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Cat Frazier on rebelling against "good design"

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As told to Mark Sussman, 1993 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Comedy](#), [Design](#), [Art](#), [Anxiety](#), [Production](#), [Process](#).

I remember the time on the internet when there was nothing ironic about the kind of design aesthetic you use. That was just what the internet looked like. Was that your early internet experience too?

The only way I was able to consume Geocities was through [Internet Archeology](#). That was a website that I found around 2012 that was archiving all these old websites from the late '90s and early 2000's. So that was my ironic viewing of the early internet's design aesthetic. My authentic experience was through MySpace. But even by the time MySpace became a thing, it was more conscious of design—even though the tacky glitter and crazy fonts were there, I still thought, "Oh, I'd better make this look nice." Whereas what I enjoy about looking at sites like Geocities is that personal expression and talking about things was more important than making everything look unique and uniform. You were allowed to be playful with your web design and text.



Life hack: replace all your friends with bread, from *Animated Text* Facebook Page

You went to Pratt, and you have a technical design background. How did the Animated Text Tumblr's aesthetic emerge out of that?

It was a direct rebellion. For class, you have to take type and learn about kerning, and you have to do these beautiful flyers and brochures. There's a very methodical practice, which is important. I learned how to use the pen tool. That's important—to learn how to use the tools appropriately. But when I got home and I was done learning about that, part of me was like, "I just wanna do something really, really ugly." I wanted to see what it's like. Because I couldn't play around like that in class. So that's pretty much where *Animated Text* started. And like I said, it was more of a curiosity. It was like, "I can't believe people allowed themselves to make stuff like this. Who let this happen?" That was my thinking.

You've always been into interacting with people. People request that you turn specific phrases into animated text. There's the Ask Cat project, where you gave people advice via text message. How much does audience feedback determine the shape of your work?

On each platform, the longer I'm on the platform the more the audience has control over the project. Tumblr is a perfect example. When I first started that blog, it was all my own jokes. And then the whole idea of a request-based thing came when people started having their own ideas. So at this point, it's become like 50/50. Not so much with Instagram yet. Because of the platform, it's not easy for me to go back and forth [with followers] like on Tumblr. But even now on Instagram, people are DM'ing me and asking, "Can you do this joke?" "I saw this image, it reminded me of you." People also say things like, "Your posts helped cure my depression, can you do more things like this?" So Facebook, Instagram—they're all becoming more and more request-based. So really, I want the voice

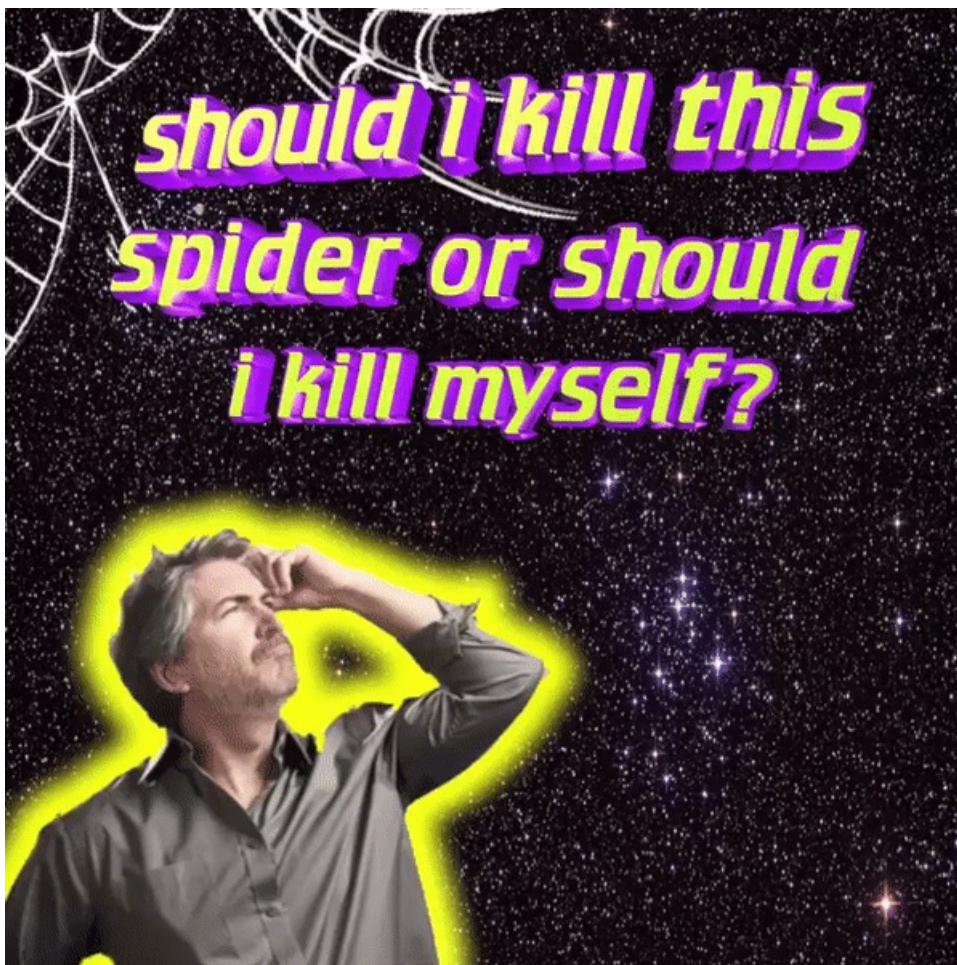
to reflect the people who are actually enjoying it.

I think the world Animated Text alludes to is a world where the internet is so much more personal than it used to be. The internet has become more of a coping mechanism, and a place that you wanna see yourself in wherever you are. I love that people can go to my page and relate to it on a personal level. And then in their own lives, they can be like, "Oh, this would be a really nice joke. Let me send this to her." And it might actually show up on the internet to this larger audience.

