DISRUPTING SOCIAL CONTRACTS THROUGH PORTRAITURE

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper is in support of the artwork created during the MFA program at Emily Carr University of Art and Design and as such will be focusing on encounters with 'strangers' through the 'act of photography'. This essay will discuss the notion of the 'stranger' in relation to staged 'photographic acts', that attempt to trouble the boundary between the 'public' and 'private'. I offer a brief outline of the notion of the 'public' and 'private' by citing authors such as Hannah Arendt and Kio Stark, who question the history and its modern understanding of these two social spheres through their analysis of social behaviour. Social contracts, the unspoken and unwritten rules informing our everyday interactions in the public, will be challenged through photographic interventions that expose social conventions and expected behaviour, in relation to the 'stranger'. Through the use of the camera, as well as the use of self-imposed rules, I outline how the 'act of photography' can play with the performed norms and interpersonal relationships in the public space. My aim is to both disrupt and reveal -- i.e. 'make visible' -- these normative practices of public behaviour. Importantly too, my aim is to reveal the subject's vulnerability. Vulnerability plays a central role in my practice, and acts as a way to penetrate the boundary people build around themselves in public situations. That is, their 'masks' or 'public face', so to speak. The aim of my research is to trouble the hidden social contracts that determine normative social behaviour in the public space and make them visible within the photograph, either through portraits that take on the form of still photographs or video. This essay will discuss the trajectory of my projects, alongside artists and theorists, while highlighting the use of photography and portraiture as central to my practice.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dedicated to Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová.

"We want to be seen and we want not to be seen. We want to be known and we want not to be known. In every interaction we have, the thickness or thinness of that boundary is negotiated over and over. We close and open, open and close."

Fig.1: *Ladislav Bielik, 'Muž s odhalenou hrudou pred okupačnym tankom', 1968*[2]

VULNERABILITY AND INTIMACY

Above is my favourite photograph, taken by Ladislav Bielik on August 21st, 1968, in my

home town of Bratislava. The black and white photograph shows a man standing in front of a tank

with his chest bare and mouth open. His attire appears simple, a piece of string is holding the

garment in its place while the subject's arms are clenching onto the sides of what seems to be his

work uniform. The image depicts the dramatic encounter between the Russian army and the citizens

of Bratislava. Perhaps what attracts me to this photograph is the subject's ability to show strength

alongside vulnerability. He is positioning himself in harm's way, and there is nothing separating him

from the cold steel of the tank. The stakes are high, his brave act could cost him his life and in understanding the consequences of his action, he chooses to do so anyway. He is clearly vulnerable, yet he is not weak. My artwork attempts to explore qualities of vulnerability in relation to public space.

Over the past couple of years, I have come to ask my father the same exact question: "What are you afraid of?" And each time he gives me the same answer: "Nothing!" I remember about five years ago, my father told me that he was depressed and was thinking about committing suicide. It shocked me. Not because he was contemplating suicide, but because that was the first time he showed vulnerability. Can revealing vulnerability be considered a show of strength?

After communism ended in Czechoslovakia, we moved into a new flat, which was not much bigger than the one before. There was a basement underneath, that my parents converted into a pet shop. It was a busy place, where 'strangers' became a part of my lived experience. The employees from downstairs came into our kitchen to heat up their food which they ate in our backyard. As time went on, I became accustomed to the lack of privacy and began to seek out their company. I would join them in the yard during their lunch breaks. If the weather was bad, I would accompany them on the stairs that connected the pet shop to our flat. Our encounters were short, but during these brief moments we shared an intimacy. Is intimacy possible without vulnerability? The staircase became a space between two worlds: the public and the private, a space between 'strangers'. It was a space where my vulnerability could be shared with 'strangers'. It was a space that I am constantly trying to recreate with a camera hanging around my neck.

INTRODUCTION

Who we are, how we present ourselves in interactions with others and how those two orientations differ from each other, are at the center of my art practice. Through the use of photography and self-set limitations, my work explores the boundaries between the public and the

private, while working with 'strangers'. Who is a 'stranger'? When does one stop being a 'stranger'? How much information do we need in order to 'know' someone? How much are we willing to reveal about ourselves?

In this paper, I will question the difference between the public and the private self and the way we present ourselves in social situations. My practice-based research aims at creating interventions in the social conventions of expected behaviour, in relation to the 'stranger' as well as the 'act of photography'. The camera allows for the encounter between the myself and the 'stranger' and has the potential to create an intimate situation in a public realm. I will be discussing the works of Rineke Dijkstra, Gillian Wearing, and Sophie Calle in relation to my work, as well as touching upon theorists who are relevant to my research. My goal is to show the vulnerability of the 'stranger', through disrupting expected social behaviours, while questioning the notion of the 'stranger' itself.

STRANGERS

Who is a 'stranger'? According to Kio Stark, author of *When Strangers Meet*, the definition of a 'stranger' can range from people whom we do not know, to people we have nothing in common with.[3] In Julia Kristeva's book *Strangers to Ourselves*, the notion of the 'stranger' is further troubled by our relation to others, as well as referring to the strangeness we carry within ourselves. The 'stranger' is translated into Slovak language as *cudzí človek* or *cudzinec*, meaning 'foreigner'. Kristeva writes of the 'stranger' as a foreigner within us.[4] She uses Freud's definitions of *heimlich*, meaning something which should stay hidden, and *unheimlich*, meaning the 'uncanny strangeness' to point to the otherness we feel within us but do not show.[5] Her arguments emerge from Freud's theory of repression as a distancing towards the 'strangeness' within us. Kristeva states that, "under certain conditions, however, the repressed 'that ought to have remained secret' shows up again and produces the feeling of 'uncanny strangeness'."[6] It is my aim to create these conditions through my projects, with the use of my camera and self-set limitations, where this 'strangeness' within us can be revealed.

