When Strangers Meet
Kio Stark (ks28@nyu.edu)
H79.2762.1 ~ TBD location ~ Tuesday 3:30pm-6:00pm
Office hours: Tuesdays after class, or by appointment

Overview
Strangers and cities are inherently intertwined. The everyday nature of interacting with strangers is a byproduct of urbanization, which has created a culture of dense populations with sparse interconnections. That density and sparseness of connections itself is part of what defines ‘the urban.’ Living in cities has made strangers into a multitude: we brush past thousands of them every day. Even the simplest exchange among strangers can contain a tangled accumulation of meanings: what transpires may have physical, emotional, social, political, technological and historical dimensions. This class takes an analytical approach to unraveling and understanding these charged moments. In the process of studying how and why strangers interact in public, we’ll address some of the abiding themes at ITP—urban behavior, spontaneous interaction, the pleasure of the unexpected, how technology can mediate or enable human experience. We’ll do this by making a close and thorough examination of how these large and abstract ideas play out in a more concrete, particular and narrow slice of human experience: interactions among strangers.

We’ll address how these interactions have changed historically (and why), the significance of the spaces in which strangers interact, what the experience of interaction with strangers means to the participants, how strangers ‘read’ each other, how they initiate interactions, how they avoid interactions, how they trust each other and how they fool each other, how they watch, listen and follow each other.

Goals
At the end of the semester, students should have developed a refined set of skills for observing and interpreting strangers and their interactions; they should have gained a general understanding of what has been established (by a variety of disciplines) about where, how and why strangers interact; they should become familiar with existing art and technology projects that involve strangers.

The overarching aim of the course is for each student learn how to recognize points of leverage that allow space for technology and art to make interventions in the social field in which strangers interact, or in a specific type of interaction strangers engage in.

Work
The principal work of the class is in understanding and synthesizing your observations from the readings, discussions, and field assignments. You will demonstrate your understanding by your participation in class discussions, your documentation of field assignments, your contributions to the class blog with responses to the readings and weekly notes on your own interactions with strangers, and final paper that will be presented to the class for discussion.

Readings:
Readings will consist of both handouts and online material. For the online material, I STRONGLY suggest that you make a printout and make notes on it as you’re reading. It is very
difficult to assimilate complex ideas without using your hands a little. I apologize to the trees for this.

*Reading responses*
Each week, you will submit a short reading response to me via email.

*Stranger interactions*
A minimum of 7 times during the semester, you will submit to the class blog a brief writeup of an interaction you have with a stranger.

*Field assignments*
There will be 4 regular field assignments and one final field assignment (documentation of which will be presented to the class on the last meeting). Your documentation of the regular field assignments takes the form of: notes on what happened and the conclusions or observations you make about what happened (or in later assignments, what you did). When you write up your notes, also take stock of your own experience in carrying out this assignment. Be prepared to share your findings and experience informally with the class.

The full assignment schedule will be distributed in class.

*Grading*
Participation: 45%
Field assignments 1-4: 40%
Final field assignment and presentation: 15%

*Attendance*
Class attendance and prompt arrivals are mandatory. If you miss more than one session, or are habitually late, it will affect your grade. If you know that you will be forced to miss a session, let me know in advance.

*Classes*

**Week 1: Hello Strangers**
Introductions all around.

Assigned reading:
Selections from Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

**Week 2: The History of Strangers**
The ways in which strangers relate in public are both historically and locally contingent. In the context of Europe and America, what do we know about how these relations—and their meanings to participants—have changed over time and why?
Assigned reading:
Georg Simmel, “The Adventurer” (Handout)

Field assignment #1: General observation: DUE MONDAY
Spend two hours in a public place where you are not likely to encounter people you know. Sit still. Unplug your devices, get off the grid. Watch people. Take notes on what they do and don’t do, how they interact with one another. If you are inspired to invent backstories for any of them, make sure to specify the details about them that inform your narrative. So for example, if you conclude that someone is rich, what told you that? Their posture, their skin, their clothing? Can you deduce any “unwritten rules” people in the location are adhering to? If so, what makes you aware of those rules?

