

projection...identification...empathy

By

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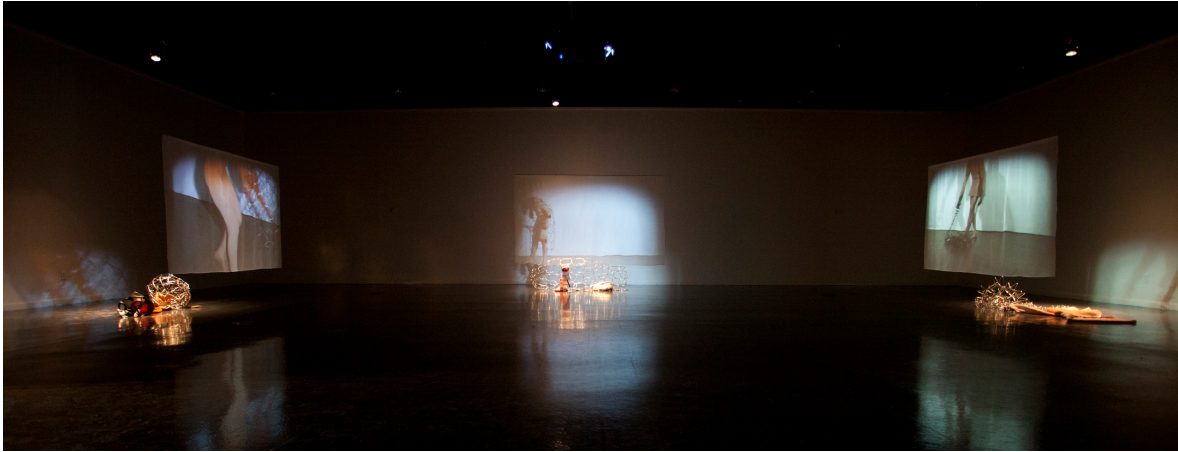
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