Albert Camus, in his book *The Stranger,* extends the question of who could be considered a 'stranger' through the character of Meursault, a French Algerian, a foreigner to certain social customs. Meursault's famous first words proclaim that his mother had just died. Yet he does not cry at his mother's funeral, he does not know her age and refuses to see his mother's face for the last time, twice.[7] He is a 'stranger' to the contracts of expected social behaviours, in other words, he refuses to play the game.[8]

'Strangers', whether we like it or not, are inevitably a part of our everyday experience, especially in heavily populated areas. One is well aware of their presence but chooses to ignore them. This avoidance of acknowledgment is what Stark refers to as 'civil inattention'.[9] 'Civil inattention' functions as a way to create "social and physical distance" between oneself and others.[10] It creates a boundary of protection, without which one's vulnerability would be too high. The 'stranger danger' mentality, embedded into our psyche since childhood, poses a oversimplified view of the 'stranger' as someone to be suspicious of and feared. According to Stark, this is due to the fact that their intentions are unclear to us.[11] We have no background information to fall back on when negotiating our safety. In a way, the 'stranger' belongs to the *unheimlich*, the unknown, the feared.

As Stark suggests in her book, the 'stranger' could also be viewed as a category. "We categorise people as a shortcut to learn about them. We see young, old, white, black, male, female, stranger, friend and we use the information we store in that box, the box labeled OLD or FEMALE or STRANGER to define them."[12] Stark is implying that humans have a tendency to classify or categorise in order to create a boundary between themselves and 'others'.[13] She further points out encounters with 'strangers' hold the potential to break through these categories. This collapse of classification, as pointed out by the political philosopher, Todd May, in his interpretation of Jacques Rancière, is at the center of politics. "Politics, then, is a process of declassification. It is the process of abandoning the identity one has been given."[14] One can break through the initial classification of a person through building connections. The camera enables me to disrupt the normative ways of social behaviour between 'strangers' through collaboration. By asking 'strangers' to participate in a

project, I am able to create a platform for our encounter. My practice is informed by empirical research and interactions with 'strangers', where the camera functions as a sidekick, 'licensing' me to explore intimacy with 'strangers'.

THE ENCOUNTER

"[A]s a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time."   - Hannah Arendt[15]

Similar to Diane Arbus, I view the camera as a tool that gives me a 'licence'[16] to approach 'strangers' on the street and to document my encounters with them through photography. The presence of the camera enables me to break through the invisible boundary we build around ourselves. By asking 'strangers' on the street for permission to photograph them, I acknowledge their presence and make them visible in the form of portraits. As Ariella Azoulay discusses in her book *The Civil Contract of Photography*, the photograph is an image not only of the people but of the encounter. [17] As Azoulay argues, "the invention of photography was the creation of a new situation in which different people, in different places, can simultaneously use a black box to manufacture an image of their encounters: not an image of them, but of the encounter itself."[18] Thus, photographs are to be viewed not only as a representation of people but of an encounter. Similarly, to Hannah Arendt's allegory of a table, the camera functions in two ways: it brings the subject and myself together, while creating a separation between us. This is a paradox in that the camera creates both a boundary and a means for connection. The camera creates a distance between the 'stranger' and me in that it is physically standing between us, while at the same time, it provides the reason for our brief encounter.

Azoulay views the 'act of photography' as a space where participants come together to form

the 'citizenry of photography'. The 'act of photography' can be viewed through Hannah Arendt's definition of an action, as described in her book, *The Human Condition*. Arendt, a political theorist, sees action as a way to start something or to initiate something new.[19] Thus, the 'act of photography' is to initiate something new through the camera. Azoulay defines the 'citizenry of photography', as a platform where all participants -- the subject, the photographer and the spectator -- come together through the 'act of photography.'[20] Although Azoulay frames the 'act of photography' as a space for establishing political relations, my position is more subjective. I view photography more as a space for creating relationships where vulnerability between 'strangers' could be shared. As Arendt explains, action establishes relationships: "Action, moreover, no matter what it's specific content, always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries."[21] So the 'act of photography' creates a space for establishing relationships between 'strangers' which has the potential to cut through boundaries and open limitations. Relationships, formed through the 'act of photography', provide a platform for intimacy with 'strangers'.

BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

Similar to the artist, Rineke Dijkstra, I am interested in revealing the subject's vulnerability through portraiture. The key to Dijkstra's work is in the selection of her subjects. Dijkstra works with 'strangers' at a pivotal moment in their lives -- adolescents on the beach, mothers right after giving birth, Israeli soldiers, ect.[22] Dijkstra refers to these moments of vulnerability as 'moments in between'. She focuses her camera on individuals "who have not yet perfected 'to mask their feelings'".[23] These 'moments in between' are the moments between the public and the private.

When one thinks of intimacy, one generally thinks of something which is experienced in private, whereas the 'stranger' is usually associated with the public sphere. Intimacy is usually experienced with people who are close to us, friends and family. However, Stark argues that

intimacy functions the same way when experienced in public, with 'strangers'. She calls these brief moments of connection between 'strangers' 'fleeting or street intimacy'.[24] As she explains, 'street intimacy' is different from regular intimacy in that it is shared in public. "If intimacy is private, then 'street intimacy' is public."[25] Stark argues that simply by exchanging a look or a few words with a 'stranger', can fulfil the human need to be acknowledged and can often lead to feelings of connectedness.

As Arendt points out, the historical definition of the words public and private differs from our modern understanding. The public was viewed as a space where individuals made themselves visible, in front of others, through action and speech.[26] The private, usually represented by the household, was a space of strict hierarchy, where humans were born and came to die, and as such, was hidden away from the public view.[27] According to Arendt, as a result of the enrichment of the private sphere through 'modern individualism', the public and the private merged into what she calls 'the social'. [28] Working in the social sphere provides me with a space where the boundary between the public and private are often blurred. Furthermore, viewing the public and the private through the lens of privacy, Arendt describes it as "things that should be shown and things that should be hidden."[29] This act of making something which was hidden 'visible' is what the French philosopher Jaques Rancière refers to, as 'politics'.[30] Furthermore, "[p]olitics is a matter of aesthetics, a matter of appearances."[31] 'Aesthetics', in Rancière's understanding of the word, has little to do with beauty or perfection, but rather it is the act of making something, which was invisible, appear. As already hinted at through Starks' definition of 'civil inattention', where one pretends that others around us do not exist, even talking to 'strangers' poses a disruption in itself as it is revealing what was invisible -- the 'stranger'.

