

Hallo aus Berlin!

It took a lot for me to finally sit down and write this quarterly report, even though I regularly reflect on my experiences and have been collecting some of the important pieces I wanted to include in this letter. But after three months of no real external “deadlines”, I panicked at the approach of the first one – a concept already alien to me only after five months of being in a place where these were the norm. Not to mention that writing this letter would mean that I would have to accept the fact that I am already a quarter done with this beautiful gift that has been given to me. But that’s glass half empty thinking, which doesn’t accurately reflect the mindset that has kept me going so far. I was confused about to approach this letter—my first instinct being to outline and create a structure, much like how I would begin a college essay. But it didn’t work and felt wrong. Whenever I would sit in front of my computer screen, I would freeze up, unable to verbalize the experiences, which I naturally reflect upon daily.

Right now, as I start this letter, I’m sitting in a warmly lit Berlin bar/café—the rosy amber tones and comfy couches are characteristic of Berlin social spaces. And I think to myself that this is the best place I could have chosen to start writing my first quarterly report. I’m detached from the isolation of my bedroom, in the throws of human behavior and interaction—I can people watch as I write. No glare of my computer screen or Facebook to distract, I am wholly analog, my favorite pen in hand. An ironic sentiment since my project is about the digital—or so I’ve been thinking this entire time.

For most of these first three months, I was lost without even realizing it for most of the time. My year started off with a jolt. I was able to visit two sites right off the bat, places I had been hoping to see even before I was officially offered the Watson. One of them was not as fruitful as I had hoped but the other, an interactive restaurant, made me feel as though I was on the right track. My project was officially coming off the page. Within the first few weeks, I even met with the contributor of one of my favorite tech blogs with whom I had been corresponding for months and whose articles introduced me to some interesting places that embody the blurring of the physical and digital. We met in the café of the trendy hotel where the digital marketing company she worked for rented space. We mostly talked about the physical-digital as it relates to marketing and advertising since that is the industry she is a part of and most familiar with. It was more

of a conversation than an interview, and I got a lot from it. But all throughout I felt two things: somewhat disconnected from her and her position and completely overwhelmed by the vast ideas I was attempting to convey to her. Did she know what the hell I was talking about? I wouldn't fully realize why I was feeling this way until months later.

As time went on however—in the midst of finding my place in a new city, having loads of fun, experiencing weeks of culture shock and its depression-like symptoms, learning the woes of being financially responsible—I struggled to make any major developments with my project. I was uncertain of the methods I should use to approach my project. Should I be reading scholarly articles on the topic? Should I understand the technical aspects of the things I was researching? Or spend more time on finding actual places I could visit or objects I could see in person? I would peruse the Internet for hours, trying to find other people and organizations I could talk to. Many of them were in the US, so of little help to me. But I emailed a couple of them anyway asking for recommendations outside of the US. No luck.

But what EXACTLY was I looking for? What EXACTLY could be categorized as embodying the (interactive) physical-digital? Was it a lamp that is connected to the Internet, enabling one to know where his or her faraway loved ones are during the day? Or a campaign that uses tweeting bikes as a branding strategy? “My project is all that and more”, I reasoned. I frantically drew diagrams, charts and illustrations in my sketchbook in an attempt to create a vibrant infographic-esque document that would finally explain my project to friends and family (and implicitly myself). The physical-digital takes form in different ways—art, architecture, events, marketing/advertising, products—and could be termed different things—“the internet of things”, “internet 2.0”, augmented reality. I still haven't finished that infographic/illustration—which in the end is a good thing. With the mindset that I should focus on all those different forms/sectors, I achieved very little. I was constantly overwhelmed and confused, and although my project was so broad I still wasn't finding anything that truly moved my project along.

I soon lost momentum and motivation with regards to my project, which happened to coincide with weeks of apathy, self-isolation and unhappiness. I was confused because I had never had this precise feeling. I no longer wanted to go out and meet new people, see the city—I watched the world go by outside my window. It wasn't

until a college friend visited for a few days that I realized what was wrong with me. She helped me see that in addition to the disappointments with my project, I was going through something completely normal—culture shock. Even though I've been to other countries, I've never lived in a place with a national language that I couldn't understand. And I've never lived in a new city where instant friends weren't thrust upon me (study abroad). How could I have missed the clear signs?

Upon my realization, things began to look up. I soon attended a two-day Tedx Berlin conference themed *City 2.0*, where speakers from many different backgrounds such as architecture, technology, psychology and ecology gave lectures about the future of cities. Even though every lecture didn't exactly relate to my project—the conference did a few things—it inspired me, rejuvenated my creativity and imagination and allowed me to let myself have fun again. It was a literal turning point.

I began delving into my project again and even emailed one of the Tedx speakers (a current PhD student residing in Berlin) proposing a coffee meet up to discuss our research interests, which had a lot of overlap. He unfortunately could not meet with me before my departure from Germany and I continued to feel disconnected and overwhelmed by my project. So I did the only thing that made sense to me—I gave it some time and space. In the meantime, I assisted an artist at Berlin Art Week, with the hopes of meeting someone whose work engages with the physical digital. Although I never met that person (most of the artists were fine artists), working at Berlin Art Week is highlight of my time in Berlin. It gave me a chance to feel connected to the art world on a different level and meet people I couldn't meet in any other context.

After a couple of weeks, out of nowhere, as I was cooking breakfast, it came to me like a lightning bolt. I suddenly understood why I had been feeling so disconnected and overwhelmed by my project. I realized that one, my focus had been too broad and two, I had been focusing too much on the digital aspect of my project. I am drawn specifically to the spaces in which we inhabit—classrooms, restaurants, subways etc. (which is why starting this letter in that bar/café, only pen in hand, is so fitting!). The spaces we inhabit are typically reserved for specific human behaviors—sleeping, traveling, learning/teaching, catching up with an old friend. I want to now focus on how the integration of interactive digital technologies into traditional spaces changes and

affects the behaviors associated with those spaces and how we come to interpret those spaces and our experiences within them. This might sound like my original proposal hasn't changed at all. But the critical part is that I won't be focusing on objects like the lamp I mentioned earlier whose purposes are not directly dependent on a particular space and do not effect the behaviors or activities associated with that space. For example, at the interactive restaurant I went to, the digital technologies were imbedded in and above the table. But the table is only significant because its purpose is to be in a restaurant. The presence of the interactive table then has an effect on customary "restaurant" behaviors—engaging less in partner conversation and with wait staff, watching a video stream of happenings in the kitchen.

I'm leaving Berlin for Tokyo in a few days, and I'm expecting it to be a whirlwind, difficult yet exciting change. For the next three months, I'm hoping that my more streamlined focus will allow me to enjoy my project rather than being at odds with it and feeling disconnected.

A very warm sincerely,

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