank worksheets that would be intended for weekly or daily use.

My dream vision for this project is to create an emotional toolkit for regular use in everyday life, one that has tools that people can use every day and others that are used in more specific circumstances – but with every included tool and object intended to illuminate our interior lives and support our continual development in knowing and building ourselves.

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