

CONFRONTING ASSUMPTIONS:
QUESTIONING UNIDIMENSIONAL STEREOTYPES
THROUGH PORTRAITS AND PERSONAL EFFECTS

by
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ABSTRACT

Keywords: identity, stereotype, prejudice, assumptions, interactive

Confronting Assumptions is an interactive exhibition that engages both subjects and audience members in challenging their conscious and subconscious presumptions about others and, in turn, questioning how they choose to present their own identities. Our tendency to define individuals as unrealistically unidimensional is as unacknowledged as it is harmful. To counter this human inclination, this project calls upon a multidisciplinary framework that encompasses various fields from feminist theory to prejudice theory, and topics spanning from identity to visibility. The exhibition will be an interactive exercise where participants will attempt to match portraits of subjects with images of their personal effects in order to uncover the hidden biases within us all. The goal is not to shame or punish participants for recognizing internalized prejudices, but rather to start a dialogue within ourselves and our communities addressing culturally embedded discrimination, intolerance, injustice and identity. Ideally this exhibit will lead to further discussions and projects that encourage looking beyond reductionistic stereotypes and eliminating intolerance.

ÖZET

Anahtar Kelime: kimlik, kalıplaşmış yargı, önyargı, varsayım, etkilesimli

“Varsayımlarla Yüzleşmek” hem öznelerinin hem de izleyicinin, ötekiler hakkındaki bilinçli ve bilinçaltı kabullerine meydan okurken, kendi benliklerini nasıl sunmayı seçtiklerini sorgulatmayı amaçlayan etkileşimli bir sergidir. Bireyleri gerçekdışı seviyede derinliksiz algılama eğilimimiz, dile getirilmediği kadar tehlikelidir de. Bu insani eğilime karşılık vermek için, bu proje feminist teoriden önyargı teorisine bir çok alanı ve benlikten görünürlüğe bir çok konuyu kapsayan disiplinlerarası bir çerçevede hayat bulmuştur. Sergi, katılımcıların portreler ile özel eşyaları eşleştirmeye çalıştığı ve bu yolla sahip oldukları gizli önyargıları ortaya çıkaracak bir etkileşimli egzersiz olarak kurgulanmıştır. Amaç, katılımcıların içselleştirdikleri önyargıları ortaya çıkartarak onları utandırmak ya da cezalandırmak değil, hem kendimiz, hem de parçası olduğumuz topluluklarla aramızda, kültürel olarak kanıksanmış ayrımcılığa, tahammülsüzlüğe, haksızlığa ve birey olmaya dair bir diyalog başlatmaktır.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
1. BACKGROUND AND EXPLORATION.....	9
2. INTRODUCTION	11
3. RESEARCH ANALYSIS	15
4. PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY.....	22
5. LIMITATIONS	24
6. AUDIENCE AND EXHIBITION	27
7. CONCLUSION	30
8. BIBLIOGRAPHY	31
9. APPENDIX	33

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

	Page
1. STEREOTYPES AND ASSUMPTIONS	11

1. BACKGROUND AND EXPLORATION

My formal education in Anthropology and Gender Studies shaped my interests in culture and identity, while my personal and political choices as a feminist push me to constantly re-examine my own biases as part of the movement to end exploitation and oppression in all its forms. Authors and academicians such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins continue to inform my ideas on privilege and empowerment and how these concepts are key to developing equality in communities across the world. When working in the ad-hoc gender-working group at Mercy Corps (a non-profit international economic development NGO), I saw first hand the positive changes that can happen through these paradigm shifts.

After moving to Turkey, my lack of privilege became that much more apparent: the obvious language barrier, the assumptions made about foreigners and foreign women in particular, as well as my own cultural baggage. I wanted to create a project that addressed these issues of identity and visibility while also tapping into my constructivist leanings for education. I personally learn best from discovery-based projects that allow participants to interact with one another as well as physically interact with the project itself. Like most experiences at interactive museums or projects around the world, those individual revelations come from the exploration of concepts first-hand and hands-on.

I spent the first year of my graduate program at Sabanci University developing various projects based on similar interests in identity, gender and discrimination. For my first thesis idea, I wanted to expand upon the research of female industrial workers and the inequality they face, specifically within textiles in Istanbul, and create a conceptual visual component that would bring visibility to those who are generally exploited due to their invisibility. After months of research and networking, I realized my language barrier was too significant since this project would have required exploring inquiries about industrial relations, urban life, workers and their spaces. The feasibility of the project was also

questionable within the scope of a Master's thesis and would be better suited as a PhD dissertation.

My second idea for my thesis project involved women in aviation in Turkey, including those working in the design, development, production, operation and use of aircrafts. My aim was to bring visibility to the women in the traditionally male-dominated industry through a public photography exhibition in an accessible, central location. This idea was also eventually rejected due to various limitations, most notably trouble gaining access to the secure locations associated with aviation.

While I still faced many of the same limitations in my current project, the individualized and compartmentalized nature of the process allowed me to find unrelated participants (not just limited to one field or industry) and photograph them all separately. I could also photograph the objects around my schedule to a certain degree and then arrange the portrait sessions accordingly, giving me more flexibility.

2. INTRODUCTION

This project emerges out of a long process of questioning and confronting my own assumptions by seeking the meaning and intentions behind the idea of identity. My goal is to engage the audience by inviting them to look into their own hidden biases through this interactive exhibition of complex imagery. By selecting images of objects and matching them with their assumed respective owners, the audience must move beyond initial judgments by overcoming the passive role generally played by spectators. Participants must become intimately engaged in actively looking beyond the two-dimensional images by allowing the subjects' multifaceted identities to speak louder than our internalized prejudices.