Rather than thinking of the public and the private strictly in terms of space, my work attempts to trouble the boundary between the two in terms of expected social behaviour. According to Arendt, "behaviour has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationship".[32] When we go back to Arendt's definition of privacy as concerning "things that should be shown and things that should stay

hidden", and apply it to social behaviour, we get what sociologist Erving Goffman calls 'frontstage' and 'backstage' behaviour. Goffman, uses the language of theatrical dramaturgy, such as "performance", "actor", or "character", to analyse everyday interactions in terms of social human behaviour.[33] In his book, *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life,* he describes human behaviour as related to 'frontstage' and 'backstage' in the following way: "Throughout our society there tends to be one informal or backstage language of behaviour, and another language of behaviour for occasions when a performance is being presented."[34] Thus, the 'frontstage' can be seen as the 'public face' that we present to others, whereas the 'backstage' could be thought of as reserved for vulnerability and intimacy. Art curator, Daniel F. Herrmann, in his article 'Frontstage/Backstage: Dramaturgic Dissonance in the Work of Gillian Wearing', describes the 'public face' in the following way: "When talking to one another, we all present a 'public face', which we mutually agree to accept as the basis of any relationship. These 'public faces' are constructs: they are different from how we might behave around our friends, spouses, children and in other social roles."[35] So the way one presents oneself in public might differ from how one might act in private. Although I personally believe that the private self is often times more 'authentic', both public and private self make up the complexities around oneself and one cannot exist without the other.

The camera further troubles the way we present oneself in the public. Roland Barthes, in his *Camera Lucida*, describes this process of posing in front of the camera from the position of the subject: "In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one [she] makes use of to exhibit [her] art." [36] Barthes further describes this action as strange, where he finds himself acting as an impostor.[37]

Gillian Wearing's work, questions these constructed public faces by calling attention to them. In her photo series, *Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say (1992-93)*, she asks 'strangers' to write down their thoughts on a piece of paper that she provides. She takes a snapshot-like portrait of them, holding the sign in their hands. The concept behind the series questions how we present ourselves in public and how we actually feel

inside. Rineke Dijkstra speaks of this discrepancy as "what we don't want to show anymore, but still feel."[38] Some of Wearing's subjects remain closed off, not risking much: 'I really love Regents Park'. The photographs which I find to be most interesting are those that reveal a vulnerability: 'I'm desperate'. What makes this photo so successful is that it creates a discrepancy between the face of the subject and whatever is written on the sign. The half smiling face of the subject contradicts the text written on the sign. Furthermore, it disrupts one's judgment of what that person should be feeling, based on their appearance.

DISRUPTING SOCIAL CONTRACTS

I use photography as a platform to create disruptions to the 'tacit social contracts'. What I mean by 'tacit social contracts' are the unspoken and unwritten ways of behaviour expected in social interactions. The public space is shaped by unspoken contracts of behaviour, in relation to the 'stranger', that only become visible through disruption. For instance, imagine a group of 'strangers' standing in an elevator. The tacit social contracts operating behind the scene are unspoken in that nobody told them to face a particular direction, they do it automatically. To act differently would be considered strange. Now, imagine that the person standing closest to the door suddenly turns around to face the others. This action causes a disruption to the invisible social behaviours, thus making them visible.

'Social contracts' function as a way to keep society members in their place through what is considered 'proper social behaviour'.[39] As Arendt writes in her book *The Human Condition*, "[S]ociety expects from each of its members a certain kind of behaviour, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to 'normalise' its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement."[40] Society anticipates a certain type of behaviour and usually rejects what is outside the norm. According to Rancière, these 'social contracts' are constituted by what he calls the *police order* or *policing*, i.e. the status quo. As the political

philosopher, Todd May, points out in his discussion of Rancière, "[T]he idea of policing [involves] a social ordering that is enforced not merely by military intervention -- armed men in uniforms -- but more significantly by the idea of proper social behaviour."[41] So the police order is to be understood not as a group of people, i.e. the police, but by the idea of 'proper social behaviour'. Disruptions operating behind my projects, function as a way to gain a glimpse into the social norms that keep everyone in 'their proper place'.[42] For instance, in *Money Talks*, I aim to disrupt the conventions around the topic of money by asking 'strangers' to reveal their income to me.

The artist Sophie Calle, in her conceptual works, pushes against the boundaries of what is considered proper social behaviour, while working with 'strangers'. For instance, in her *Paris Shadows (1978-1979),* she follows 'strangers' around, while she photographs them and makes notes of their whereabouts. In another project of hers, called *The Hotel (1981)*, she works as a room cleaner at a hotel in Venice and uses the opportunity to rummage through people's belongings, while documenting her discoveries by a way of photography and diary entries. As compelling as Calle's work is, I am more interested in encounters and interactions with the 'stranger', rather than employing the voyeuristic approach present in Calle's work.

Much like the tacit social contracts of daily life, photography is governed by a set of unwritten rules. As described by Azoulay, the photographic process generally begins when the photographer looks through the viewfinder and ends at the click of the shutter.[43] The photographer is expected to turn her camera toward something that is considered of public interest, while the subject is to pose and follow the orders of the photographer.[44] In my photo series, *Mirror, Mirror (2017),* as well as my thesis project, *Wait a Minute (2018)*, I aim to disrupt this process of expected ways of behaviour involved in the photographic act. That is, by using the camera as a tool to facilitate interactions with 'strangers', my aim is to document the transformation of a 'stranger' into an individual who is vulnerable in the fleeting moment of the 'act of photography'.

METHOD

I approach 'strangers' on the street, with a camera visibly hanging around my neck. This gives the other person a visual cue of my intention prior to me uttering the first words. I begin by explaining the project to them and ask if they wish to participate by posing for a portrait. I usually walk around in the Downtown area of Vancouver as it is more densely populated and provides for a greater number of people, as well as anonymity. Some people agree to participate, others don't. After a while, I start noticing a pattern in the appearance of those who do agree and start making an effort to focus on different age groups or gender, to provide for a more 'democratic' sample. The ratio between those that choose to partake and those who choose not to, depends on each individual, as each encounter asks for a different level of intimacy from the subject. For instance, the level of participation in a photo series I created in the third semester at Emily Carr University, called *Money Talks (2017)*, was very low. In this project, I asked participants to pose for a portrait, while asking the subjects to disclose their annual income to me. The vulnerability of the subject lies in the combination of posing for a portrait -- thus making oneself visible in public -- as well as asking the subject to reveal private information in the form of their annual income -- which would stay hidden from the viewer.