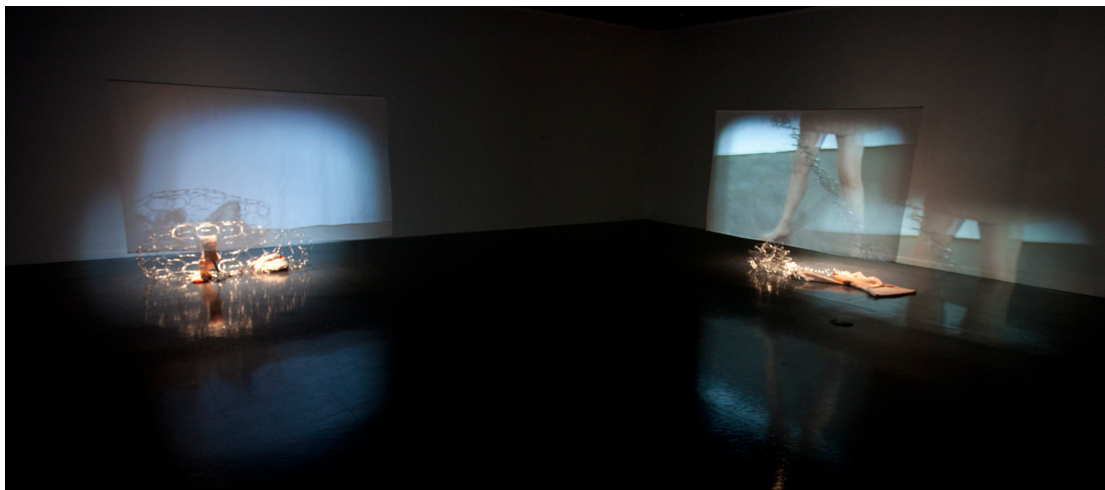
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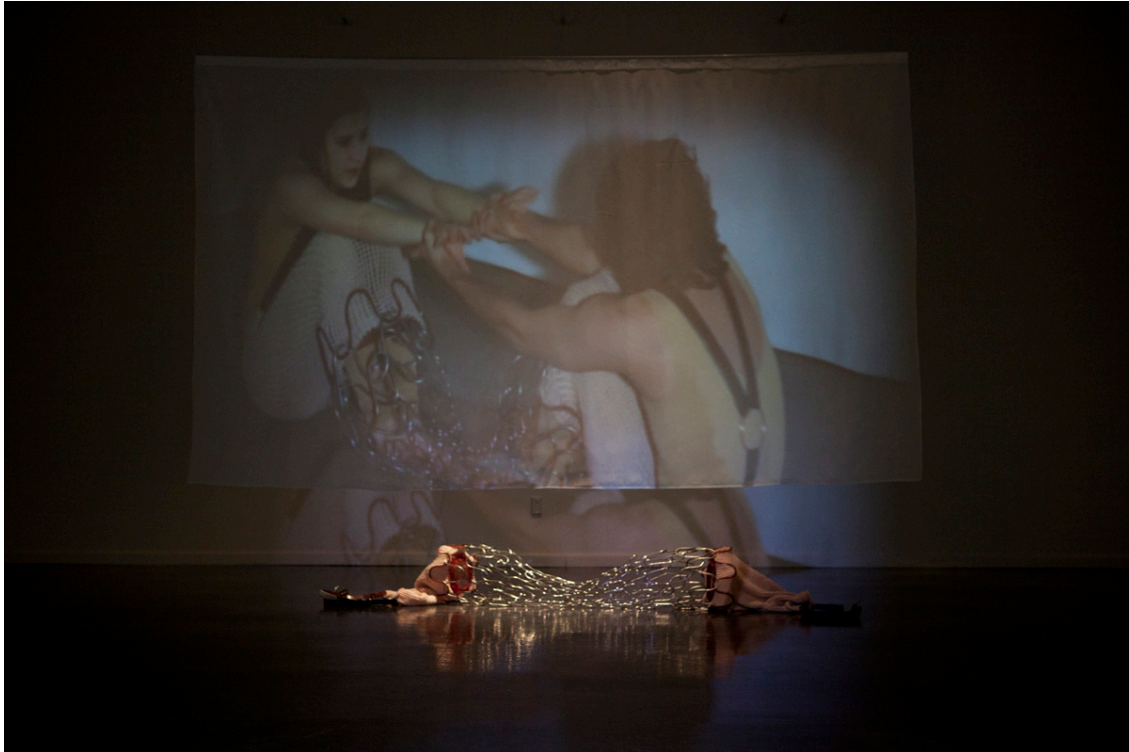
Abstract