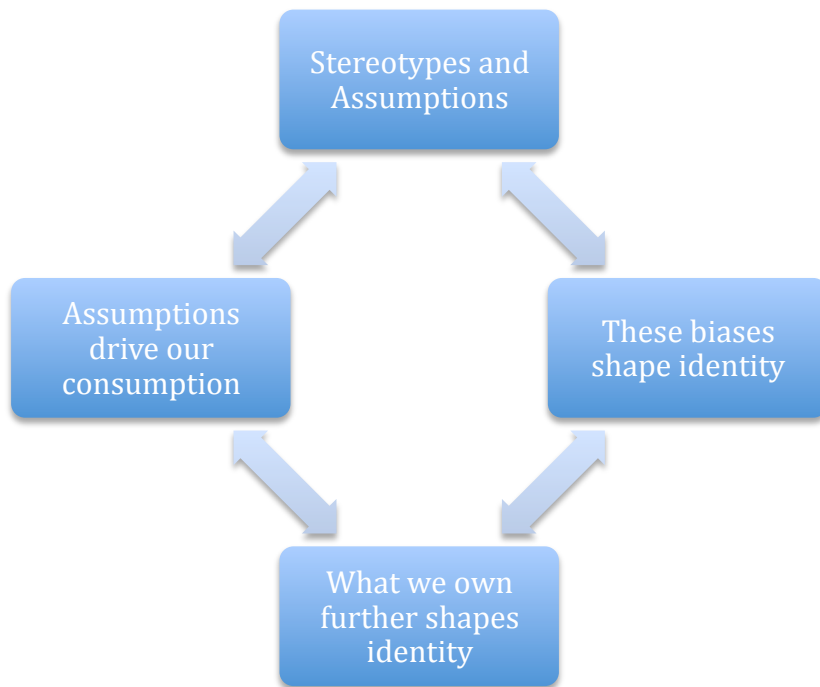


DIAGRAM 1: STEREOTYPES AND ASSUMPTIONS

For the subjects in the portraits, the process of grappling with the complexity of identity begins long before the exhibition. I asked a diverse group of 16 individuals to each select

five objects that hold significant personal meaning for them. These objects could be anything at all that they found to be important in some way, as long as they fit on a table (so they could all be photographed uniformly). Through the selection of meaningful, physical articles photographed for the exhibition, subjects journey through a process of questioning and self-identification: Why do we ascribe certain meanings to simple things? Who are we if only viewed through these three objects? How much of my decision is shaped by my desire to maintain a certain public image?

Since ones' identity is often dependent on reflexive recognition- an external opinion coupled with the self-validation of this recognition- we are socialized to present ourselves in a way that pleases others (Wilska, 2008). While our identities are not totally prescribed by others, our public personas, no matter how independent and individualistic, are still somewhat confined by social norms and expectations. Since our public persona is inextricably linked to how we present ourselves, consumption of various objects plays a huge role in the construction and maintenance of identity. Additionally, Miller (1987) argues that the meaning of the objects themselves is shaped by the way in which we use them during this process of identity-formation.

While the topic of identity-formation via consumption has been theoretically explored extensively, the existing studies generally focus on consumption styles, materialism and lifestyle (see e.g. Lunt & Livingston 1992; Boedeker 1997; Belk 1992). This project attempts to approach this topic as an open invitation to question and dissect these ideas through personal reflection via a visual interactive exercise.

Confronting Assumptions also asks participants to interact with one another, furthering their exploration into questions of identity and prejudice. Participants' conscious and subconscious thoughts that shape their everyday interactions and decisions will come to the surface as they question the underlying driving forces of the matching process: How

does the subject's gender, ethnicity, color, size, age, and/or attractiveness influence my decision and why? What does this say about me and my internalized discrimination? The interaction of participants sharing their differing or similar opinions allows for a more diverse examination not only of the subjects and their objects, but also of the variety and similarity of their hidden biases.

For the photographs of the objects chosen by the subjects, I wanted to eliminate any sense of context in order to reduce any extraneous information potentially gleaned by the audience. The objects needed to be "read" by each audience member without the aid of clues that could change their interpretation of each item. By photographing each object separately with professional studio lighting on a white shooting table, all final images of the objects are visually uniform and devoid of any personal context (see fig. 17-20). For the final exhibition, I chose to use only three out of the five items for each subject, both to make the matching process more manageable (48 photographs of objects as opposed to 80) and to ensure a diverse final selection of objects. Later in this paper I will discuss how this additional "editing" may also play a role in the identity-shaping process.

The singular approach used to create the portraits developed out of a need to expand the traditional, one-dimensional representation of a subject. These multifaceted visual depictions attempt to literally capture all sides and angles of an individual simultaneously (see fig. 1-16). After exploring various potential solutions, including a long time-lapse process and numerous superimposing approaches, I still could not achieve an ideal aesthetic outcome. I decided that the only way to bring the idea to life would be to start from scratch and build a unique structure perfectly suited to my needs.

After much trial and error, I designed and built a mirror booth structure in which subjects would sit on a stool and be photographed for their portraits. I took about 40 photographs of each subject sitting in the same spot but with varying expressions and directions in an

effort to bring out various aspects of their persona. Obviously there is no way for me to capture the infinitesimal range of emotions and angles of each subject, but rather each varied expression symbolizes this inherent diversity. With the camera stabilized on a tripod in front of each subject, I could combine the images seamlessly afterwards in Photoshop to create a uniquely comprehensive portrait of each individual.

