

The Stranger Gets a Gift

Cristina Maldonado, Mexico-Prague, 2019

MA Fine Arts Prague City University

Human interactions are very well drafted, is easy to orient oneself in what is supposed to happen in each encounter: I can expect a driver to take me somewhere, from a client to buy something from me, from a partner to accompany me through life. Though it is way more confusing and complicated to meet these expectations, the initial purpose of the interaction is clear and it justifies the exchange. These behavioral routes are seldom broken. I don't call a doctor if I don't feel sick and I don't expect my art student to prescribe a medical test. I use this rough simplification of interactions, to explain that (even when exceptions can happen) I usually enter interactions with a clear behavioral map to follow. I'm surrounded by human interactions that are pragmatic, and on some level, utilitarian.

In *The Stranger Gets a Gift* I am focused on the interactions that emerge circumstantially between two strangers, me being one of them. There is no clear purpose to this exchange and no precedent of what the person can contribute. It is also impossible to say when and where these encounters will happen, the most I can do is to make myself available: having time to spend, drifting, and being open. Sometimes I know when they will happen, for example, when I will be introduced to someone, but I have no idea if people will engage in an interaction that somewhat doesn't promise a precise outcome. In many of these exchanges, I have no clue why others are interested in investing their time and energy, and why they open to me. Perhaps this is what drove me to map these interactions. I notate them in order to find what is at stake, and how it moves and evolves. The notation indicates ways in which these interactions can grow into relationships. I don't deliberately decide what they are about, what can be shared, or what is the thing I can contribute with. It is the sustained observation of how these random encounters happen and how coincidences keep occurring, which dictates the steps to follow.

The relationship continues until strangers are available, therefore, I am continuously in the position of waiting and enduring periods of uncertainty.

There is a lot of making and doing to sustain these interactions, a truly demanding material effort. Notation often evolves into the creation of objects that trigger and sustain the interactions. The exchange occurs through materials - words, drawings, embroideries, weaves, collages, photographs, projections, postcards, booklets, stones, fabrics-, that materialize human content -stories, thoughts, emotions, intentions, feelings, memories. When I gathered all these materials for the first time, I realized I had an archive of materialities of relationships. These materials are not documentation or traces, they are the carriers of the relationship and enable the interaction to continue into other cycles. Sometimes they are the means to include other strangers and my close people in the process of exchange.

The project occurs in a continuous flow of feeding the found relationships while being open to new ones, as much as my time and capacity allow. It takes the form of an ongoing accumulation of stories and objects, the relation of relations, that can appear as a live archive in an installation. Some objects are ready to continue their journey and accompany other strangers, some others as narrators of previous exchanges. The project exists on several levels: it takes place in the streets through my interactions, in an exhibition venue where all the materialities are gathered and exposed to the audience, and in a literary form, in booklets and postcards that narrate the stories of encounters.

Material means to communicate the project will probably keep changing through time, as well as my strategies to remain in contact with strangers. This project requires a constant questioning of what is at stake in the interactions and a consequent adjustment. So far, in the last couple of years, I had to figure out how to: deal with uncertainty and purposelessness, stop my creative mind from visualizing outcomes too soon, wait for

signals and directions that came from events instead of following my predilections, accept the risk of sudden death of a project -no matter how hard I have worked on it- if the stranger decides to be absent or to depart.

This kind of interaction had no precedent in my behavioral map and I had to slowly build the understanding and the logic to sustain them. I had to revise aspects such as giving and receiving, my position in relation to the "stranger", my role as an artist in these interactions and the nonhuman things that constitute the encounter.

In today's discourse of meeting the "other", there is a tacit moral pressure for tolerating the difference and the purpose of understanding the other through his/her circumstance. Some interactions are justified by the sole purpose of exercising empathy on these terms. Thanks to phenomenologist Mathew Ratcliffe and his essay *Empathy without Simulation* (1), I could articulate why this access is not valid for me. He states that it is not possible to know what other person is going through, criticizing how we think we exercise empathy by "putting ourselves in someone else's shoes". Furthermore, he proposes that is necessary to give away the expectation to understand someone and the temptation to find what we have in common. Instead, he proposes to come closer by observing how this person affects our world. Understanding how the stranger shapes my experience became more important than deciphering who the stranger was. My focus turned to what happens when we are together.

In this way I don't imagine me and the stranger as two separate elements, having to bridge our differences in order to come closer, but the stranger is already a constituent of my experience. Martin Buber's primary word I-Thou (2), brought to my attention to the consequences of thinking the I and the other, the you, as an indivisible unit that contains all possibilities. Without the I-Thou awareness, I incur separation by categorizing: this person is a woman, of certain age, race, profession, social

class, etc. all of those being attributes that differentiate her from me. I turn this person into an "It" (I-It according to Buber), ripping from her the infinite potential of what she can be. When I meet a stranger, I deal with an unfinished picture, I do not get attached to a particular attribute. I know almost nothing about him/her and I am aware they know almost nothing about me. Without a clear agenda, there is no chance to reduce this person to what she/he will provide to the encounter. This is how ignorance and availability help me to sense the infinite possibilities of what our interaction can become, and what I can become because of these strangers, in reaction to them. This keeps me from anticipating directions. The principles of David Bohm's Dialogue (3) (in my version of one to one) have also reinforced this choice. I make a conscious effort in suspending any plan, reason, goal or expectation to allow a topic or a situation to emerge in dialogue. The only way to orient myself in this uncertain interaction is the wish to be there, with the person.