Week 3: Who’s a Stranger?
How has the stranger as an archetype been defined and understood? What are the varieties of cosmopolitanism (as an aspect of urban life)? What is its perceived value, and what are some of the ways it is enabled or discouraged? How might a local culture’s conception of what it means to be a stranger have concrete effects on attitudes, conduct, and demographic patterns?

Assigned reading:
Georg Simmel, “The Stranger” (http://media.pfeiffer.edu/lridener/courses/STRANGER.HTML)
Kurt Iveson, “Strangers in the Cosmopolis” (Handout)
Richard Sennett, “Cosmopolitanism as Social Experience” (Handout)
Stanley Milgram, “The Familiar Stranger: An Aspect of Urban Anonymity” (Handout)

Week 4: Disruption
One of the significant psychological effects of stranger interactions is the way they interrupt the expected narratives of daily life. How have artists and thinkers engaged with the concept of disruption? What does disruption accomplish politically, emotionally, aesthetically? What does it reveal?

Assigned reading:
Tim Etchells, Certain Fragments, “On Risk and Investment” (Handout)
Sophie Calle and Paul Auster, “Gotham Handbook” (Handout)
Krzysztof Wodiczko, Designing for the City of Strangers” (Handout)

Week 5: Field trip to Guggenheim for Tino Sehgal installation

Week 6: The Rules of Engagement
How do people display and perceive information about each other in public contexts? How do they negotiate impressions and interactions? What kinds of engagements are possible, and what are the general rules by which they proceed?
**Week 7: Fleeting Relationships**
A fleeting relationship is transient, but has emotional valences and momentary interdependence between individuals. How and why do fleeting relationships begin and end? Are there pleasures particular to fleeting relationships? How do people involved in fleeting relationships communicate with each other in verbal and nonverbal ways?

Assigned reading:
Erving Goffman, from *Behavior in Public Places*
Irene Beattie et al, “Momentary Pleasures: Social Encounters and Fleeting Relationships at a Singles Dance” (Handout)

**Week 8: Public Space—Uses of the Street**
What is the concrete and emotional value of a street culture that includes and promotes interactions among strangers? How does the arrangement of physical space affect these interactions?

Sophie Watson, *City Publics*, “Introduction” (Handout)

**Week 9: Public Space—Behavior-Up Design**
How does the experience of spaces influence public interactions and even values and attitudes? How can spaces be designed by taking cues from public behavior, rather than in order to manipulate public behavior?

Assigned reading:
In-class viewing of William H. Whyte’s documentary, “The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces”

**Week 10: Empathy & helping behavior**
What produces human empathy, and why do we help each other in some situations but not in others?
Week 11: Prurience and Confession
Some stranger interactions are essentially uni-directional: they comprise one person’s attentions to an unwitting subject, or to a subject they can't communicate with. What are the pleasures afforded by such acts? Why do we find the everyday actions of others so compelling? How have artists used these techniques, and why?

Assigned reading:
Sophie Calle, *Suite Venetienne*
Frank Warren, *Post Secret*
Other, TBD

Week 12: Reading—Social Perception
How do strangers ‘read’ one another? By what cues do we perceive information about strangers, and make social judgments? How can those perceptions be manipulated? What can we control, and what can’t we, about how we are perceived by people we don’t know?

Assigned reading:
“You Remind Me of Me” NYT article (http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/12/health/12mimic.html?_r=1)

Week 13: Social perception 2
What are the contexts in which strangers lie to each other, and to what end? How do they pull it off?

Assigned reading:
David Maurer, selections from *The Big Con* (Handout)

In addition, we will play a few rounds of a social perception game called Werewolf (aka Mafia).

Week 14: Final field assignment presentations