In order for this process to be successful, the mirror booth needed to fully surround each person but still be small enough to construct economically. I wanted to create a sense of a larger space while building a structure that was both collapsible and transportable, allowing me to move it to different locations if needed. The more accessible the mirror booth, the more diverse my groups of subjects could be. Since the purpose of this project is to confront assumptions we make about people based on experiences and stereotypes, selecting and photographing a diverse group of individuals was essential.

I went through multiple designs and found the best way to create an affordable, collapsible structure would be through two basic components: A four-walled wooden structure (each wall 93 cm tall by 60 cm wide) filled with 24 square mirrors in total, and a welded metal four-walled base support structure on which the mirrored walls would sit (see figure 21-23). This way, all eight pieces (held together by hinges to make the angles adjustable) could separate and pack away for transport. Additionally, a plywood pyramid top was added to give a bigger sense of interior space (60 cm taller), which better elicits the idea of infinite depth of identity. Before building the full-size structure, I built a small 1/10th scale model to determine exact measurements and potential angles of reflection. I will delve further into the specifics and limitations of the mirror booth later in the production process section of this paper.

3. RESEARCH ANALYSIS

In order to fully explore the topics addressed in my thesis project, I used a multidisciplinary approach that encompasses various fields from feminist theory to prejudice theory, and topics spanning from identity to visibility. While there are many possible approaches to the topics of identity and consumption and how they are tied to stereotypes and prejudice, I chose to focus on the points of intersection, particularly those that address the importance of the visual.

Across the field of psychology and sociology, it is widely acknowledged that social context plays a major role in the formation of identity: it is only with the help of others that we can truly “see” who we are. Through this continuous process of reflexive recognition, we are constantly shaping who we are, how we see ourselves and how others perceive us (Wilska 197, 208). According to Ilmonen (2004) and Belk (1992), all choices we make, whether they are related to our likes and dislikes or how we choose to present ourselves, are subject to social pressures. This visible outcome of one’s identity shaped by social structures is what Bourdieu refers to as “habitus” (1984). Habitus is a Latin term that refers to a habitual or typical condition, state, or appearance. Bourdieu uses the word to refer to an "open set of dispositions" of individual actors that is constantly modified or reinforced through experience (122). These dispositions generate individual practices, perceptions, and attitudes, and are said to be transposable in that they are "capable of generating a multiplicity of practices and perceptions in fields other than those in which they were originally acquired” (Bourdieu 113). While the habitus is sufficiently "open" to allow for human agency, it is nevertheless the product of social conditioning.

In this project, not only are the physical objects inherently visible (and thus part of this visible outcome of conditioning, or “habitus”), but they are made more so through the process of selection by the subject, the documentation and the final exhibition for public

display. Even if the objects themselves are personal and private, they are now subjected to public viewing. The social identity of each subject is then shaped by a conscious selection of specific objects that will be knowingly exposed to social critique.

Beyond the inevitable social influences that we face in what we consume and how we choose to present ourselves, we are constantly defined by external assumptions and reductionistic prejudices that tend to reduce us to unidimensional stereotypes. In the book *Identity and Culture*, Chris Weedon states that the belief in our ability to shape our own identity and truly know ourselves is only partially correct, yet we live as if full control over who we are is possible (154). Echoing cultural theorist Stuart Hall's ideas in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Weedon finds that even though identity is not as apparent or straightforward as we think, it still has real world effects. He acknowledges the harm of subscribing to binaries and fixed identities of individuals, particularly their ability to perpetuate inequality and prejudice (Weedon 154).

Gordon Allport is still the preeminent prejudice theorist, and studies spanning all disciplines have sought to make relevant Allport's sociocultural model of prejudice through a wide array of theories and projects that address discrimination, intolerance and injustice. He defines prejudice as "a hostile attitude or feeling toward a person solely because he or she belongs to a group to which one has assigned objectionable qualities," which ignores truth and is based on misinformation (Allport 6). According to Allport, humans are born free of prejudice but are taught to incorporate it into daily discourse through socialization (20). From America to Malaysia to South Africa, no society is free from group scorn, which, by its very nature, denies the dignity of individuals and the unification of groups.

Discrimination is the act of expressing these negative prejudices in various degrees of violence, which Allport separates into five levels ranging from spoken abuse to genocide

(14). While these violent manifestations of prejudice generally move beyond the spoken, they are still just as harmful to individual and group identity. Although most of his theory is housed within the mid-twentieth century economic and social context in America, his detailed and empirically grounded research on social attitudes is still applicable today. Projects like *Confronting Assumptions* exist to shift the established modes of behavior and judgments that, according to Allport, perpetuate intolerance and obscure true identity.

Like Allport, Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes the need for a multilayered approach to prejudice that she defines as “intersectionality.” Through this reconceptualization of systems of domination, one can recognize a paradigm of race, class and gender as interlocking systems of oppression instead of isolated forms of discrimination (Collins 18). Instead of employing an additive approach to intolerance, Allport and Collins view these various forms of oppression as an overarching structure of domination in which all components depend on and influence one another. By using this intersectionality approach, we avoid the pitfalls of compartmentalizing various forms of oppression as isolated barriers that tend to define individuals as unrealistically unidimensional.