The initial purposelessness of these interactions keeps me busy positioning myself since I can't picture clearly what is my role. With time, days, weeks, and sometimes months, the interaction evolves and finds a direction. But in the meantime, just by remaining with the person, the process of giving and receiving occurs, in spontaneously and chaotic ways. There are all kinds of gifts coming from both directions -gifting one's own time, stories, or gifting the action of listening-.

These gifts aren't part of a known economy of exchange. They don't respond to Marcel Mauss's kind of gift (4) in which the receiver is obliged to reciprocate in order to preserve the social order, the gesture of giving isn't articulated by any dominant institution. There is no protocol in this giving, every single time, with each person, is necessary to figure out what this giving/receiving is about. On the other hand, the gifts I offer are not for free, they are not a charity gesture, I expect something in return. The difference is that the sole reaction of the receiver, regardless of what it is, is enough for me.

Rejection, or the inability to give, is also giving and they also become material.

Giving and receiving occur simultaneously. In the beginning, I was unaware that by offering something, I would automatically place myself in the position of receiving. I fell several times into this cycle unknowingly. On those occasions, the exchange happened in a cloud of generosity, confusion and good faith since no one knew what there was to gain. The fact that in giving, one is actually receiving -for instance the possibility I get to access my memories because of creating a gift for a stranger- makes receiving and giving inextricable. This might be what Buber meant when he said that boundlessness in the I- Thou also implies that whatever affects Thou, will affect I (5). In this case, there is no possibility to experience giving to the other and receiving from the other separately. As, for the stranger and me, there is no way to experience the encounter separately.

This brings me back to the topic of positioning myself in the interaction and positioning this kind of interaction within other relational practices in the context of art. If, as an artist, I target a group because I think I can contribute to their situation, transform it, visibilize it, I am separating myself from them in the very start. This separation allows me to be the element that can observe and make an "intervention" in a flow, to which I don't belong. Certainly an exchange occurs. In Borriaud's Relational Aesthetics (6) compilation there are plenty of examples in which the artist is the catalyst of an intervention reinterpreting local material or functions as the conceptual and technical conduct for a communal experience. But this is not the process that I engage with when I offer my time and effort in The Stranger Gets a Gift. At first, I thought my actions were a sort of intervention in the life of another person, but by now is clear that in this process my personal material weaves with the personal material of the stranger's, or the "not-artists", so instead of me-them, we become us, in the process of creation.

I came across the thoughts of Dr. Brainerd Prince, who criticizes the mindset of the contemporary missionaries, it is surprising how similar the discourses of artists in residence and missionaries are. Prince, also influenced by Buber, thinks that the relationship of missionaries and missionized is not sufficiently problematized, "if the missionary has an agenda for the missionized, whom he wants to transform, then how is the missionized able to be equal with the missionary?" (7) and something very similar could be said of relational artists in residence. They both travels with a purpose to faraway places are received by organizers who consider their presence is necessary, they intend to observe the place and learn how to live with the locals, find their way to connect with them, and convince them to engage in an interaction that will be beneficial in some way for both sides. The position of both, artists and missionaries, the one of the foreigners that intends to establish a dialogue and offers something.

In my interactions, I start from a very similar standpoint. The shift comes when I suspend the idea of contributing or achieving something. I restrain myself from having a mission and this is why the only place where it feels right to find these interactions is in daily life, through being immersed in ordinary activity, yes in a residence, in my homeland, or in the country I live in. But somehow being passive, found by the interaction. I have no specific topic to address, no complex imagination of my counterpart, and my focus is on being available and "with" in case the interaction shows up.

To understand my position of "with" further, I need to take myself, and the stranger out of the center of the encounter. The Actor-Network Theory (8) makes this possible by taking into account that nonhumans intervene, shape, and enable the interaction itself. So what it is human (experiences, feelings, thoughts) becomes visible and possible thanks to what is not (the material that carries them). In this same line of thought, Law and Hetherington propose that "semiotics of materiality suggests that

objects, materials, information, people and the divisions between big and small or global and local, there are all relational effects" (9). The exchange is inserted in a broader net of actors in which I can make sense because of the presence of the others, including nonhumans. Familiarity with strangers is built through materials. Objects are the true catalyst of the interaction: The creation of something new, the recovery of something forgotten, the compilation of scattered things, all these are ways to develop the relationship. These objects are as important as the persons who created them, as the stories that they represent, as the distance they traveled, as the time it took for them to become, as the destiny they will encounter, as the material that constitutes them. All of these elements give a sense, meaning to the relationship, and determine when to be and how to be.

For Law and Hetherington the world operates through stuff, and stuff means people, objects, and information (10). So furthermore, all the means that allow me to travel, transportation system, low budget fairs, visa agreements in the European Union, resources of local cultural institutions that invite me to a residency; the free time that the strangers have to invest in our interactions, the education that allows us to speak English, the level of safety and security in the local place that allows them to be open to a complete stranger, the institutions that offer a space of recreation and encounter, a library, an activity center for the elder, or a hipster international food market in which lots of different people converge... all of these are stuff that creates the moment of meeting a stranger. Although all this stuff might not be explicit in my work, it sustains it and it certainly repositions me in the equation of an encounter. I operate now from a perspective in which material relations allow me to enter an uncharted human interaction, until now unknown to me.

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