Image by DANIEL DISSELKOEN
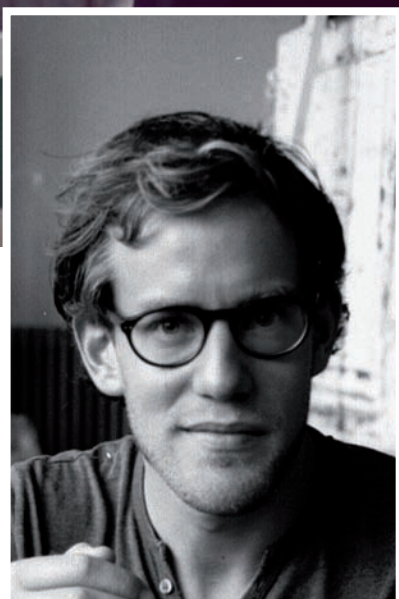

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UNSPECIALIZE!
THE MORE YOU KNOW THE LESS YOU SEE

A PORTRAIT OF DANIEL DISSELKOEN

Hanna Schraffenberger

I'm looking out of the window of a tram. Daniel Disselkoen, the graduate from the Royal Academy of Art I'm about to meet, lives in the Statenkwartier — a part of The Hague I don't know yet. It's a nice district and although there is nothing spectacular about this neighborhood, I enjoy the view of streets I haven't seen before.

A few minutes later I meet Daniel in a small café and he tells me more about this area. He grew up in this neighborhood. After studying law and philosophy in Groningen for four years, he moved back to the very same street he was born in. That was four years ago and marked the beginning of his graphic design studies at the art academy. Just recently he graduated. It is his knowledge of the city that has motivated his search for new perspectives and inspired several of his works.

During my studies I took the same tram to art academy on an almost daily basis. On this ride there simply was nothing new to see and hence no motivation to look outside. I realized how easily it becomes boring when you live in a place you know so well.

Leaving the familiar behind, Daniel spends several months abroad. First in America, at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, then in Japan, doing an internship at the advertisement agency Wieden+Kennedy.

When you don't know a place you look around and spot all those new and interesting things. But the better you get to know the area the less you look around. While commuting in Japan I

paid a lot of attention to my surroundings. I realized that there are three main groups of passengers: those staring at their phone, those who read, and those who sleep or look down. It's a general phenomenon that when people know the area they don't look outside.

Upon returning home, Daniel decides to take matters into his own hands and sets out to make his regular route to the academy interesting again. The result is **Man-eater**, the simplest augmented reality game I've ever seen. Without the use of phones, headsets or computers, merely relying on two stickers, the game adds an additional layer on top of our view, changes our focus and allows us to experience our well-known surrounding in a new way.

The first sticker shows a little monster, the so-called Man-eater. It is placed on the window of the tram. The second sticker is a manual, placed on the headrest right in front of the potential player. The manual is hard to overlook and states the four simple rules:

1. Close one eye and look to the right

2. With the Man-eater, eat as many heads of pedestrians as possible

3. Time to play: between two stops of the tram

4. If you haven't eaten enough heads, start again at the next stop

The first level challenges you to eat at least 3 heads, the third level asks for 12. Daniel is aware that this won't always be possible.

Sometimes the circumstances outside make the game completely unplayable with those rules. For example, if there is simply no one outside then you can't play, or if there are far too many people it will be too easy. But I think the simplicity is also the beauty of the game.

The online world calls the game the real-world version of Pac-Man. However, the arcade game was not what inspired Daniel.

I used to play this game with dots on the window. I think there are quite a lot of people who played a game like this when they were kids. Those people enjoy rediscovering it now. Others like it because it is entirely new to them.

His story is convincing. Indeed, Man-eater makes me relive my own rides to school, pretending the bird poop on the window was Super Mario who had to jump from passing car to car. I like the beautiful and unexpected update to the childhood game and appreciate that Daniel turned it into a visually appealing version. However, reliving childhood memories wasn't Daniel's original intention with the game. His goal is to make people notice the outside world again.

Traveling by tram, I just think this is a great moment for looking around and experiencing your environment in a new way. With the game, I want to provide a fresh perspective, give them a new experience of the city they know so well.

Contrary to what one might think, Daniel doesn't think that people always have to look around.