The socially defined norms are the common element at the core of every “ism” and create a standard to which we compare all others. In the United States, this means that anyone who is not white, male, heterosexual, Christian, economically successful, youthful and able-bodied is the “other.” While some see these frameworks of similarity and difference necessary in order to relate to others in a meaningful and reliable way (Jenkins 2008), most studies find that stereotypes tend to perpetuate inaccurate, limiting and reductionistic views of individuals and groups (Steele 613-615). This project attempts to confront these unrealistic and detrimental frameworks through which we both consciously and subconsciously view others.

My aim is for the audience to move beyond the two-dimensional portrait images and look for the multidimensional reality of each individual. Barthes acknowledges that the simplest line or detail in a photograph can project a “desire beyond what [the image] permits us to see” (59) while each photograph possesses the incredible capacity to shrink behind that which it represents (82). The meaning then emerges within each of us individually once we stop looking at the image itself. According to Calhoun, this “blind field” wherein we best understand the image then becomes the “ironic crux” of the visual medium that allows one to look without truly seeing (617-618). My hope is that the audience takes this opportunity to move beyond first glances and attempts to see people for more than the culmination of their hidden biases. Since the visual is replacing the linguistic as our primary means of communicating with each other and of understanding our postmodern world (Mirzoeff, 1999), visual projects that speak to these issues are becoming the best way to make complex topics accessible to a wider audience.

In terms of specific works that influenced this project, there is evidence that Leonardo Da Vinci, with vast knowledge of geometry and anatomy, designed an octagonal mirror room to allow him to see multiple views of the human body simultaneously and infinitely, although his designs never came to fruition during his lifetime because the technology necessary to create such mirrors was not available until the 17th century (see fig. 28). Under the mirror room sketch in his notebook, Leonardo wrote: "If you have 8 flat mirrors, each 2 braccia wide and 3 high, and have them placed in a circle so as to form 8 sides of 16 braccia circumference and 5 of diameter, that man who will stand inside will be able to see every part of himself endlessly" (Da Vinci, 81). According to Da Vinci, “beauty cannot be properly conceived if the eye, using its visual power, does not embrace all the parts at the same time” (Mendelsohn, 299). Although my mirror booth design is different in many ways, the end results are similar: This project, like Da Vinci’s, aims to see a person in their entirety by viewing all infinite aspects of their person simultaneously. His focus on beauty and mine on identity are different, although we both sought to capture a sense of

completeness that was only possible through these infinite angles and reflections. While I was unaware of Da Vinci's design before starting my project and I have never actually seen a reproduction of this work in person, his ideas shaped centuries of designs that undoubtedly influenced the design of my mirror booth structure for this project.

There are many contemporary artists and artworks that informed and influenced my process and project. Most of them involve portraiture of some kind since that is the focus of my project, but there are also some artists who have other focuses that provided inspiration.

Michael Wesely is a German-born photographer living in Berlin who has been working with and refining long-exposure techniques for over a decade using self-made cameras. His 1994 photography series *Schule* (German for "school") documents entire classrooms of students in a single image using multiple exposures (see fig. 31). The result is a ghostly image reminiscent of early photographic portrait processing. The success of these singular images becomes clear when the final images of different classes are compared to one another: Each class becomes a single entity while still retaining its individual uniqueness. Every classroom has a face distinctly its own yet it is a face that does not actually exist in the real world. While the faces of my project are decidedly different than those of the *Schule* series, this process of melding various expressions to create something that does not and cannot exist in reality is a shared quality of both projects. Each school class portrait gives insight into the physical identity of a class while my portraits tell stories about the individual identities of each subject.

Documenting everything from iconic celebrities to symbolic events of the twentieth century, the photojournalist Phil Stern captured images that defined generations. He had a singular talent for creating the indelible, catching rarely seen glimpses of the real individuals behind the untouchable idols. For the purposes of this project, I was inspired by

his ability to capture and unveil that which is generally not seen by the public (figures 32 and 33 illustrate his unique style). This does not mean he captured the entirety of a person, but rather an aspect that does not typically come through in standard portraiture. In this respect, our goals are similar: We both wanted to bring out more than just a photogenic smile and move beyond the expected portrayal of an individual.

Looking at a more recent addition to the world of photography, Ted Craig is an American photographer who uses a combination of strategic placement and post-production to create surreal environments that exemplify particular moods and personalities. Inspired by the conceptual works (mostly self portraits) of Joel Robison, Craig aims to create landscapes from his imagination in an attempt to capture unconventional realities. While his style and concepts are not the same as my project, we both use post-production in such a way that makes it difficult to determine the difference between the real and the digital photo manipulation (see fig. 34-35). The observer may know that something is physically impossible, like suspended objects or distorted sizes, but his attention to minute details and incredible editing skills allows for the suspension of disbelief. In all of the portraits for the project, the photo manipulation is so precise that many participants did not believe I used photo manipulation in post-production even though the images would have been impossible otherwise (see fig. 1-16).

Brooklyn-based photographer Brian Wittmuss focuses on dissecting identity in his project *Vicarious View*, a continuing study of people wearing masks that represent an aspect of their lives (see fig. 36-37). These masks are chosen by the subjects, and hold some special significance for each subject, which is similar to the role of the objects in my project. These environmental portraits place the individuals in the context of their bedrooms, giving the viewer a glimpse into how each person lives and a taste of who they may be. The audience can still learn about each unique subject without ever seeing their face, even though most of his subjects are of a similar age and socioeconomic background. In

Confronting Assumptions, the subjects and objects are completely removed from their environment in an attempt to eliminate context but their faces are completely visible. The approach is different, but both projects share many similar aspects: the audience is asked to glean as much as they can about the identities of the subjects based on a combination of their appearance and their consumption habits. Wittmuss attempts to highlight the impact they have on their environment (and visa-versa) through consumption, while my project focuses more on the multi-faceted nature of each individual through various facial expressions and limited objects. It would be interesting to see the impact these images have on an audience and what kind of assumptions people make about these individuals based on their environments.