So these things are inherently social, and they come out of the social world the platforms create.

Exactly. Animated Text, in this form, could not exist anywhere else but on social. The way I see people consuming it is by tagging their friends, saying, "Oh, this is so me." Or they use it in conversations. It just feels natural to me to be a mediator between them. Even though a little bit of me goes into everything, and obviously I'm curating what I want to make, it still feels very much like the voice of the people who are consuming it.

I remember when I first started using the internet, I felt like it was a thing that I could consume—that I wasn't gonna be a part of. Whereas now, especially with social media, everyone has a piece of the pie. So that's more where I see my stuff going. Ask Cat is an example of that, where you can text me, and then your conversation with me ends up on the internet. That type of feedback loop has less to do with actual design. Somebody might be able to do animated text that's actually really beautiful. And it has this same sort of tone, and same sort of feedback loop. And it'll be doing pretty much the same thing that I'm doing.



Should I kill this spider or kill myself? From the *Animated Text* Instagram

Can you take me through the process of creating an Animated Text post?

It always starts with the joke. That could come from a follower requesting something, or I might be in the grocery store and I might think, "I should replace my friends with bread." Usually I'll write it down in a notebook or in my phone. I'll keep it on a to-do list. And then it slowly starts to build until I start thinking, this would be really funny if there was a guy in Heelys, or a galaxy in the background. The last one that was really easy was the Kool-Aid man, and he was saying, "Damn girl, are you a fire alarm? 'Cause you're really fucking loud and annoying." In my head, I was like, "I don't know why, but the Kool Aid man is so obnoxious, he would be saying that." So those types of things are easy. There are some that take a little bit longer just visually, because the concept is so abstract, I don't really have a scene in my head.

Aurora is the program I use to add the 3D text and images. It's a 3D program that's been around since the late '80s. I always use that. Then I'll either have the images already, I'll buy them, or I'll get them from a free image place. I'll take the background out, add some really obnoxious glow-like yellow, green, or something like that—and I'll put the text in and add the image. The final magic is just the layout, figuring out the fonts and bevelling and everything like that. Once that's done, I export it. Then I try to find really bad music. I say bad, because people comment on it. To me, for some reason, trip hop and annoying hip hop are funny.

Do you think that there's an expressive dimension to what you're doing?

I definitely think it's an expressive act. And I think most of the expression comes from the original joke. I've noticed that if I make two things that look the same, the exact same photography and type and everything, its success comes from the actual joke more than from the way it looks. I'm able to divorce myself from that, even though I love making it look a certain way. So I think the expression, first, is from the writing. And then from the design.

So you think of yourself as a writer.

Yeah, writing is important. I'm so hesitant to call myself a writer or what I do writing, because it is joke making. I think the shorter the animated text is, the better it is for me. I guess it's like being a one-liner joke writer. That's what I aspire to be. And then obviously, talking about something that's super relatable, like depression, anxiety, or not wanting to wake up and go to work. Or calling 911 and telling them that you love them. Just doing something really absurd like that, then trying to boil it down as simply as possible, to a sentence.

Do you keep a notebook, or do you just have a doc open at all times?

I have four different docs—a doc on my phone, a physical notepad, a doc on Google Docs, and a notes app on my Mac. That's just because at any point in time, I could just be triggered to think of something that's funny or hear something someone said that's funny. So I always wanna be able to either write it down, put it in my phone, or somewhere. At night, or in the morning sometimes, I'll look back on one of them and be like, "This was not funny," or, "This is really funny." It really is something that could happen at any time. I could steal it from some girl behind me in the line at Target, or from a commercial I saw.



Calling 911 to say I love you, from the *Animated Text* Instagram

There's something extremely therapeutic about your work. It's so funny. But when you step back it's all very dark and depressing on its face.

Before I discovered Facebook, I was in a Tumblr bubble, where everything is dark. All of a sudden, everyone was like, "I really like your depressing memes." I didn't know that they were so depressing. But then I look back at it, and it's like, "Should I kill this spider or should I kill myself?" It's so weird that I'm talking about this. But you know what, that's the type of stuff I make. It is really, really dark. But I'm so removed from it that it becomes absurd. I'm doing so much work on this meme about dying or killing a spider. I don't want to trivialize those thoughts, but I think bringing them to the forefront with things that are so mundane really helps me, and helps other people, too.

Do you see yourself as being part of the therapeutic community that's become so central to the project?

I think so. Spawning from that is [Throw More Glitter](#), which is very, very new. But it's basically another project through which I'm intentionally making all these jokes that are about depression and sadness and anxiety. It's surprising how big of a community that's building.

The more I do it, the more it has become a part of my language and the way I speak to people—and also the way I see the world. Sort of like, "This is all gonna end, so I might as well laugh about it." It's also part of the way I interact with certain people. I'll see some Joe Schmoe on the street, someone who I would normally never look at twice, but I'll be like, "He would make the perfect animated text. He looks like somebody's astronomy teacher. I need to put him in this thing." And that really just makes me think that everyone is super nice.

That's also the feeling that comes out of me seeing all the people who appreciate these things. In my mind, I'm like, "I'm this random girl, who can get my humor? Who can appreciate this?" But I've started to realize that we all share these similar thoughts. Which is funny.

Cat Frazier recommends:

Watching [Forensic Files](#)

[WikiHow](#) illustrations

[Teenagestepdad](#)

[makewordart.net](#)

[The Gay Science](#) by Michel Foucault

Free Photoshop additions that allow you to make your text look like 80s chrome.

Name

Cat Frazier

Vocation

Artist, Designer, Dad Joke Enthusiast