I usually do not carry a tripod or any external lighting with me, as this would compromise my mobility. I find that being a woman helps me gain people's trust. I stopped a man on the street who identified himself as "being from Surrey" and asked him to pose for a portrait. He was wearing a worker´s uniform, carrying a sports bag and smoking a joint. "To be honest, I wouldn't have agreed to come [to this alleyway] if you were a man." Maybe it's not so much about trust. Maybe they see me, a woman, as less of a threat. Maybe they just do not take me seriously. Todd May, defines trust as "an affective relationship of vulnerability before and with the other".[45] Is vulnerability possible without trust?

When approaching 'strangers', I usually focus on single subjects walking by. I generally find that people who are in groups or pairs tend to decline more often than those who are alone. It might

be that they are, to a certain extend, dependent on the wants and needs of the people they are with. Additionally, if the subject posing is in the company of a person they know, they tend to be less relaxed. They get nervous about how their friend or partner might perceive them, while posing for a portrait. As pointed out by Stark, there is more at stake when around people of the same social circles, than in interactions with 'strangers'.[46] According to film director, Jim Jarmusch, there is a sort of freedom which comes when interacting with 'strangers'. "You can say whatever you want. You can be as completely honest or dishonest. And that kind of freedom of an intimate relationship with a stranger for a brief moment was interesting to me."[47] These brief interactions with 'strangers' provide for a space of freedom, where intimacy may be shared.

In the summer semester of 2017, I worked on a theatrical production called *A Game Of You*. It was an experimental play by a Belgium theatre company called *Ontroerend Goed*.[48] In this immersive theater piece, 'strangers' encountered each other in a labyrinth of rooms and hallways. The visitors had little information as to what was to be expected. They were promised a one-on-one interaction lasting approximately 25 minutes. The play was composed of five rooms: each structured in a way as to reveal something about the subject. The rooms were small, the hallways between them were narrow. The play was designed to provide a platform for brief intimacy between 'strangers'. Each visitor was matched with an actor, whose job was to penetrate through the invisible boundary one generally presents in interactions with 'strangers'. Intimacy was demanded through the size of the space, but mainly through a creation of a situation -- imposed by a set of rigid rules -- aiming to reveal the subject's vulnerability. It took us, the actors, two weeks of training to learn the rules of the game and months to master it. We were trained to pick up on subtle mannerisms, remembering and later noting them down. The goal of the game was to carefully construct a sense of the person we were guiding through the experience and reflect it back to them at the end, in the form of a monologue. Of course, it was impossible to get to know someone in such a short amount of time. Or was it? In the short time span, we shared an intimacy. Were we still 'strangers'? In order for the play to function, both the 'stranger' and I had to be open. My work functions in a similar way, where the

rules imposed on the subject, aim at providing a controlled environment for brief encounters with 'strangers'.

RULES

Rules have always been a part of my lived experience, whether through the rigidity of my upbringing, rules imposed by society through social contracts or rules that I imposed upon myself. Each project has a set of rules aimed at revealing something about the subject, which would otherwise stay hidden. Additionally, self-imposed rules function as a way to narrow in on the central idea of each project while creating a certain aesthetic. The rules operating behind the scenes of each project are aimed at the 'stranger' as well as myself. Those directed at the subject aim at revealing the subject's vulnerability, while those I needed to follow were to do primarily with aesthetics. In this case, aesthetics has to do with standards of beauty and taste. I choose to aestheticise my photographs, mainly through saturated colors, as a way to seduce the viewer.[49]

Perhaps the amount of control I bring to the photographic process is a way to conceal my own vulnerability. I remember watching my first film screening of *The Five Obstructions,* while studying film and production in Sydney, Australia. This quasi documentary film, directed by the Danish provocateur Lars von Trier, revolves around a series of interactions between von Trier and Danish director, Jørgen Leth. Von Trier challenges Leth to remake his 1967 film, *The Perfect Human,* each time with a new set of restrictions, carefully constructed by von Trier. Ultimately, von Trier wants Leth to make a 'bad' movie. As von Trier admits towards the end of the movie, the rules were designed to reveal Leth's vulnerability. Although von Trier never actually uses the word vulnerability, this is what he means when he states that he wants to see Leth less 'perfect' and more 'human'. Perhaps that is why von Trier feels so defeated in the end, when he fails to expose Leth's vulnerability. Perhaps von Trier himself is unable to reveal his own vulnerability and seeks to do so through Leth. Perhaps the degree of aesthetics applied in my projects, function as a way to achieve

perfection in order to mask my own vulnerability. Perhaps what I am looking to experience through my subjects is what I myself am afraid to show, my vulnerability.

WORK

In *Mirror, Mirror*, I attempt to reveal the subject's vulnerability through the use of a two-way mirror. I constructed a mirror in which the frame was made out of wood and contained a sheet of plexiglass, with special foil mounted onto one of the sides. The structure of the mirror resembled a vanity, with 12 LED lights surrounding it in a semicircle, giving the portraits a slightly cinematic look. The background was dark green but came out almost black in the final prints. I do not print my own photographs and as much as I control the process in which the photographs are taken, I give all

that control up when it comes to printing. In *Mirror, Mirror*, I invited 'strangers' I encountered on the street -- while walking around my neighbourhood -- into my home studio. The living room needed to be blacked out and so I usually invited people into my home after sunset. Their vulnerability was compromised in entering a 'stranger's' home, while mine was in inviting 'strangers' into my living room.

The camera was visibly resting on a tripod on the other side of the mirror. I asked them to sit down and placed myself behind the mirror -- disappearing from the view -- while the subject was confronted with their own image. The sound of the shutter release came to them unexpected. The discomfort was heightened as each photographic session lasted around 20 minutes. This strategy of removing myself from view posed a disruption to the normative expectations of the photographic event, described by Azoulay, where the photographic act starts when the photographer looks through the viewfinder. This posed a disruption in that I, the photographer, as well as the camera, became invisible to the subject. A similar strategy was employed by Shikuza Yokomizo in *Dear Stranger (1998-2000)*, where she invited 'strangers' to pose inside their home for the duration of 10 minutes. The subjects were unable to see position of the camera or tell when a photograph of them was being taken.