David Hockney, arguably one of the most influential artists of our time, was a pioneer in the field of photo collage. His cubist-inspired works depicting multiple aspects of people (and places) simultaneously (see fig. 38-39) fundamentally questioned the way we photograph and ultimately present a subject. Similar works by artists such as Daniel Crooks also attempt to move beyond static imagery by constructing a final image that is as dynamic as the individuals themselves, distorting time and space in the process (see fig. 40). Works such as these that utilize various combinatorial methods are similar to the aims of the portraits in *Confronting Assumptions*, but exist more as singular works of art as opposed to an interactive project series. The photo collage approach was one of the many initial ideas for this project but was ultimately discarded in favor of a different approach.

4. PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

The development process of the mirror booth took much longer than expected, which put me a few months behind my planned thesis work timeline. Although this resulted in only 16 portraits instead of the planned 20 for the final exhibition, the tradeoff was well worth it. With more time and effort put in the building and development of the structure up front, the portrait process became more streamlined and defined.

After designing the mirror booth structure on paper and then with a scale model, I utilized the resources on campus to bring the structure to life. With the help of Kemal Şimşek in the wood and metals lab and fellow student and lab assistant Ece Budak, we were able to build everything to my own specifications. They both assisted me every step of the way, from tweaking the design to choosing the right material to welding the final structure. This was my first time working with a welder and their expertise was invaluable in the process (see fig. 24-26). Although the building of the mirror booth took months longer than expected due to various mechanical issues and scheduling conflicts, the preparation and planning made it possible for me to complete my thesis project in time.

Once the mirror booth was completed, I began photographing subjects. By this time, I had finished photographing most of the personal objects chosen by the participants, allowing me to focus all my energy on the portraits portion of my project. Up until this point, the angles of mirrored reflections had all been speculation since I could not actually test the booth until it was finished. Initial test shots photographed with my phone camera proved that the mirror booth was successfully planned and executed (see fig. 27).

During the initial planning phase for the mirror booth structure, I also ran into various lighting challenges. The mirror booth must act as a dark room blocking out all external light while leaving room for an artificial light source. This way, the mirror booth could be

placed anywhere inside or outside at anytime of day and I would still retain total control of the light on the subjects for a unified and clean look. The appropriate solution involved creating a cloth “skirt” out of black backdrop material to go around the metal base structure while using the same cloth to cover up any gaps on top of the structure. I also decided to use a ring light around the lens of my camera as the artificial light source for two reasons: I wanted to create a spotlight affect on the actual face of the individual to separate it a bit from the mirrored reflections, and I wanted to reduce the potential for external light leaks through gaps created to allow for my camera lens and an artificial light source. The lens-mounted ring light provided the perfect solution to these necessities.

After photographing the first three subjects at Sabanci University campus, I successfully packed and moved the mirror booth into the city to my apartment in Kadikoy, Istanbul. This moving process, while ultimately successful, proved to be much more difficult than imagined due to overall weight, delicacy of the mirrors, and the condition of the roads and sidewalks used to transport the structure. Once in my apartment, it was not possible to move again by myself to any other location. I asked the rest of the subjects to schedule times to come to my apartment for their portrait session, which did not adversely affect the overall project or limit the diversity of the subjects. On the contrary, most participants were excited to be part of this project and see the outcome of the images regardless of the mirror booth location. This may have been different if the project required participants to travel out to Sabanci University campus to be photographed.

In postproduction, I spent time with the sets of images for each subject choosing the best selection of expressions to use for the final portrait. I always asked the subjects themselves for their input on which images they favored in an attempt to ensure their personality came through. I did not want to be the sole selector of expressions since the way in which people see themselves is an integral part of their identity. Once selecting a variety of images, I carefully stitched them together in Photoshop to create the final portraits.

5. LIMITATIONS

I came across a wide variety of limitations while pursuing this project that inevitably shaped the outcome. Many of these issues were out of my control while others were caused by my status as a foreigner and the ever-present language barrier.

Diversity of subjects for this project was of the utmost importance since the purpose is to dissect presumptions we have about others. If all of the subjects were of the same age group, gender and social class, the project would not be as successful. That being said, I had to accept the limitations of my current networks and find a way to work with people that were accessible to varying degrees. I reached out to friends of friends and family members of friends in an attempt to avoid having a homogenous group of subjects. While the final group of participants is relatively diverse, I would have liked to branch out even further and find people completely outside of my network altogether. In the future, I would like to expand this project in an attempt to diversify further.

As suggested during the thesis defense critiques, there may be some alternative ways to approach this project that would allow for a more diverse group of subjects. One idea consists of placing the mirror box in multiple public places around the city, such as Istiklal Caddesi, and invite random passersby to participate in the project. Ostensibly, there would be a more diverse range of socio-economic class, age, ethnic group, gender, orientation, ability, height, size and nationality. This would also require that I rethink the object portion of the project since I would not be able to borrow the objects long enough to photograph them in a studio space. One possibility, also suggested by the jury during my thesis defense, would be to photograph whatever objects they have on their person at that time. This may also present a different set of logistical problems, such as safety risks, the need for assistants, potential lack of objects or lack of diversity of objects in pockets, getting to

and from the location, permits and permissions to conduct such a public project and sheer volume of interested participants.

