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Tools for Improved Social Interacting

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Tools for Improved Social Interacting is a series of wearable devices—including the Anti-Daydreaming Device, Happiness Hat, and Body Contact Training Suit—that use sensors to condition the behavior of the wearer to better adapt to expected social behaviors. The work explores the potential for technology to shape how we think, feel, and act. It also questions our social expectations, attempting to better understand their function and worth.

The Happiness Hat trains the wearer to smile more. An enclosed bend sensor attaches to the cheek and measures smile size, affecting an attached servo with metal spike. The smaller the smile of the wearer, the further a spike is driven into the back of their neck. The Body Contact Training Suit requires the wearer to maintain frequent body contact with another person in order to hear normally; if he or she stops touching someone for too long, static noise begins to play through headphones sewn into the hood. A capacitance sensing circuit measures skin-to-skin body contact via a metal bracelet sewn into the sleeve. The Anti-Daydreaming Device is a scarf with a heat radiation sensor that detects if the wearer is engaged in conversation with another person. During conversation, the scarf vibrates periodically to remind the wearer to stop daydreaming and pay attention.

This project, and McCarthy's work in general, explores the potential for technology to shape our thoughts, feelings, and actions. In what ways can it be used to affect our interactions and relationships, and what does it mean to employ this kind of control? What social expectations do we have of each other, and what is the function and value of those expectations? The wearable devices provide haptic and audio feedback that is imperceptible to all but the wearer, allowing the devices to be fully integrated into everyday life. McCarthy is interested in the invisible influences of technology that can result in perceptible changes and shifts. As technologies that can manipulate our brains continue to be developed, it is essential that we explore the possibilities while considering the effects.

Designer, artist, and programmer Lauren McCarthy is currently an MFA student in the UCLA Design | Media Arts program. She received a BS in Computer Science and a BS in Art and Design from MIT. Her work explores the structures and systems of social interaction, identity, and self-representation. She is interested in the slightly uncomfortable moments when patterns are shifted, expectations are broken, and participants become aware of the system. Her work takes any form necessary: video, performance, software, internet art, interactive objects/environments, and media installations. McCarthy most recently worked at Small Design Firm on projects for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Thomas Jefferson's home at Monticello, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She has also worked at Continuum and the MIT Media Lab.

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