What the final images in *Mirror, Mirror* failed to convey was the process in which they were taken. They needed to be contextualised in such a way as to reveal the entirety of the encounter for the viewer. Azoulay observes the problem in the following way:

"Handicapped, the image is not sufficient in itself and required visual and verbal support -- a spokesperson to bring it forth and to have it speak. A solitary image cannot testify to what is revealed through it, but must be attached to another image, another piece of information, another assertion or description, another grievance or piece of evidence, another broadcast, another transmitter." [50]

These images needed additional information attached to them in order to reveal the context. With this in mind, my second project, *Money Talks*, I approach 'strangers' on the street and ask them to pose for a photograph, while also asking them to disclose their annual income to me. The final

images were silent portraits; single subjects, centre posed against colourful backgrounds, presented in combination with title cards -- disclosing the subject's income as wells as their occupation. The title cards were presented in a group, displayed at the same level as the as the photographs, slightly away from the images. A level of performativity was demanded from the audience, through the placement of the title cards, as the viewer was forced to go back and forth between the portraits and the title cards.

Fig.3: Karin Kunzo, *Money Talks* installation, 2018

In *Money Talks*, the disruption pivots on asking a 'stranger' to disclose personal information to me, a 'stranger'. As Azoulay points out, the photographic act is not merely an interaction between the photographer and the subject, but the spectator as well.[51] Through agreeing to participate in the 'act of photography', the subject agrees to not only agree to reveal this information to me, the photographer,

but to the viewer as well. The subject's vulnerability is situated in revealing private to the public -- through photographs. Equally, my vulnerability is in approaching people on the street while running the risk of being rejected.

Fig.4: Karin Kunzo, *Money Talks* with title cards, 2018

During this project, I gave the subjects two rules: 1) look directly into the camera and 2) do not smile. The 'look into the camera' rule functions as a way to acknowledge the spectator. This gave the portraits a confrontational feel, as anyone looking at the photo is having to gaze upon an image of a person looking straight back at them. The 'no smile rule' is a rule that emerged in the development of the series. That is, I noticed that almost every 'female' subject started smiling as soon as I started taking pictures. This was problematic, because the pictures lacked seriousness. I was forced to direct the 'female' subjects to stop smiling, which, in exchange, made them tense up.

Azoulay provides an interesting example of an encounter between an Israeli photographer and

two Palestinian women, 'strangers' to each other as well as to the photographer. What these two women shared was a similar situation: both had lost a child due to the bureaucracy of having to pass through various Israeli checkpoints while in labour. To document this tragedy, the photographer came to take a photograph of their grievances. While posing for the portrait, both women started smiling.[52] Their smile posed a disruption to the expected ways of behaviour of someone whose child had just died. What could be the explanation behind this smile? Was it the power relationship between photographer and subject or was it the expected ways of behaviour of having to perform in front of the camera?

The presentation of the *Money Talks* took on the form of an installation, with sound being projected into the exhibition space through speakers. In the final installation of *Money Talks*, I provided the viewer with a glimpse into the process in which the images were made through audio. The audio played an important element in presenting the work as it gave the audience additional information around the encounter as well as illustrating the numerous rejections. It contained snippets of conversations broadcasted into the exhibition space. One could hear a collage of voices, a series of rejections interrupted by a person disclosing the amount of money they earn. There were people laughing, delicately dancing around the topic, interspersed with hard NOs. The voices of 'strangers' were entwined with the noise of the traffic. The quick pace and chaos of the street contradicted the silent photographs on the wall. The audio provided for a further insight into the social contracts when it came to the topic of money. Out of approximately twenty people that I stopped daily, about 75% did not want to share their personal details with me. I started the recording before I walked up to people, with the recorder visibly in my hand. I approached a man, approximately in his sixties, while walking around in Kitsilano.

Fig.5: Karin Kunzo, *Money Talk* series, 2017

SUBJECT: *"Did you say you go to Emily Carr?"*

ARTIST*: "Yes, I am 2nd year MFA."*

S: *"So is this going to end up on the board? In...in...when you do your annual show...is this going to end up on the wall?"*

A: *"If the picture is good enough."*

S: *"I know too many people at Emily Carr for me to do that… ." (breaks into a nervous laughter)*

A: *"So you don't feel comfortable them knowing your income?"*

S: *"Correct!"*

A: *"Why would that be?"*

S: *"Why would that be? Well...because...right now, I'm partially retired, working part time and probably making a lot more than other people ever will. So! That's a...uhm...that's not something I want to make a big deal about."*[53]

The refusals to reveal private information is an important part of the artwork as a whole. They show that I am not entitled to someone's privacy just because I have asked for it. I generally found that people around the age of 50 or older were less inclined to share their income with me. This might have been a part of the reason why most people that agreed and ended up on the wall seemed to have been of a similar age. Perhaps the level of trust operating behind these interactions is 'group or identity based' rather than 'generalised trust'. Dietlind Stolle defines 'generalised trust' as trust that extends to people whom we do not know -- 'strangers' -- while 'group or identity based trust' is defined as trust that extends to others through identification based on a group or an identity category.[54] It might have been that those who choose to participate could identify with me based on my appearance, either through race, age, gender or other attributes. I stopped a man on the street and asked him if he wanted to participate in *Money Talks*. He refused to reveal his income, but nevertheless engaged in a conversation with me. "You know, I recently had a discussion with my colleagues about this...about how white people are more inclined to share their income with others than Asians", he proclaimed. "Why do you think that is?", I asked. "Well, I think Asian cultures are generally more private", he answered.

I end each encounter with giving the subject a card with my information, in case they would like a copy of the photograph or needed to contact me. I found that participants in the *Mirror, Mirror* series contacted me more frequently, mostly to obtain a copy of their portrait, than those participating

in *Money Talks*. Perhaps, this was due to the fact that people who participated in the *Mirror, Mirror* series invested more in the project, as they had to physically travel to my house, at an arranged time, in order to be photographed. In *Money Talks*, the participants who contacted me, were mostly concerned with how the portraits were to be displayed. However, this project also revealed some unexpected outcomes. Below is an e-mail written by a girl I stopped on Commercial Drive, sent to me a few hours after our encounter. She was earning $12.50/hour, working as a 'budtender' at a local dispensary.

