

## Methods of Contextualising

The most striking aspect of the **U.S. Deaths Near 100,000, An Incalculable Loss** front-page of the *New York Times* was how personal it was. The obituaries were not just names, but their attachments and memories with the ones paying tribute to the lives lost.

*“Grandmother.”*

*“Tailor known for his exacting work and strong opinions.”*

*“No one made creamed potatoes or fried sweet corn the way she did.”*

Although the cover spoke of deaths in the U.S., the sentiment and loss were undeniably a universal one. Different parts of the world experienced official numbers that were similarly staggering. And over the next two years, the numbers have only become more unfathomable. In that way - the headline is a self-fulfilling prophecy; An incalculable loss.

This idea formed the bedrock for our exploration. **The cover prompted the question about grief and how it manifests itself in different ways to tell the story of the pandemic.**

It begins with an exploration of misinformation, a recurring phenomenon which are given rise to controversial opinions and continues to cause disagreements across the globe. Next, it considers the individual experiences of lockdown and how lives were structurally altered. It continues with various expressions of grief, coping mechanisms, escapism - as people grappled with the devastation of an unquantifiable tragedy. Finally, it reflects on the survivors, those who bear the scars of the virus.

Like acts in a play. But occurring simultaneously and often, painfully.

1. Adversarial design as an inquiry can lead to the unearthing of evidence, effects, underlying conditions, agendas, and nuances which are then used as constituent elements of a “unified whole”. In the context of the project, the story of the pandemic has several moving parts that are influenced by collective and individual experiences. Our experiments lead us to questions of economy, conspiracy theories, political allegiances, mental health awareness, manipulations by media, the instant nature of social media, access to healthcare, and so on. To untangle grief from all the moving parts and using it as a backdrop to pose these questions became an outcome of our project. Initially, I was quite literally using the *New York Times* cover as a backdrop to explore mental health and escapism but in subsequent iterations, the exploration evolved. The challenge was transforming these intangible evidences into an object which would then form a cohesive narrative of the pandemic - or at least a general one.

Although the essay refers to more action-oriented end products, our project essentially tries to make sense of grief from the sea of information. It tries to process collective trauma or even position oneself within a collective trauma through design.

Laranjo, F., 2014. *Critical Graphic Design: Critical of What? | Modes of Criticism*. [online] *Modes of Criticism*. Available at: <<https://modesofcriticism.org/critical-graphic-design/>> [Accessed 23 February 2022].

2. The essay highlights the importance of merging the sensibilities of a designer as author and designer as a researcher. The various forms of data collection and ethnography tools that are employed by studies such as social sciences and humanities are essential starting points for graphic designers to use their own production and creation methods. For the purpose of this project, the critical gaze was not divorced from personal views. In fact, one can argue that without personal opinions or feelings from a creator, developing a critical position is not possible.

When I was working on this project I drew inspiration from my own lived experiences of the pandemic as well as those of others. In a way, it was inescapable as it is a moment in history we are still living through and therefore, impossible to detach ourselves from. In essence, telling the story of the pandemic through graphic, visual form, serves the same function as a newspaper itself, thereby transcending the front page of the *New York Times*, we chose to speak to the wider context and usage of newspapers as media and memory.

Harvard Business Review. 2020. *That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief*. [online] Available at: <<https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>> [Accessed 23 February 2022].

Pattee, E., 2020. *Covid-19 makes us think about our mortality. Our brains aren't designed for that..* [online] [www.washingtonpost.com/health/covid-thinking-about-death/2020/10/02/1dc0f7e4-c520-11ea-8ffe-372be8d82298\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/covid-thinking-about-death/2020/10/02/1dc0f7e4-c520-11ea-8ffe-372be8d82298_story.html) [Accessed 23 February 2022].

3. The article describes an emotion, specific to our pandemic experience - anticipatory grief. The looming fear of losing a loved one or the situation being an endless new reality underscored everything we had been feeling at the beginning of the pandemic and in many ways, still do. "Just as going to the airport is forever different from how it was before 9/11, things will change and this is the point at which they changed. " (ibid). the *New York Times* front page strikes a chord with this anticipatory fear. For some, the fear is already realized and threatens to do more harm and for most, it demolishes our sense of safety. Although the headline mentions 100,000 dead, the cover itself contains names of 450. The contrast between the decisive 100,000 and the illegible-sized obituaries speaks to the ungraspable nature of this grief. Human minds struggle with this onslaught of uncertainty and loss. While reading into the concept of the front page I realized that one of the ways we deal with grieving the dead is through tributes. Immortalizing their memory is an important step in grieving. We invent lore - like how all loved ones become stars after they pass on to the next life. The magnitude of a galaxy is just as endless, incalculable as our loss. For example, in our project, the words "the dead" and "our dead" are repeated endlessly in some images to create formations that resemble constellations or voids.

4. *Denial* is considered to be the first stage of grief. It can manifest itself as bubble-bath variety of self-care, escapism in the form of Netflix or in more extreme versions, conspiracy theories that disagree with the reality altogether. When nations went into lockdown and people's new reality was restricted to four walls, time became an insurmountable odd. Quarantine trends overtook social media; people wanted to communicate and participate with each other more than they ever had previously. Digital publications and outlets put out numerous listicles for *Things To Do At Home* which spanned from ridiculous to repetitive. Another manifestation was emotional spending. Online shopping provided people with something to look forward to in the bleak monotony. I felt it was natural to explore the emotional toll it took on us or how mentally 'taxing' it was. Some of them were meaningful purchases and some of them were impulsive or done for the lack of something better. Hence, the idea of receipts. Receipts serve as reminders. As proof. They are meticulous. Computer-generated. *Undeniable*.

Shibuya, S., 2020. *SUNRISE FROM A SMALL WINDOW*. [Acrylic paint, newspaper].

Tiravanija, R., 2014. *Untitled 2014 (We have the Light)*. [Prints & Multiples].

5. Sho Shibuya's series of sunsets painted on the *New York Times* front pages has perhaps influenced our project the most. The designer replaces the contents of the newspaper with warm and cool gradients - keeping only its header untouched. Most of his other such iterations try to recreate the front-page topic of the day through a singular graphic.

The sunset series uses repetition as a way to depict the monotony of lockdown and to remind the audience of their location. Drawing from that in our experiments we use the *Incalculable Loss* front page as the backdrop against which life's various reflections and activities occur. We are encouraging each other to move on, keeping ourselves busy, engaging with other political developments, with the tragedy that lies underneath all these endeavours.

6. *The Sun is Gone but We have the Light* is a line from a Nirvana song. Tiravanija writes these words on a newspaper page thrice; each time in a different colour. The interaction between an audience and a piece of media is a recurring element in his work. For the purpose of our project, I view our attempts as a sort of intervention in how the story of the pandemic is being told. The front page of the *New York Times* tells the story of our grief and we, as readers (and, designers) are now interacting, reconstructing, excerpting, removing, adding, comparing it for the purpose of making sense of the emotional toll of the unfathomable number. Newspapers are disposable by nature. Once the shock-value subsides and the contents are absorbed, they lose their original purpose.

By interfering with its contents and changing the way it is circulated, we were essentially taking this story forward and questioning the very idea of a newspaper as a repository of a narrative of our collective experience of time and events.