Projection...identification...empathy consists of an installation of body-size, wearable objects and videos of performers wearing the objects. Two live performances add another layer of substance to the pieces already displayed. The four videos displayed in the exhibition and a video of the performance at the exhibition are available for viewing with this document. These are physical manifestations of emotional states of being which all people have experienced in some form. These linear, stainless steel and knitted, wool objects inhibit movement of the body and reinforce these emotional states by forcing the wearer to experience them. These flexible trap-like burdens can expand and collapse as the wearer moves within them. My goal with these pieces is to create a sense of empathy within the performers as well as the viewers who watch them.

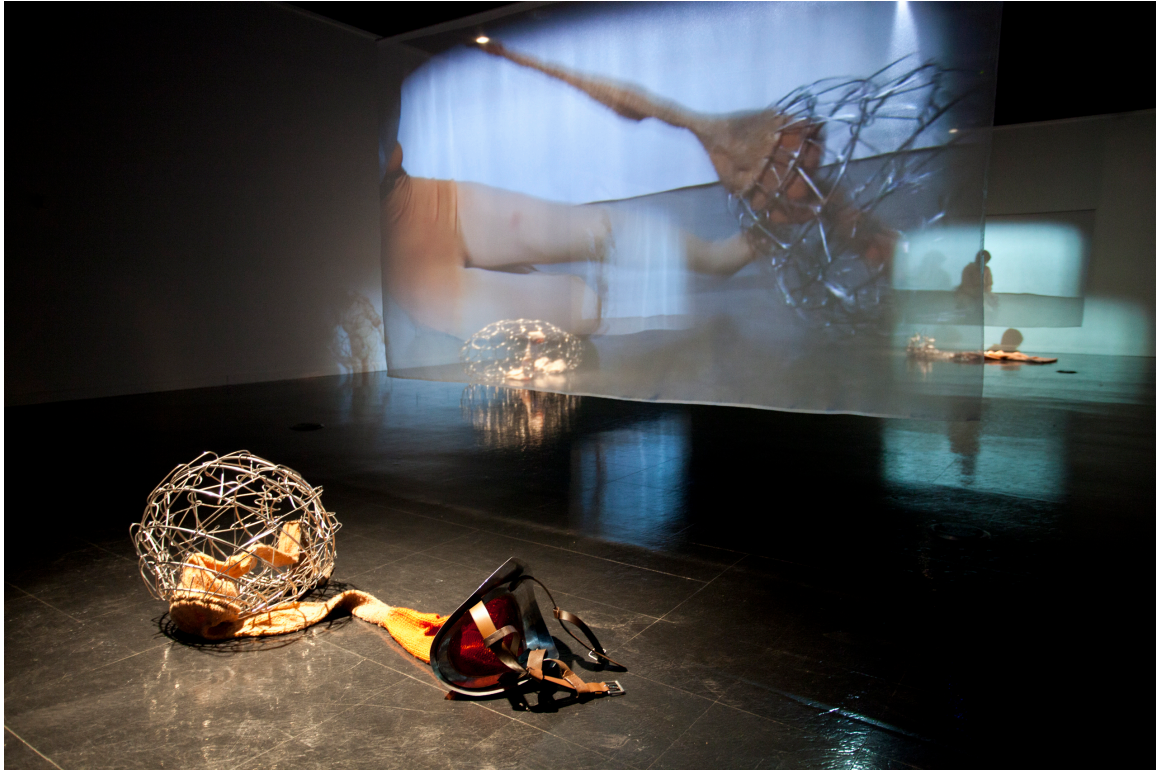


Both art and performances can convey ideas and emotions; I want to use these forms of expression to help people become more aware of their own feelings and attitudes toward other people. The pieces in this exhibition give tangible form to the incorporeal thoughts and feelings, which many people may experience. Each piece represents a specific emotion, such as: shame, frustration, isolation, and attachment as well as some of the behaviors associated with those emotional states. By making these imperceptible qualities visible, the audience may be able to better understand the situation related to the devices. As the viewers watch the videos and live performances, they can imagine themselves wearing the pieces and how this experience would affect them.





The exhibition is an immersion of sight, sound, and emotion, which completely envelops the viewers. As the audience enters the darkened gallery space, the viewers are confronted with projected videos of people moving around with peculiar objects attached to them. The low clinking sound of metal-on-metal as the pieces move adds an underlying tension to the experience. The initial reaction of the viewers is to stop and stare at the videos in an attempt to understand the actions that are being projected. Then, the viewers realize that the objects from the videos are on display behind the screens, partially visible on the floor and behind a semi-transparent screen. The devices appear to be discarded on the floor after being worn. They have served their purpose for the one who was wearing them and are waiting for the next wearer. Optimally, the viewers walk closer to the screens and move into the space behind them where the physical pieces exist.



The audience can see the work from the center of the gallery and has access to one layer of experience from this viewpoint. Viewers are able to understand the basic idea of psychological struggle. Ideally, some viewers will step around the screen partition to experience the work from another angle, which allows them access to another level of understanding. The space behind the screens where the pieces are displayed is one of the most intimate, thought-provoking areas in the installation. When the viewers walk behind the screens they can become part of the pieces. As they stand in the light, surrounded by videos of the work on both sides, the objects confront the viewers, and they can imagine what it would be like to wear them. I intentionally created this space by using the semi-transparent screens as a barrier or membrane, which separates that space from the rest of the gallery. There is a compression of space, light, and time because of the projected video.



In the videos, the performers awaken and discover that they are attached to or enclosed within one of these devices. At first, they cautiously explore the pieces and how they are connected to their bodies. Then, the performers begin to test the limits of the pieces and attempt to move in them. While moving, they realize how the devices restrict and burden them, which causes the wearers to struggle to rid themselves of the objects. As they struggle with the pieces, the proposed emotional state becomes apparent, and the wearers are immersed in their feelings. At some point the devices prove to be too much for the wearer, and they fall to the floor in exhaustion and surrender. Now that they have given up control, they learn to find a way to cope with the restrictive, burdensome pieces. Instead of struggling, they begin to accept the device as part of themselves and find ways to work symbiotically with the attachment. My objective was for this to facilitate an internal dialogue, which is not happening in real space, but within the mind of the wearer.