> "Hey!
>
> My names kelseigh.
> You took my picture earlier on commercial drive your project thing. I spoke to my boss about it and they don't want that being posted or I could lose my job. I appologize if that's inconvenient for you , but I would appreciate it if you could not post it please and thank you! I appreciate it!
> Please let me know you received this email, thank you" [55]

The subject has been threatened to lose her job, if she was to reveal her income. However, this was not an isolated incident. I have encountered others who claimed that their employer forbade them from sharing information around their salary, under the threat of being laid-off.

THESIS PROJECT

In my thesis project, *Wait a Minute (2018)*, I challenged myself to work with video format in order to capture what the portraits in *Mirror, Mirror* and *Money Talks* could not capture: the 'moments in between'. I suppose, moving between photography and video is not too unnatural of a jump. Both Dijkstra and Wearing employ video when working with the 'stranger' and questioning the boundary between the public and private. In *Dancing in Peckham (1994)*, Wearing uses video to point to the way we present ourselves in a public space. In the video, Wearing is seen dancing in the middle of a shopping mall, with the camera resting on a tripod. The music coming from her headphones is inaudible to the passersby. The disruption is in Wearing's presentation of private behaviour in a public

setting. The camera is sitting on a tripod, while Wearing gets carried away by the music. Art curator, Bernhart Schwenk, describes this particular artwork as 'moving portraits' rather than seeing them as films.[56]

Dijkstra is no stranger to working with 'moving portraits' either. In her video work, *The Buzz Club (1994)*, Dijkstra asks 'strangers' from a night club in Liverpool, England, to dance in front of a camera that she set up outside the club. As Dijkstra herself proclaims, she is interested in the 'moments in between'. The video shows adolescents dancing to their favourite music, in different stages, slipping in and out of self-consciousness, finally letting themselves be overtaken by the music. Both of these videos show what a photograph could not: the 'moments in between'.

In *Wait a Minute*, I asked 'strangers' to pose for a portrait, while I took a slow motion video of them, posing in front of the camera. While in *Money Talks* I provided the subject with specific details around my intentions, prior to shooting, in *Wait a Minute,* my language is more vague. I give the subject limited information about my interest in working with 'strangers' through portraiture, while being interested in the topic of vulnerability, and ask them to participate. If they agree, I begin to 'perform' the actions of a photographer, setting up the tripod I have been carrying, placing the camera on top of it. I look through the viewfinder, adjust the focus and exposure and press record. I stay in this position, with my finger above the shutter, to give a suggestion to the subject that a still photograph is about to be taken. I am performing the 'act of photography' in front of the subject, while the subject is 'performing' for the camera, as described by Barthes earlier. My aim is to prolong this process of 'performing' for the duration of a minute, while measuring time intuitively. The sound of the shutter release never comes and the subject usually starts growing more impatient as time goes on. Those who began their pose with a smile, slowly cease to do so as time goes on. After a while, the wait becomes uncomfortable for the subject as well as for myself.[57] As soon as I stop filming, I inform the subject that I was recording a slow-motion video of them and ask for their permission, again. I provide them with justification behind my actions: I explain that telling them beforehand would change the way they behaved in front of the camera. No one seems to mind. I wonder what it would be

like to work on this project in countries where people generally tend to be less polite.

It is necessary that I do not disclose my full intentions to the subject, as this would alter the subject's behaviour in front of the camera. By doing so, I aim to capture a candidness of the 'stranger', which would otherwise be impossible to achieve, but at the same time, this raises the question of ethics. Walker Evans might provide an example where this search for the candid moment might have caused an ethical issue. In his *Subway Portraits (1938-41),* Evans used an undercover camera to photograph 'strangers' in a public space in order to capture the rawness on faces of people riding the subway. The subjects were unaware of his actions, which made this body of work problematic.

In the case of *Wait a Minute*, the camera was fully visible, but I did disclose my full intention to the subject, for the same reason why Evans did not expose his camera -- to capture the candid moment. In my defense, I inform the subject as soon as the act is done and ask them for their permission again. Should they refuse, I intend to delete the digital file. In this sense, my work operates on the same level as Yokomizo's *Dear Stranger*, where I let the 'stranger' decide if they choose to participate in the project or not. Yokomizo invites her 'strangers' to participate in her photographic project by slipping a note under their door, announcing the time and the date of when she intends to take their portrait. If they do not wish to be involved, she instructs them to draw their curtains closed at that specific time. In my case, I leave each of my subjects with my contact information, should they want to contact me or decide to withdraw from the project altogether.

Additionally, *Wait a Minute* can be also seen as continuation of *Mirror, Mirror*, where I disrupt the subjects' expectations around the photographic process. The video allowed me to capture the unprepared 'moments in between', while pointing at the 'public face', presented in front of the camera, as a construct. Functioning similarly to *Mirror, Mirror*, *Wait a Minute*, disrupts the expectations of the photographic act about how much time one should take in order to take a picture. This poses a level of vulnerability for the subject as well as for myself. The subject is vulnerable in front of the camera in that I am holding them prisoner in the 'act of photography'.[58] My vulnerability is compromised for that same reason: in prolonging the process I run the risk of being viewed as inept.