Another idea involves relinquishing some of my control as the photographer and allowing the participants themselves to trigger the shutter while in the mirror booth. This could be part of the more public mirror booth idea or it could be utilized in its current form. A participant would step into the mirror booth, sit on the stool and close the booth almost completely, leaving only enough space for the lens and light. They would take the trigger button for the camera and pose in whichever way they desire, triggering the shutter at moments they find particularly interesting or compelling. The results will, in theory, be more arbitrary and spontaneous than if I had control over the shutter or the poses of the subjects. This idea also poses some potential logistical issues, including the need for certain equipment and the chance that the angles may not work in the final composite portrait.

My role in “editing” the objects chosen by the subjects was necessary but also could potentially reshape someone’s perception of an individual. Although this manipulation was unintentional, it is a reality of my inevitable role in the process. Ideally, participants could pick more than five objects to represent themselves, but budget and logistical constraints did not allow for that.

There were also some unintended outcomes with the mirror booth, although some worked out unexpectedly. Since the mirror booth only had four walls (and not eight, like Da Vinci’s), there were fewer reflections than I would have liked. If the time and budget would have allowed, eight walls may have been possible and the outcome may have been vastly different. Additionally, there were unexpected light variations in the portraits based on the colors of the clothing and hair of each subject. Because there was so much light reflecting off the mirrored walls, the outcome of the tones of each portrait was highly

individualized. The size and the height of the subject also affected the visible angles and lines of the mirrored walls, which added to the individuality of each portrait.

6. AUDIENCE AND EXHIBITION

It was exciting to create and observe the transformation of the gallery into a communal space for open communication, discovery and dialogue. The installation of the exhibition took one day and ran into very few issues, fitting perfectly into the available walls. The layout and spacing of the gallery is conducive to an interactive project of this nature: it is perfectly sized to create an intimate atmosphere while still leaving space for reflection and movement.

While it can be difficult to determine the “success” of a project or exhibition, the success of this project is measured only by its ability to create a safe space in which people can confront their assumptions about others. If the exhibition can and does become a space for discussion and growth, which of course can and should involve fun and laughter, then the project is a success. Comparing their matched guesses to the real “answers” is not the aim and is merely a tool for checking in on their own biases and a starting point for thinking critically.

Interestingly, many of the subjects in the portraits could not remember the objects they had picked at the beginning of the process. While, for some, significant time had passed, others could not recall their choices because of the temporary nature of the decision: many of their choices were time and space specific, meaning that had they chosen their objects a day, month or year later, they may have varied significantly. This reinforces the concept that identity is flexible and in a constantly being shaped by momentary and long-term factors in our lives. It would be interesting to test this theory further in a second project, or an extension of this one, where subjects choose objects at different times based on their moods or changing experiences. This could paint a more accurate portrait of their identities or even stir up additional questions about the complexities and intricacies behind the relationship between what we have and who we are.

Some patterns of commonly matched objects and portraits did emerge and they generally seemed to be tied to stereotypical assumptions based on age or ethnicity. For example, in Figure 29, we can see two objects that were commonly associated with this subject. Speaking with participants who chose to match that subject with those specific objects, the common consensus was that she did not appear to be Turkish and was probably French or from a neighboring country. Those objects (A statue of the Eiffel Tower and a tin with a painting of a windmill) appeared to be French in origin and led people to believe that she would have chosen them as her significant objects. In the end, it did not matter that she chose neither object, but rather that these assumptions were made based on her (non-Turkish) appearance.

Another example, Figure 30, shows a similar pattern emerging based on assumptions about the subject's religion. Participants continued to match the prayer beads with this subject in particular because they associated his darker skin color with a specific ethnic origin and thus stronger religious beliefs. The difference between the first example and this example is that the photograph of the prayer beads is in fact tied to this particular subject. It is important to note that participants who are less familiar with Islam and the practices associated with the religion may not have made the same assumptions about the subject and his objects, making location and cultural context important in the process and overall outcome of the project.

Sometimes the assumptions we make are correct, but that does not make them any less threatening to the complexity of individual identity. It would be interesting to see how different the matching experience would be in a different cultural context, such as America. Would participants lean towards the same assumptions and stereotypes? I do not have the answer to this, but it does open up the project to future possibilities and exhibitions abroad.

The participant feedback has so far been positive and informative. The interactive element is “enjoyable and interesting”, “easy,” “fun,” and “engaging” based on feedback I received from participants after the opening. Most participants have found that the magnetic aspect of the exhibition brings them back to activities from their childhood, from games to refrigerator magnets, which allows them to feel more comfortable fully immersing themselves in the activity. This idea of letting go of inhibitions and returning to a youthful state seems to ease tensions with strangers and further enrich the interactive component. Reducing apprehension through an enjoyable matching exercise seems to open up individuals not only for conversation amongst friends and strangers, but also allows them to openly look within themselves with less anxiety and shame.

7. CONCLUSION

In this project, theories of identity and bias have been examined through samples of consumption and participatory exploration. The theoretical background was based on postmodern sociological assumptions of consumption and identity-formation in modern societies, as well as interdisciplinary approach to prejudice. Over the last 15 years, postmodern theories have highlighted the expression and maintenance of individual identity via consumption practices. This maintenance process is regulated by an individual's self-awareness and controlled by social interactions. Identity formation- and the consumption it relies upon- is a never-ending and not always conscious process.