The live performance provides a similar narrative to the video component, as well as an added layer of involvement. The performers move and respond individually to the devices they wear, both behind and around the screens, which display the projected video performance. They perform a sequence of reactions to the devices in real time, which creates a conflicting dialogue with themselves in the videos and adds to the tension in this space. After this, the performers slowly congregate in the center of the gallery and discover each other. At this point they are moving out of their own minds and into society. This creates a connection between the internal and external world. They interact with each other as they move through and around the other objects. As they continue to interact, they become more playful and adventurous. Eventually, they move beyond exploring among themselves and weave throughout the audience allowing them to experience the work by touch. This part of the performance is symbolic of realizing that no one is alone in her situation. I believe that many other people experience similar, complex, emotional states, but often hide these feelings from the world.



The materials used to create the pieces work together to form a contrasting dialogue, which makes the pieces more enigmatic and indefinable. I want to physically involve the viewer in the objects by presenting the opportunity for them to touch the rich, varying textures on the pieces and imagining themselves wearing them. Each piece has a stainless steel component, which creates a burdensome weight or enclosure for the wearer. This piece is flexible and can compress and stretch as needed. The kinetic capabilities of the steel elements create continuous sound, which helps to express the emotional component of the work. These steel pieces are menacing in that they are recognizable as a trap, but are also seductive and beautiful as objects. The steel contrasts strongly with the knitted wool and plastic portion of the piece, which is fleshy and vulnerable in. The textile choices in the objects relate to the human body and domestic activities as opposed to the more sterile, surgical steel parts.



Chagrin is a device that attaches to the top of the body on the person wearing it and prevents her from raising her head or straightening her form. It covers the head except for eyeholes with a knitted, wool mask and is connected to the torso by leather straps and an aluminum piece of armor, resembling a gorget, or medieval neck armor. The wearer is forced to look down at the floor unless she struggles to twist her head upward. This piece reinforces ideas of shame and embarrassment as the wearer is unable to lift her head and look at her peers in the face. The knitted head covering transforms into a fleshy filament as it leaves the head and travels to the elliptical stainless steel trap below. The tissue attaches to the steel form and continues to extend beyond its end as if it is still growing, and possibly connecting to the floor.



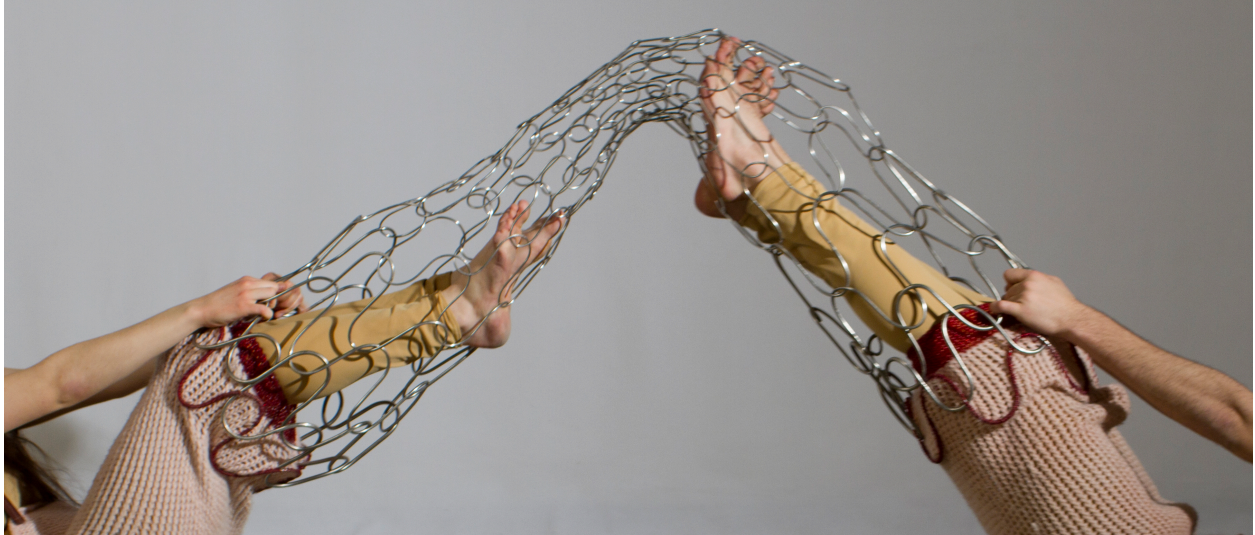
Self-Incarceration represents a body-sized, oblong cage, which encases the entire figure of the wearer. The decorative pattern of the stainless steel rod collapses and expands to allow the body to bend and move within it. The wearer's arms and legs are strapped into knitted, fleshy coverings inside the cage. She is protected, yet isolated from the rest of the world with her vulnerable fleshy parts exposed underneath. Although she can put her arms, legs, and even her head partially outside of the cage, she cannot be intimately close to another person. By protecting herself, she limits her ability to form relationships with those around her. She can move within the piece, but cannot escape its binding form.



