Project name: Silent Words

Category: Installation

Artist: Rushali Paratey

Abstract:
India is a country with a large spectrum of economical, cultural and social diversity, it has always been a challenge to find the middle ground or choose what topics take precedence. Questions like should the country address child trafficking or hostile work environments first tend to be often raised. There are debates about whether India needs to address barbarism or patriarchy. In a country where people are not aware of their rights or the fact that they have been abused in a way which is criminal, it is evident that the reports and data collected in this context are misaligned. India has dealt with this topic early on when in 1992, Bhanwari Devi - a social worker was gang-raped for preventing a child marriage. This incident led to developing the Vishakha guidelines which deal with addressing sexual harassment at workplace.

Silent Words is a public art installation meant to spread awareness about the extent of abuse, harassment and violence of sexual nature happening in a community. It aims to encourage denizens to share their experiences and stories to break a silence created by social structures around this topic. It is an open source art project which allows communities to download the files and setup the installation in their communities. Silent words was designed with a focus on the urban Indian society. As an installation ‘Silent Words’ intends to bring digital movements and conversations about this topic to the physical space.

Background:
People who have experienced abuse often need support even in the simplest form of a listener. Speaking about traumatic incidents in a society where sex is taboo makes it challenging to find a trustworthy space. My initial observations as part of an urban setting was that there was a demand for a safe space to share experiences that influenced the way individuals developed within a community. Anonymity was a factor that made spaces safer. In 2014, as part of a YouTube community called nerdfighters, I participated in an event called Project for Awesome (abbreviated P4A) where I created a video\cite{1} promoting two charitable organizations - MARD (Men against rape and discrimination) and heforshe.org. The video had three stories of harassment that were shared with me. When I asked the sources if I could share their story anonymously for the P4A video, they quickly agreed. This video project inspired Silent Words. As part of my initial research, I started to ask questions to people from the society for whom I intended to design. Questions like ‘Have you experienced abuse or harassment?’,
witnessed someone being abused or harassed?’, ‘What would you tell your past self who experienced this today?’ and so on helped me gauge for the said demographic. Digital movements about sharing were getting started at this time, bolstering the idea behind this installation. Based on the information collected, I proceeded to make a prototype. During my Masters degree, I was taking two classes - Digital Fabrication with Danny Rozin and Prototyping Electronic Devices taught by Deqing Sun and I used learnings and resources from both these classes to develop the prototype of the interactive installation.

The prototype took the shape of a tree since due to its significance to the community it caters to. Trees are often worshipped and considered a source of knowledge. Within Indian communities they represent everyday life, connections and a silent being that is both a listener and an observer. Movements like the ‘Chipko Andolan’ - a forest conservation movement, contributed to the inspirations for the sculpture as well. The intention of the sculpture was to be part of the environment yet hard to ignore. The installation was less of a representation of data or statistics and more about the individual incidents with an emphasis on being gender non-specific. This prototype was showcased at the end of semester ITP show[2]. After observing visitors to the show interact with Silent Words and gathering feedback, I was able to resolve user interaction questions and I began to work on the next iteration of it.

First iteration of silent words - https://vimeo.com/260515549
https://rushali.space/blog/2018/1/2/tree-digital-fabrication
https://rushali.space/blog/2018/1/2/speaking-sculpture
https://rushali.space/blog/2018/1/2/the-speaking-tree-digifab

**Description:**
The installation takes the form of a tree. The structure has audio jacks around the trunk where users can insert a 3.5mm headphone cable into the sculpture and listen to audio recordings of sexual abuse left by users anonymously. The tree lights up in different sequences every time it recognizes that a user has interacted with it by listening to someone's story or if someone has left the tree a voice message.
Audience experience:
The installation prompts the user to interact with it in one of two ways - You can contribute a story or you can listen. A sign on the tree prompts the user to call the tree. Headphones hung on the branches attached to audio jacks in the bark prompt users to listen. If a user decides to call the tree, the tree through an automated calling service responds with a description of what the installation is about and asks if the user wants to share an experience or story and it guides the user through the process of doing so. If the user decides to listen, they dive into voice recordings left anonymously.
How is the piece created:

**Materials:** 1 inch plywood, ⅛ inch bass wood, neopixel jewels, female and male 3.5mm audio connectors, 5V 8A power supply, microcontroller like Raspberry Pi or Arduino, audio amplifier

**Process:** The installation was modeled in Vectorworks. The file was then exported in dwg/dxf format and opened in MasterCAM to CNC the shape on one inch plywood.

Programmable LEDs were then installed in each pocket and a laser etched shape covered these pockets partially. The wiring was clipped to the back of the structure.
Audio jacks were assembled onto laser etched shapes and attached to the branches of the structure. The other end of the audio jack was connected via cables to an audio amplifier. The audio amplifier is further connected to a microcontroller’s audio output to generate the audio recordings.

The microcontroller is programmed to download and save any voice message it receives from the automated calling service. LEDs on the tree provide visual feedback when a message is received and saved. The voice message gets added to the loop of audio recordings being played back.
Next Steps:
I would like to take into account and answer open questions like - are voice recordings anonymous enough? Should the recordings be replaced with computer generated voices to increase the level of anonymity? How would language play a role in this installation and how can I design for inclusivity? What happens to the data collected?
My aim is to address each aspect of the interaction of the installation by showcasing it and eventually installing it in an urban setting in India.

References:

Acknowledgments:
1. Icon - headphones by Bestdesignmarket from the Noun Project
2. Icon - voicemail by Guilhem from the Noun Project
3. Icon - telephone by Nikita Kozin from the Noun Project
4. Icon - cloud data by Bestdesignmarket from the Noun Project
5. Icon - circuit by luimonts from the Noun Project
6. Icon - speaker by zalhan from the Noun Project
7. Icon - lights by Made from the Noun Project

Bio:
Currently based in New York City, Rushali is an artist & engineer developing work that lies in the intersection of media arts and creative technology. She is a Research Fellow at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in the Interactive Telecommunications Program where she received her Masters. She co-produced the Solutions Zone of the Coal and Ice exhibition that was staged in Fort Mason, San Francisco in 2018. She’s part of the organizing team for Processing Community Day in Bangalore and NYC and is helping bring together the creative code community in India.