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1st June 2008: a letter within a letter

Posted by [rajni_shah](#) on June 1, 2008 at 2:22pm

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For my online residency during June 2008, I've decided to keep a blog on this page. It's strange because blogging on the one hand really appeals to me - I love writing and being able to combine images and words in such a relaxed way. However, the idea of audience has always troubled me with a blog- who is it for? And why? So writing it as part of a residency about engagement definitely helps, but I'm also going to approach it as a series of letters to people I know. Sometimes this will be explicit, sometimes less so. Whoever you are, thanks for reading...

Dear Kristen

I'm sorry I wasn't there for our phone conversation today, it was careless and unlike me to be so far away and disorganised. Please forgive me! Hearing your voice, just for that brief moment, reminded me of how important those traces are: the sound of a voice, the look someone gives you, a touch, a smell. They're bound up in memory but they also provide a frame for the future, they become the very essence of who we are that day, the way we walk, speak, act, and the decisions we make. I'd like to include an extract from something I wrote recently, it's a letter to the audience at a tiny intervention I made; I was meditating and they were invited to drink tea, read the letter and talk to each other or just sit quietly.



"Thanks for joining me at this tea party. This is what I wrote before I started. It is a note, for you to understand a little more where I am coming from, and to explain a little how this might work.

I'm planning to meditate, for an hour, to be present with you through meditation. I use meditation in performance because that's something I have to offer, it's one way I can find to acknowledge a kind of peace with the world that's not often present. It's not that I'm particularly good at meditation or that I think everyone should meditate, but rather that I know it can radically alter the feeling in a space, and I hope that through meditating I might open up a space where you also can be whoever and however you are, without being judged.

So I will meditate for an hour, until approximately 3pm, and then I will come out of the meditation and join in whatever conversation might be happening at the tea table. I'm not entirely sure what this will be like, it's a little bit of an experiment, but I wanted to have some time to be with you in a different way, with my eyes open, talking or listening with you.

This piece is part of an ongoing interest, a journey really, trying out different ways of using gift and conversation in public situations and in performances. This year I've started work with a group of female sex workers in London, interpreting gift in the most literal way, making thank you cards and sending photos to family members. The drop-in centre where I am working is a real home, and a really creative home, it's a constant place of refuge that is filled with changing artistic activity and stimulus. And it's a real example to me of how creativity is not surplus but lifeblood. It's not that the women who use the centre wouldn't be alive without the artistic content of the workshops, but that they wouldn't value being alive in the same way. The opportunity each week to have a voice, to engage, to question and wonder brings out the best qualities in these women. In some of them, the transformation between the moment when they walk into the group - bitter, angry, sullen - and when they leave - grateful, laughing and engaged - is hard to believe. And their desire to continue the chain of gifting, to keep giving to others, is strong.

Thank you for restoring another person's faith in humanity. Thank you for sitting here, for trusting me, for trusting the people around you. This note is genuine. You affect me. Your manner, your kindness, your energy, your smile or frown leave traces of themselves in me and in those around you. These are all gifts. Gifts that you give every day, at every moment. So I invite you to sit with me, to have a cup of tea, perhaps to talk to the other people who might be sitting here at the same time, or to invite others to join you. Do not be afraid to talk, or not to talk, to engage in conversation or just to sit and rest. You are very welcome."

Now it's late here and I'm tired so I shall finish there. Tomorrow, we shall speak and I shall write to other people on my blog. Thank you for bringing my attention to the Chelsea piece - it would never have occurred to me normally to post the letter on this site but on writing to you I realised it was just exactly what was most appropriate. You are such an inspiration.

rajni.x.

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Comment by [Caffyn Kelley](#) on June 5, 2008 at 10:35am

Hi Rajni - have been thinking a lot about your gifts of art and service, and relating to some work I have been doing on discerning and developing non-commodified knowledges and objects and relationships. Generosity disturbs our economy's paradigmatic assumption that in any transaction between people each one is out to get as much from the exchange as possible. Permaculture guru Toby Hemenway describes a basic principle of permaculture as "giving away the surplus" and points to societies around the world where goods, land and services circulate as gifts. He writes, "open-ended giving links both people, and points toward a future exchange. The giver is seen by the group as useful, reliable, and generous, and is accepted into the communal flow of goods and labor, while the receiver is indebted to a system that supports him. " He notes that in gift economies, people must cultivate a sense of abundance and trust , in contrast to the experience of fear and scarcity that is structured by the monetized economy. Gift economies suggest a circular and circulating rather than linear and progressive experience of time, seasons and society. They weave a web of gratitude and obligation, love and commitment. Does a gift economy still exist in aspects of our lives and relationships? Your residency, and the program you have curated for us, is a beautiful gift. Thank you.



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