Exasperation incapacitates the wearer's arms with a tapering, stainless steel, collapsible form that extends from one hand to the other. This heavy trap-like burden prevents the wearer from using her hands and therefore, induces frustration. The steel form has many rounded points that increase in size, which catch and drag upon the floor as the performer tries to move with this heavy piece. With an enormous amount of effort she can fling part of the piece like a weapon. The steel wire is connected to a larger fleshy-colored, knitted garment that has a leather strap in the back similar to a straightjacket. The wearer must carry or drag this heavy piece in order to move and cannot use her hands to do anything but convey her burden.



Codependency intrinsically binds two people together by connecting their feet to one another. The woven stainless steel undulating rods have a decorative quality that resembles scales as they encapsulate the feet and lower legs of the people within the object. Fleshy, knitted forms extend from the steel pieces to the waist, where leather straps restrain the wearers. One person cannot move without affecting the other person. They must struggle until they are able to find a compromise and learn to move as a unit. This piece illustrates how much one person's behavior can influence that of those close to her. The steel holds the two together no matter how hard they try to break free. This piece symbolizes the bonds created by relationships that are never really broken; they continue to alter how people live their lives.



Each individual piece is not easily identifiable and retains qualities of multiple objects from various sources. My research for these forms encompasses a wide variety of material including: psychiatric devices, prosthetics, corrective braces, medical instruments, parasites, medieval armor, restraining devices, African cultural masks, and shamanistic ritual costumes. Each of the stainless steel forms creates an intimidating enclosure, which holds a fleshy membrane-like material or the actual flesh of the person wearing the piece. The devices have an animated quality as they move, which makes them similar to a parasite that has taken up residence with a host. All of the forms can be seen to protect the wearer but hinder them at the same time. The part of the body that is inhibited by each device is symbolically linked to the emotional state it induces. For example, one piece attaches to the wearer's head and no longer allows her to completely lift her head, which depicts the idea of shame.

The wearers are converted into cyborgs, hybrid beings part human part machine, when they put on the devices. When the participants become more than human, they become different from the rest of the population. The performers become fantastical

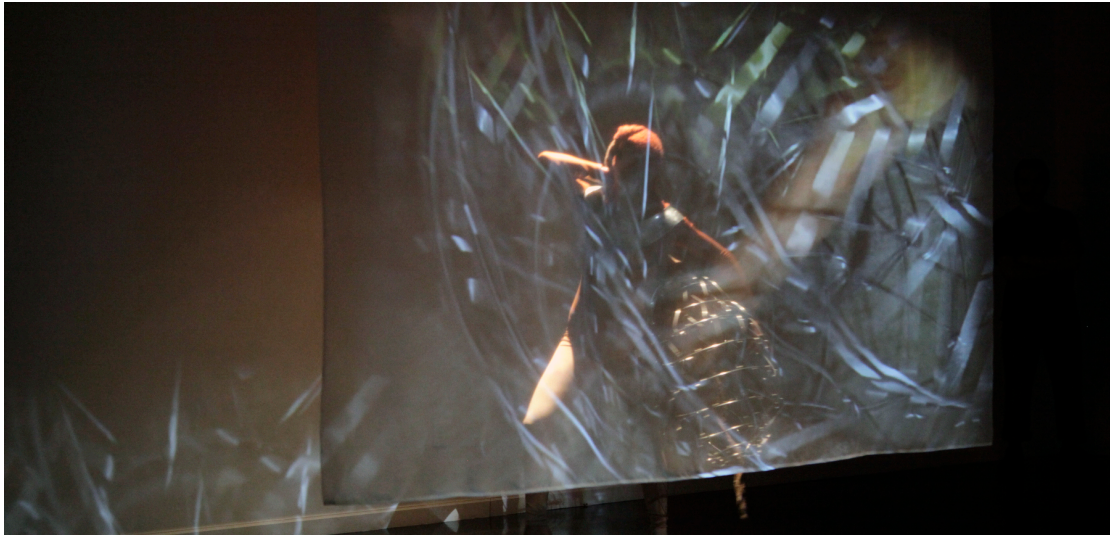
creatures with debilitating devices attached to them. These devices illuminate the unseen psychological states that people often experience. This becomes a metaphor for people with cultural, physical, or psychological differences that mark them as different from the rest of the society.

