

TALKING TO STRANGERS, ASKING DIRECTIONS, ACTING OUT, AND OTHER CIVIC DUTIES GERMAINE KOH

I talk to strangers a lot. I've been asked out based on my phone manner; I briefly dated someone I met online; and the first friendship I made in Vancouver developed from a conversation on a bus. I also make of point of asking directions when I'm in new places, as a way of getting to know cities and neighbourhoods through their inhabitants. I have begun to reflect on the wider potential of these practices, for I am often surprised by the depth, richness, and sensitivity of my interlocutors' comments.

Talking to strangers is an act that cuts across expected routines. Deliberately prodding a stranger to let down her guard and engage can be seen as a gentle act of invasion, but one that can become reciprocal. On the other hand, asking directions entails consciously adopting a position of weakness, acknowledging the other's vernacular expertise. And asking residents to display their local knowledge can reconnect them in some way with that locality; when addressed as an expert, the local might realize the amount of information she possesses about her own community.

It is important to note that these are deliberate personal practices, not art. However, I have also made artworks that put people into conversation with each other, such as a telephone hacked so that each time its handset is lifted it dials one of a number of local residents who have agreed to converse with whomever happens to call. Other times, I have created situations with implications for passersby. For example, I have sat in an enclosed display window during office hours, actively but impassively observing the street, thereby inverting the assumed power relations between passersby and displayed object. I have slept in inappropriate public places, as if I were a street person transposed into these contexts. In these cases, it was my refusal or inability to engage that has prompted discussion in the form of collective decision-making about what to do with me and how to interpret my presence. Works such as these call upon local stakeholders to recognize their responsibility to take charge.

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs describes the self-regulating function of neighbourhoods and identifies individuals who serve either as tacit block custodians or self-appointed public figures responsible for learning and spreading local news by connecting with each other. She notes that, "In a curious way, some of these help establish an identity not only for themselves but for others."² Within the *Territory* exhibition, Jayce Salloum's photographs of local street details that were reinserted back into the neighbourhood produced a similar mirroring effect. My own work in the exhibition—covert transplants of soil from foreign countries—may have also created situations of estrangement through displacement. However, on a personal level, the self-consciousness I unexpectedly felt while working on this project in the streets is more pertinent to the topic at hand.

My discomfiture about being a conspicuous interloper reminded me that there is another potential held by strangers who might not belong to a neighbourhood, but whose passage through it makes inhabitants aware of their own responsibility to, participation in, care for, and knowledge of their localities. These strange agents can act as precipitators or catalysts. In contrast to the "plantedness" or "locatedness" of Jacobs' characters, they do not belong, yet I believe they can still be said to act in the service of the community. In this way, they are also different from the uninvolved observer known as the flâneur, whose passage through the city is based on self-interest and enacted for his own benefit. Beyond benign acts such as asking directions, someone wishing to operate as a precipitator—an artist, for instance—can also use the social tactic of acting out: acting overtly as a catalyst rather than covertly as an infiltrator. Innovative instances of acting out should be able to initiate moments of reckoning that cause onlookers to recognize the prevailing values of a particular location by recognizing that the strange-behaving person doesn't conform to the expected behaviours of the context or setting. I can attest that making public interventions often entails acute unease for everyone around, but the dilemmas produced by these strange acts can be transformative. The strategy

of acting out—acting the stranger—has the potential to precipitate crises of action or morals. What becomes significant is whether or not the public intervenes. In other words, situations in which someone is acting out of the norm have the potential not only to cause us to recognize our relative unity in the face of their strangeness, but also to see ourselves choosing to either ignore or act on this. Moments of acting out provide the occasion to consider the relationship between the foreign agent and a community, and the responsibilities of strangers to each other.