I don't necessarily think it is bad that people don't look outside. I enjoy those rides where you do nothing at all. The last thing I want is to force commuters into another thing they have to do while they travel. I think in the tram or in a train your mind can be satisfied with the fact that you are traveling. So you are free to do nothing at all, your mind can reverberate, you can just let your thoughts travel as well. But for those that don't look around anymore because they don't expect something interesting to see, I made the Man-eater to let them explore the familiar in a new way.

Image by DANIEL DISSELKOEN

Besides the fact that he doesn't want to push people to 'do something' in the tram, Daniel has more reservations about whether or not to place the stickers.

Very often I don't like street art like graffiti and stickers. Too many times it's just somebody tagging his name. I think when you push your work in public places, you have to be mindful of your audience.

Daniel's unobtrusive solution: in case the stickers are not appreciated or even considered vandalism, they can easily be removed due to his use of removable glue.
However, not all aspects of the project's realization are so commendable. In order to test how his project is perceived and get the natural reaction of those playing the game, he filmed the tram passengers sitting next to the sticker without them knowing about it.

I wanted to know how people react by shooting first, and ask for permission to use the footage afterwards. At first, it seemed like the passengers were not playing the game. Before playing, people looked around cautiously to see whether someone is watching them. Only when they didn't feel observed, they felt comfortable playing it. Consequently, I couldn't look at them the whole time. So I just sat there and filmed them with my phone.

The dilemma whether and how to observe people with or without their knowledge is also well known in science. Once you tell somebody that you are observing him, he might behave differently. If you don't tell, there are ethical considerations to take. Daniel's approach paid off but also gave rise to doubts about his method.

From my short glances, it seemed like they were not playing the game. Only when I checked out the video footage, I noticed the little movement of their heads — they were playing it after all. However, a few people noticed that I was filming them and apparently felt really bad about it. They stopped playing; sat somewhere else or even stepped out of the tram. I felt terrible about it.

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Image by DANIEL DISSELKOEN

His close observations of commuters, his interest in their behavior and reactions to the game not only lead to some valuable insights regarding the success of Man-eater, but also inspired his newest project.

Just like I had noticed before in Japan, we also have those different types of commuters: those reading, those looking at their phone or tablet, and those sleeping or looking down. During my observations, I noticed it's the people staring at their phone or tablet who did not play Man-eater at all. They just sat in the tram, looking at their phone, not even noticing a sticker right in front of them. That observation made me want to create something that turns the tablet or phone into a device that makes you look around and take part in your surrounding, rather than isolate yourself from it.

Indeed, his newest project does just that. Or to be precise: it will do just that, as soon as it is published in the App Store. Right now, Daniel is in contact with programmers, who will turn his concept into an actual app. Until then, the details remain a secret. However, from what I could deduce, the upcoming app will be focused on a similar idea.

The underlying question I asked myself is "Can we change the way we look at our environment and how we experience it?" With Man-eater, I have shown it is possible. With the new app, I take the concept of providing a new experience of the surroundings even further. This game can be played everywhere. I would really like it if people started using it in their room, continued outside, looked around, and then were driven to also discover different places.

I am curious how he intends to alter my view of the world this time.

I noticed it is not only knowing an area well that makes you perceive less about it. Knowledge in general makes you see your environment in a certain way. I'm a designer and the more I've learned about design, the more I started to perceive the world in terms of design. Of course, I am exaggerating when I say that, looking at the world, I see typefaces, patterns, grids, packages, posters and advertisements. At the same time, I miss other things about the world. For example, I might only see the package and not its content. To generalize and exaggerate a bit more: a biologist might spot plants, an architect might focus on buildings and a psychologist might perceive more about people. What you perceive about the world is influenced by what you are specialized in. My app is intended to free people from their specialized view of the world and will provide them with another way to look at it.

"When you don't know a place you look around and spot all those new and interesting things."

To achieve this, the app will basically use everything a phone or tablet has to offer: it will make use of the modern phone's computational capabi-

lities and mobility, it will use the camera as well as information about the user's position, make use of the Internet connection, use the fact that people always have it with them and incorporate social aspects. Hearing about the technical elements such as spatial awareness and the use of the camera, I expect an AR application. However, this much is for sure: Daniel did not start out with the intent to make an AR app.

I don't have a strong opinion about what AR is. I don't have a fixed definition of it. For me, AR is a bit like labels or branding in advertisement. It's something you put on top, and suddenly, people experience a product in a different way. I would never start out thinking 'I should make something with Augmented Reality', and then come up with a project. But in retrospect, I can say that the Man-eater can be seen as an Augmented Reality project. I don't know whether the new project will fit your definition of AR, but it will definitely let people perceive reality differently.