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The installation of *Wait a Minute* resembled a living room: containing a large plant, a loveseat, a carpet, a TV turned vertically and a cupboard filled with books. This was to further suggest a private space inside an institutional setting, pointing to the unwritten social contracts of behaviour in an exhibition space. My aim was to play with the audience. I wanted to see how and if the audience would interact with the installation. In my opinion, the installation was successful in evoking a personal space as well as pointing to the conventional behaviours in an exhibition space. "Don't touch the art!", said a mother to her child who was about to sit down on the couch.
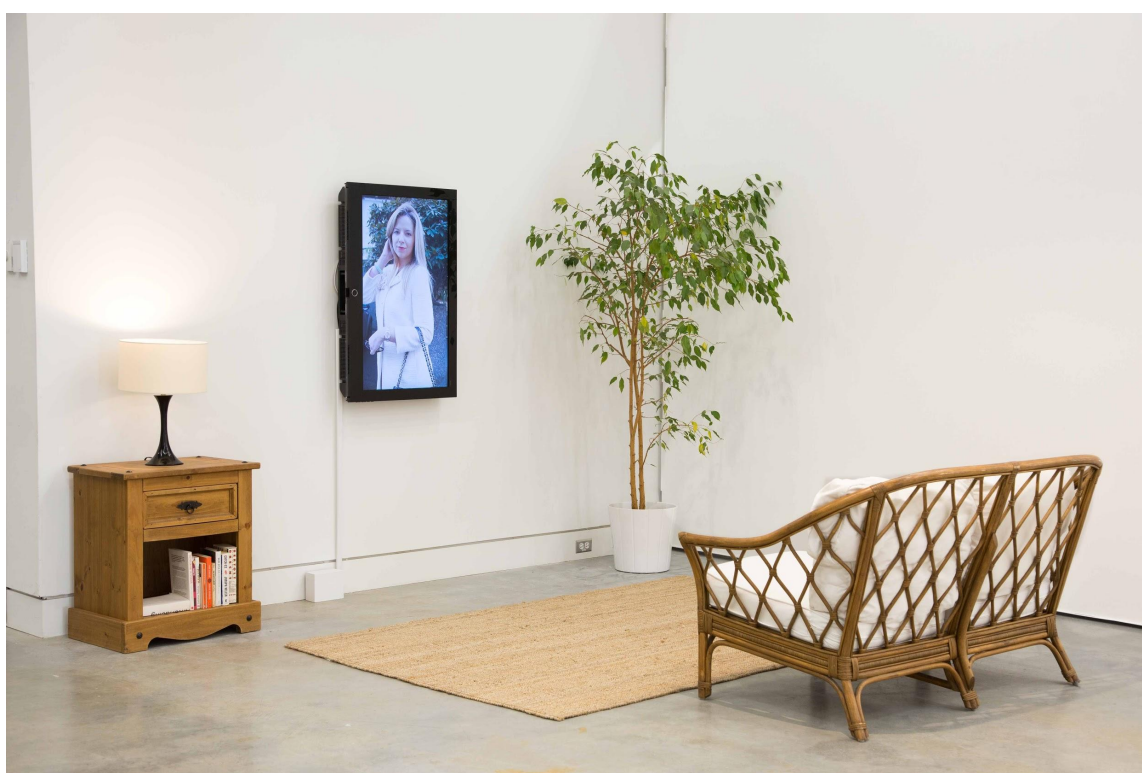

Fig.6: Karin Kunzo, *Wait a Minute*, 2018

However, the relationship between the installation and the work itself was questionable. The video was played through a TV, which was mounted on one of the walls of the living room, turned vertically. The duration of the video was 14 minutes. It was composed of multiple short clips, each portraying a single subject, played in a loop without sound. In front was a loveseat, which was positioned in a way as to reveal the faces of those watching the 'moving portraits' to passersby. The

dimension of the loveseat was to force a closer proximity between 'strangers' to one another. While passing by the installation, I saw people mostly viewing the 'moving portraits' from behind the loveseat, standing behind the couch, while holding onto the back of the bamboo structure. This could have been due to the artwork hanging at a conventional height of 56 inches. This could have resulted in the artwork being more consumable while standing rather than sitting. I will need to keep this in mind for future reference and either adjust the height at which the work is hung based on the installation or take other measurements to merge the space with the artwork, in order to provide a more immersive experience for the viewer.

Generally, I felt that people were less likely to engage with *Wait a Minute* than with *Money Talks*, which was exhibited right next to it. My judgement is informed by direct observations as well as conversations with audience members. This could have been due to the location of the piece -- next to a busy hallway -- as well as the orientation of the love seat. Perhaps the audience felt too exposed in scrutinising the portraits, and thus unable to indulge in the experience. Another reason could have been that the 'moving portraits' demanded a slower pace from the viewer, which was in direct competition with the business of the hallway.

In comparison, *Money Talk*s attracted a wider audience of people. This could have been caused by the use of highly saturated backgrounds in the images. I was pleased to see that people would spend extended periods of time in this section. At one point, I saw a group of people standing next to the labels and pointing at the images with their index finger. "It immediately exposed my biases", an audience member disclosed to me. The parabolic speaker, placed in the center of the room, was problematic in that the sound was leaking. Although this seemed to have no direct impact on *Money Talks, Wait a Minute* might have been impacted by the intrusion of sound, resulting in that people were not able to fully engage with the work.

CONCLUSION

As a result of my encounters with 'strangers', I learned that intimacy is not automatically granted to me just because I have asked for it. Under certain conditions, that 'which was to remain hidden', is revealed. My goal was to create such conditions, through the presence of the camera and self-set parameters, in order to trouble the 'public face'. In the case of *Money Talks*, the topic of money served as an intervention in social conventions around the topic of money in relations to the 'stranger'. The taboo around money made people less inclined to share, as can be heard through the supplementary audio. This guardedness also manifested itself into the portraits as people in the photographs appeared more strong than vulnerable. This might have also been caused by my application of the 'do not smile' rule. Another interesting result of *Money Talks* was that the people who agreed to participate, all seemed to be of a similar age group. This might have been due to the process of identification between the subject and myself -- the photographer -- and vice versa.

Furthermore, the aestheticization of photographs in *Money Talks* proved to be effective in drawing people into the exhibition space. Moving forward, I plan to further use beauty as a tool to lure viewers in, while employing social topics. However, the visual representation of the photographs alone was unable to show the complexities around the topic of money, which was why the title cards in combination with audio played a central part to the project. This added a level of interactivity with the audience, which I plan to employ in my art practice moving forward.