This work is meant to be a configuration that is part organic and part mechanical, a hybrid form, which also survives because it is attached to a host. When my creations are attached to a human, there becomes a being that is part living organism and part machine, as well as part human and part other. This creature lives in the liminal space between categories, as many things in life actually do. Liminal refers to being at a threshold between two constructs and not specifically fitting into either one. By showing these adaptations which create a new being, viewers will be able to imagine themselves as this being and realize that, in part, we are all cyborgs. Donna Haraway uses this metaphor to show that all people are unique combinations who should not try to fit others or themselves into specific categories. People are distinctly individual, and it is not reasonable to attempt to judge others by our own biased views. She also uses the metaphor of the cyborg to show how all people are made up of our physical body and our socially constructed body, which can be at odds with each other. "The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" (Haraway 1991). These combined forms transcend and defy categorization in the polarities that we typically use to assign meaning.



In many ways showing these forms as attachments to a human creates something that goes beyond any human or organism we know. This allows the audience to imagine themselves as another type of being. This awareness of other perspectives allows the viewers to realize that there are multiple points of view of the world. In this way it relates to the ideas of postmodernism, which opened the art world to be able to see things from many different viewpoints, including the liminal, in-between spaces, occupied by transgendered bodies and subcultures of which Judith Halberstam discusses in "In a Queer Time and Place." According to Halberstam, transgender "embraces more hybrid possibilities for embodiment and identification" (2005). She writes about how the rise of postmodernism has seen the rise of the importance of subcultures rather than an elite Avant Guard or one dominant mass culture. This enables continually shifting ideas about the ways we define and classify a person and

will continue to do so as we socially construct our world (Halberstam 2005). By creating these hybrid forms, I believe I am exposing the less dominant viewpoints in our society and giving them equal importance. These less dominant viewpoints include mentally ill, physically handicapped, or otherwise hegemonized individuals such as women and minorities.



I have created this work based on my personal experiences with a close relation with mental illness. Typically, some individuals with mental disorders are not able to understand empathetic responses. I want the viewers to try to understand other marginalized points of view, even if it is not reciprocal. The initial lack of empathy can help the audience relate to the viewpoint of mental illness. Handling my emotional reactions to these situations has been a difficult experience, which has shaped my temperament. As I have dealt with these emotions, I have found them to be universal states of being that many other people experience. This realization has helped me to overcome these burdens and find a way to use them for my own development and growth. I want to share this awareness with the rest of the world by showing this artwork.



The title of my thesis *projection...identification...empathy* refers to psychological terms that relate to the ideas I am trying to express with my work. Projection is recognizing something in yourself and placing these attributes on another person rather than yourself. Empathy comes from the German concept *Einfühlung*. This concept held that projection was the first step towards creating empathetic responses. Identification involves recognizing something in someone else that relates to oneself. This is the cognitive element that allows others to realize what they are doing when they see themselves in someone else. Both of these steps enable someone to feel and to understand another person's situation. This can be described as a multistage process in which one leads to another or, they may all happen simultaneously (Duan 1996). My goal is for the audience to recognize that other people have these same feelings, which will promote greater understanding between people in different situations.

By utilizing art and performance, I am crafting an experience for the audience so that they may recognize these emotions within themselves. I also seek to create an awareness of empathy and the ability to see how differences can cause people to be misunderstood. It is difficult to be aware of the way we treat other people who we feel are different from us. Empathetic people see others as fellow human beings rather than foreign entities to be ignored or teased. The community at large will work together more efficiently and easily if the individual members are able to recognize and respect differences. The understanding of unique qualities within society will lead to understanding and compassion in a more tolerant atmosphere.

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