In contrast to Man-eater, which manages to augment the outside with as little as two stickers, this app sounds rather technical. I wonder to what degree technology served as an inspiration.

Of course, you do need to know something about the material you are working with. But it's only because I realized that people don't look around anymore when they are busy with their phones and tablets, that I thought it was an interesting subject and medium to use. I wanted to know more about it, so I got a tablet. Knowing its functionality and possibilities allowed me to come up with the final idea. But the inspiration was not the technology, but my observation of people being completely immersed in it. For me technology is not a target, but a tool.
I think when you know too much about something technical, you don't come up with ideas that create something new. You then might come up with a technical improvement or technical innovation or something like that. If you
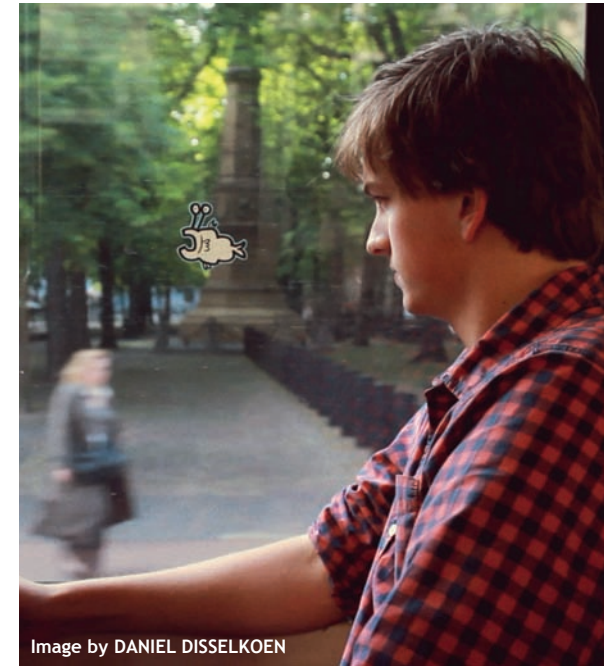

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know everything from one subject, it becomes harder and harder to see the big picture and to come up with a new idea.

Ordering our second round of coffees, I have a pretty clear idea that with his work, Daniel wants to create something new and intends to confront us with another perspective on the world — an ambition he shares with many artists. However, given all our talking about apps, games, travelling and trams, I am not sure yet whether he considers his games works of art.

I would call it 'applied arts'. I like it if what I do also has a specific function which is not abstract. Of course the work and shape can be abstract. But I like it when I can see if it works. If people look outside, play the Man-eater and enjoy it, it works. This concrete functionality is an important aspect of my work.

Finishing our drinks, we talk about his current work: right now he is designing a crazy bridge, which presumably will never be built. We talk about his other works, including documentaries about Mall-Walkers and 47-second long interviews

held in the middle of Japan's busiest intersection. We talk about the commercial potential of his app, and calculate the hours needed to realize it.

Quickly, the time has come to pay our coffees. Usually, at this point in an interview, I ask my dialog partners a last question about their plans for the future. I already know that Daniel will be working hard on getting his app done. I ask about his plans anyway.

I think I might want to work in advertising. It is one of the little areas where you can come up with an idea and it doesn't matter which medium you use. You can adjust the medium to your idea. Ideally, I want to first come up with an idea, then choose the suitable medium and then show it to a client. A good agency where you can work like that — that's a place where I want to work.

I thank Daniel for the interview. On my way back home, there's no Man-eater to keep me company. The effect of seeing something new is wearing off and my interest in looking outside is fading quickly. So I take a look around inside the tram. Daniel's right: there are the ones with the phones, the readers and the sleepers. But there are also quite a few people gazing out the window. Just when I get suspicious, I notice the way they pronounce Scheveningen. There's no doubt about it: they are German tourists.

I'm not sure whether locals really lost their interest in the outside world. However, I have to yield a point to Daniel's observations. What we perceive is shaped by what we know. Knowing German makes me spot Germans on the tram. What I have learned about Daniel is most probably similarly shaped by my knowledge and specialization. Given my own background in creative science, I see the scientist in Daniel: a young observer, driven by the question how we can change what we perceive about the world. I see his games as a series of experiments. And if his app will let me perceive things differently, I can't wait to take part and try it out myself. ◼

Daniel's website: www.danieldisselkoen.nl

Image by DANIEL DISSELKOEN