To pursue such strategies is to acknowledge the real force of social differences and to suggest that abstract ideals must, at some point, cross into the realm of real consequences. Writing about “anxieties of citizenship,” Danielle Allen acknowledges the difficult fact of mistrust and inequality between citizens, but argues for the civic potential of sacrifice, vulnerability, and debate. She looks at catalytic events—such as the brutal 1957 media images from the Little Rock civil rights actions—in terms of the epiphanies they provoked and moral crises they precipitated about prevailing notions of democracy, pointing out that, “Once the citizenship of dominance and acquiescence was made public, citizens in the rest of the country had no choice to reject or affirm it.”³ In the following decades—years in which questions of accountability between individuals within the social body were as vital as they have become again today—classic situational artworks, such as Adrian Piper’s *Catalysis* (1970) or Yoko Ono’s invitation to cut off her clothing in *Cut Piece* (1964), addressed the social potential of individual sacrifice and vulnerability to others.

More recently, there have been myriad artworks that purport to show us our interconnectedness, yet do so through such complicated filters or interfaces that they are unlikely to actually cause us to look up from our devices and connect in person with someone. And there are plenty of other artworks that set up conditions for relating to others based on relational aesthetics. But few actually catalyze the potential for social action. Just as connective devices such as mobile phones are perversely used both as shields to ward off human contact and as props to appear more connected than one is, the explosion of artworks dealing with ideas of connectivity is not unlike the contradictory condition of simultaneously desiring connectedness but being unable or reluctant to act on that desire.⁴

This revelation was surprising to me. With the drive to self-exposure and artificially accelerated intimacy that so pervades our media-inundated culture, I would have assumed that most people consider strangers no different than acquaintances. Yet certain examples—such as the large sections of the classified ads devoted to missed opportunities for connection and on-line sites offering advice on approaching strangers—have lead me to conclude that many people find it difficult to let their guard down in order to engage with others, and that there might exist in our culture a real, generalized sense of regret about this condition (witness the tragic tone of those missed connection ads). But why, then, do we avoid strangers? What is really at stake in concrete acts of connecting with strangers?

A number of philosophers, dating coaches, sociologists, political scientists, and theologians are arguing for the real necessity of cultivating gestures of trust or pursuing connections with strangers as a strategy for fostering a safer society. To counter the assumption that we would not want to bind ourselves to strangers because they are unlike us, Kwame Anthony Appiah works from the fundamental principle that human strangers are always more similar to us than they are different. In *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, he reflects upon the dilemmas that confront those who would assume a responsibility to other “citizens of the cosmos” in the face of the forces of statehood. Appiah looks at how global imperialism is modulated by local tradition and argues against accepted practices of nationalizing culture. He ultimately calls for a subtle but realistic sort of applied morality and suggests that, “Conversation doesn’t have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it’s enough that it helps people get used to each other.”⁵

Given that our society today has lost many assumptions about locatedness and belonging that may have applied to the neighbourhoods Jane Jacobs described back in 1961, the prospect of conversing with strangers seems to have become all the more pressing. And if the notion no longer holds that there are fixed, identifiable communities and that we are all vulnerable to each other, our notions of citizenship must surely evolve. Indeed, in an “age of terrorism” in which strangers are being categorically demonized, accepting a responsibility to people we do not know becomes fraught with political intent. Given this “world of strangers,” I would argue that a good start would be—whether as located citizens or as outsiders—to actively assume the civic necessity of talking to strangers, being vulnerable, and even acting out.

NOTES

- 1 This is a revised version of a talk delivered as part of “Territory: Speakeasy” at Artspeak on 25 January 2007.
- 2 Jane Jacobs, “The Uses of Sidewalks: Contact,” in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House Modern Library, 1993): 78-94. The first edition of this book was published in 1961.
- 3 Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004): 5.
- 4 See Anders Persson, “Intimacy Among Strangers: On Mobile Telephone Calls in Public Places,” *Journal of Mundane Behavior* 2, no. 3 (October 2001) <http://www.mundanebehavior.org/issues/v2n3/persson.htm>.
- 5 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism; Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2006): 85.