

Towards a tender society of thoughtful questions and answers
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People often asked how I'm able to entice random strangers into working with me on art projects about their own lives. The answer is that I appear to actually be interested in the person and his or her activities. And what is the best strategy for appearing interested? The answer is to sincerely be interested—in fact nothing else will work. This is not difficult for me, because I actually think that people are interesting. I would even go so far as to say that I have a great fondness for the human race.

This wasn't always the case; as a child and adolescent, I was extremely shy and preferred to stay clear of most people. Dogs, books, and cheeses were all preferable companions to me. When, later in life, I decided to become a participant in society, I realized that I had no social skills for constructively engaging with people. Small talk had always made me feel dead inside, so that wasn't going to work. Instead, I decided to actively push conversations in the direction of "bigger talk." I asked people real questions about their lives, their work, their histories, their favorite foods, etc. Sometimes this was perceived as invasive, but I tried to be very sensitive. I became an increasingly capable listener and asker of related follow-up questions. As a result, my social self has been very intentionally constructed. This isn't as bad as it might seem, though. I think everyone's social (and personal) selves are constructed, just not usually very consciously.

As it turns out, people really like to be paid attention to. Perhaps they are even starved for thoughtful attention. From these interactions of mine, I have formed collaborations with people to produce exhibitions and public art projects about aspects of their lives that might otherwise have gone unnoticed, sometimes even by themselves. I've worked with neighborhood residents in Oakland, mall shoppers in a Bay Area suburb, developmentally disabled adults in San Francisco, office workers in Minnesota, a ten-year-old boy in Seattle, etc. One project

that was produced here in Portland involved Cleveland and Joan Williams' lawn sculptures, which had been vandalized. I created twenty reinforcement sculptures that looked like the original three, but were based on the Williams and their friends and family. All of the sculptures were shown at PICA last summer as part of a show I did there and are now permanently displayed in the Williams' front yard. After the project was completed, I continued to spend time with the Williams and eventually bought a house in their neighborhood that had belonged to Cleveland's mother, who had recently died. So, my relationship with the Williams not only developed into an art project; it created a way for me to become a part of a neighborhood in a very real way.

Through asking strangers questions, I have learned to have more meaningful interactions with people outside of my work—friends, family, neighbors, even people at art openings, sometimes. I try to be willing to discuss subjects that are really important in my life, too. When my sister died last summer, I talked with several people about it (sometimes people I didn't know very well) and found out that most of them had also faced death in some way. It was very comforting, and it caused me to believe that people in general have the ability to relate to all sorts of things, if they are given the chance.

Since I've been paying attention, it's become incredibly obvious how few meaningful questions people ask each other. I recommend that people try a little harder. How much do you really know about the people who you encounter on a daily basis? Try asking these people what they really care about. Show them that you are truly interested. Perhaps it will rub off on them, and they will ask you a question back. Whole complex conversations might ensue. You'll learn things from each other, trust and honesty could develop, the world (and the art world with it) might become a better place.