In *Wait a Minute*, my encounters with 'strangers' took on another format. Working with video allowed me to capture the 'moments in between', which *Mirror, Mirror* could not. By providing the subject with limited information around the process, I was able to disrupt the way the subject wanted to appear in front of the camera and reveal what they could not help but show. The duration of the video was important in that it forced the subject to 'perform' in front of the camera for an extended period of time, which was longer than expected. This intervention in the social conventions around the 'act of photography' allowed me to trouble the 'public face' which one employs when posing in front of the camera. The subjects tried to control their expression but could not help but reveal something else in the process. In *Wait a Minute*, people slipped in and out of 'character', similar to the subjects

dancing in Dijkstra's work. The videos that seemed to have been the most successful were those where the subject started off with a smile and in the process of filming started to abandon it. However, the installation in which the *Wait a Minute* was exhibited, might have interfered with the work itself. This might have been caused by the placement of the work within the exhibition space, orientation of the couch, or sound leaking in. Moving forward, I will need to be aware of all elements within an installation and how they complement the work.

In conclusion, the more difficult the situation was for the subject, the less they were willing to share and the more guarded they seemed. On the other hand, if the subjects' expectations got disrupted, they could not help but reveal something which was beyond their control. The camera played a central role in my encounters with 'strangers'. Going forward, I plan to continue to push the status quo while working with 'strangers' and highlighting social topics through photography. I also plan to continue to employ an element of play and interactivity with the viewer, mainly through installation and sound. I am interested in exhibiting my work outside of the gallery setting and exploring how my work operates in a public space. Lastly, I am planning to explore my own vulnerability in front of the camera, either through still images or video.

NOTES

1. Kio Stark, *When Stranger Meet*, p. 20.

2. Translation from Slovak: *The Bare-chested Man in Front of Occupier's Tank*, by Ladislav Bielik, 1968.

3. Kio Stark, *When Stranger Meet*, p. 9.

4. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p.192.

5. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p.182-183.

6. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 184.

7. Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*.

8. As the narrative takes on an absurd turn, Meursault finds himself in front of a court, accused of killing an Arab man, where his strange behaviour around his mother's death plays a central part in the court's decision to end Meursault's life. Kamel Daoud, a Algerian author, in his book *The Meursault Investigation,* retells Camus' story from the point of view of the 'Arab'. Narrated through the deceased Arab's brother, Daoud's work points to the lack of agency of the murdered man, who Camus left without a name.

9. Kio Stark, *How Strangers Meet: How People You Don't Know Can Transform You*, p. 57.

10. Kio Stark, *How Strangers Meet: How People You Don't Know Can Transform You*, p. 57.

11. Kio Stark, *How Strangers Meet: How People You Don't Know Can Transform You*, p. 38.

12. Kio Stark, *How Strangers Meet: How People You Don't Know Can Transform You*, p. 11.

13. The relationship between oneself and the 'other', taken up in my work, refers to the relationship between oneself and 'others', meaning others around us. However, I am aware of the term 'other' in psychoanalysis, specifically in relation to Freud and Lacan's work. I refrain from drawing further connections between the other as a term used in psychoanalysis, for the limitations of this paper, as well as this program.

14. Todd May, secondary literature on Jacques Rancière, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality*, p. 50.

15. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 48.

16. Diane Arbus. *An Aperture Monograph*. p. 1.

17. Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 92-93.

18. Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 92-93.

19. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.155-223.

20. Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 97.

21. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.170.

22. Jennifer Blessing, Lecture called: Guggenheim Symposium - Empathy, Affect, and the Photographic Image.

23. Jennifer Blessing, Lecture called: Guggenheim Symposium - Empathy, Affect, and the Photographic Image.

24. Kio Stark, *How Strangers Meet: How People You Don't Know Can Transform You*, p. 14-19.

25. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.35

26. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.23-69.

26. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 23-69.

28. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.35.

29. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 64.

30. Jacques Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*.

31. Jacques Rancière as quoted in *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality*, p.44.

32. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.38.

33. Daniel F. Herrmann, *Gillian Wearing*. p.23.

34. Erwing Goffman, *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, p.88.

35. Daniel F. Herrmann, *Gillian Wearing*. p.22.

36. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.13.

37. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.13.

38. Jennifer Blessing, Lecture called: Guggenheim Symposium - Empathy, Affect, and the Photographic Image.

39. Todd May, secondary literature on Jacques Rancière, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality*, p.42.

40. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*., p. 37-38.

41. Todd May, secondary literature on Jacques Rancière, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality*, p.42.

42. Todd May describing the dynamics of the police order as depending on the participation of people in regards to passive democracy. *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality*, p.48.

43. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*. p. 106.

44. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*. p. 156.

45. Todd May, secondary literature on Jacques Rancière, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality*, p.116.

46. Kio Stark, *How Strangers Meet: How People You Don't Know Can Transform You*, p. 25.

47. An interview with Jim Jarmusch about his film *Night on Earth, 1991*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEqMxgLHql4>

48. *'Game of You'* travelled travelled internationally to countries like Australia, Germany, Russia, Singapore, UK, France, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Netherlands, Ireland, Portugal, Switzerland, Russia, Italy, and Australia. In Vancouver, the shows took place in Harbour Center lobby, the performances running daily from July, 2017 until September, 2017.

49. Aestheticization is a strategy used by photographers like Taryn Simon, who uses seduction

as a way to "bring the viewer closer and demands attention". An interview between the artist and journalist, Christopher Bollen, accessed online. <https://032c.com/2007/taryn-simon/>.

50. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 191.

51. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*.

52. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 379-381.

53. transcript from an audio recorded on October 12, 2017.

54. Dietlind Stolle, *Trusting Strangers: The Concept of Generalised Trust in Perspective*, p. 401.

55. an e-mail from Kelseigh, Sep 22nd 2017.

56. Bernhart Schwenk, Gillian Wearing, p. 33.

57. Azoulay provides a similar example of an encounter between an Israeli photographer, Miki Kratsman, and a family living in the West Bank. The photographer is hired to film the family, but because of his background as a still photographer, he places himself behind the camera and starts looking through the viewfinder. This action gave the family an unspoken expectation that a still photograph was being taken. Yet, the sound of the shutter, which is to signal that a photograph was taken, did not arrive, even after two minutes. The family starts growing more and more impatient, imprisoned by the expectations of the photographic event. A small boy is the first to leave, with the rest of the family following suit. However, the photographer's act was unintentional. As Azoulay points out, the situation resulted in "embarrassment for both sides". Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p.395-398.

58. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 396.

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