Confronting Assumptions invites its audience to explore and dissect these topics of identity and bias through an interactive matching photography exhibition, bringing individuals into direct physical contact with their conscious and unconscious decisions. The purpose of acknowledging these assumptions we make about others is to recognize the oppressive and limiting nature of unidimensional stereotypes, even when seen as a "positive" bias. This project is merely the beginning of a conversation that starts within oneself, expands into recognizing bias in all aspects of life and eventually results in a process of eliminating prejudice altogether.

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9. APPENDIX



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

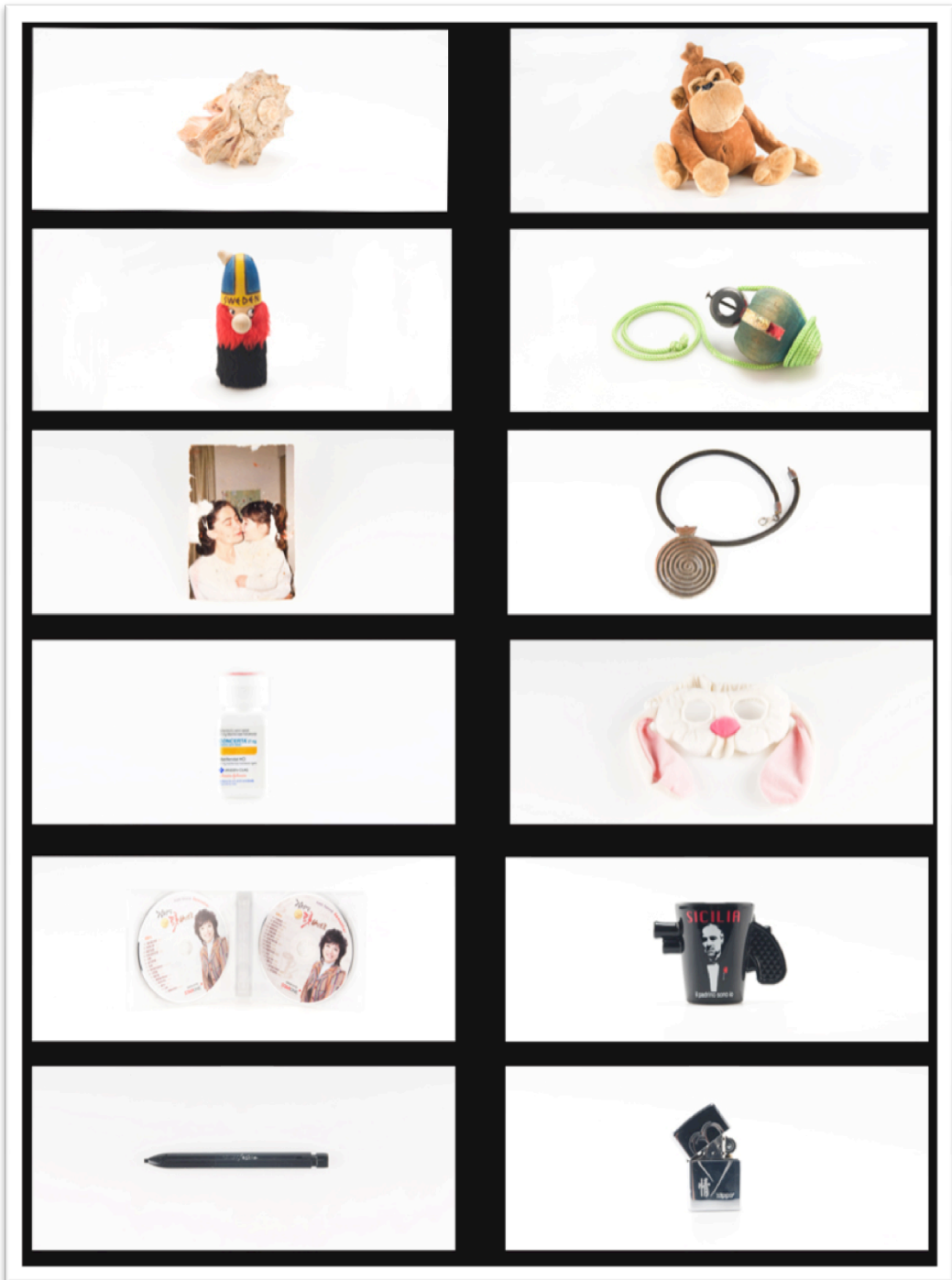


Fig. 17

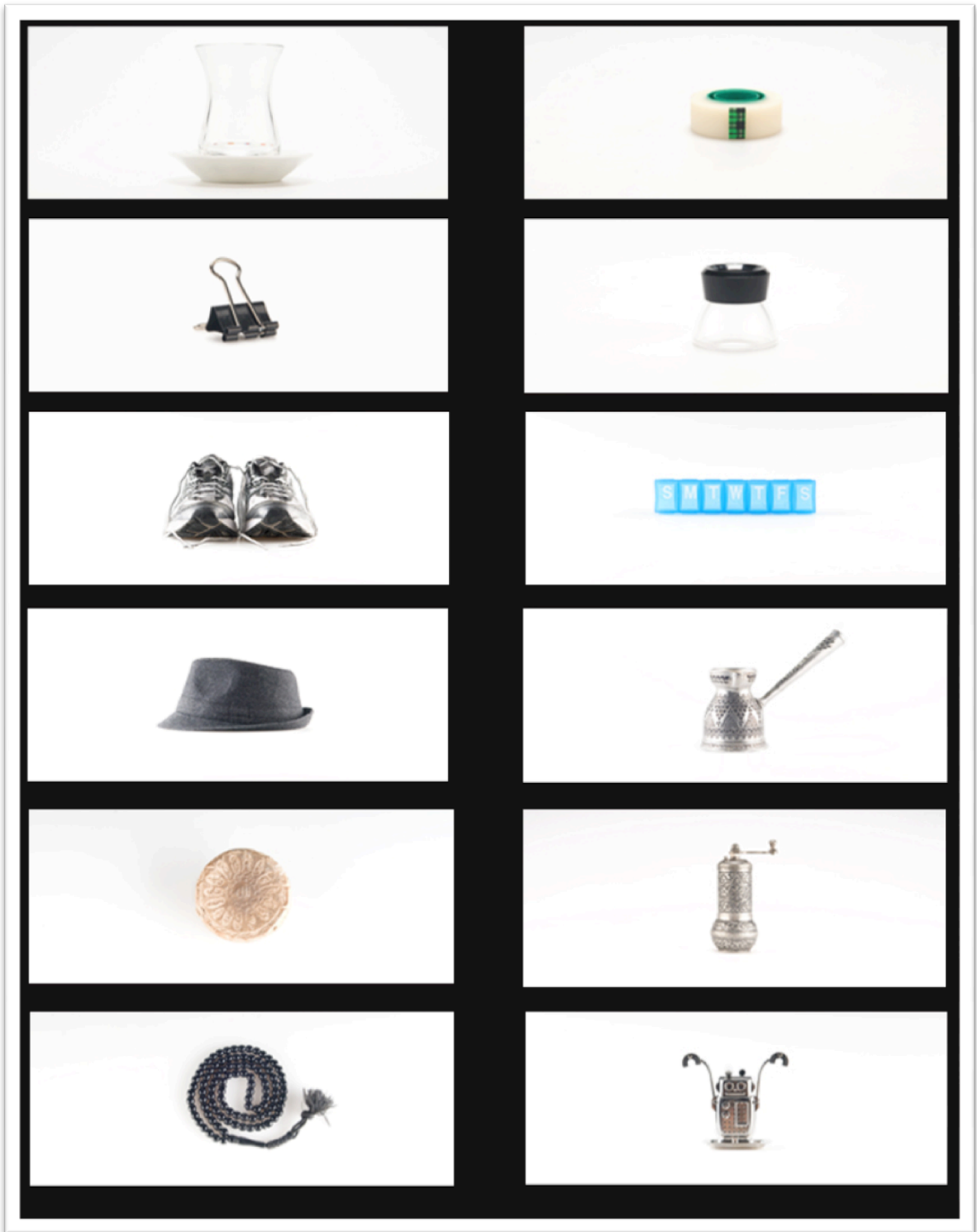


Fig. 18



Fig. 21



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24



Fig. 25

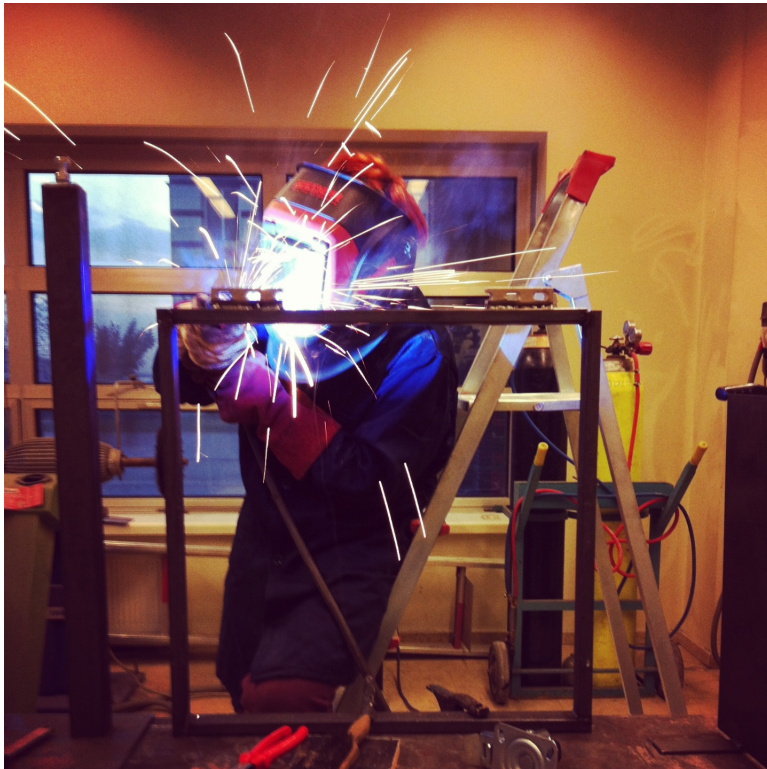


Fig. 26



Fig. 27



Fig. 28 [From Da Vinci, 2004]



Fig. 29



Fig. 30



Fig. 31 [Michael Wesely, *Schule*, 1994]



Fig. 32 [Phil Stern, www.philsternarchives.com]



Fig. 33 [Phil Stern, <http://www.philsternarchives.com>]



Fig. 34, 35 [Ted Craig, <http://www.tedcraigphoto.com/conceptual>]



Fig. 36 [Brian Wittmuss, *Vicarious View*, 2010]



Fig. 37 [Brian Wittmuss, *Vicarious View*, 2010]



Fig. 38 [David Hockney. *Kasmin*. Polaroid Collage. 28th March 1982.]



Fig. 39 [David Hockney. *Self Portrait*. 1970.]



Fig. 40 [Daniel Crooks. *Portrait #3*. 2007]