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.

*Documenting field assignments:*
Your documentation of 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.

Field assignments must be turned in on the Monday preceding the class date, by the end of day (whenever your day ends).

*Class blog*
Each week, you’ll be responding here to questions about the reading, and to one another’s responses. In addition, you should each contribute brief notes about interactions you have with strangers, at minimum one per week.

*Final papers/project proposals*
Your final paper should research and analyze an aspect of stranger interactions that we have not studied in class, or make a deeper investigation of one that we have studied. So, for example, you might focus on stranger interactions among or between specific subcultures or groups; in a particular type of urban space; interactions in a specific location; a particular technique of interaction; patterns of stranger interactions in a non-western culture (preferably one that you have already studied in some capacity). This is far from an exhaustive list of your options, just food for thought.

If you choose the project proposal option, you will carry out similar research and analysis in order to define the point of leverage that you hypothesize will create a space for your planned intervention, and what you expect to happen. You will then describe the project you envision and why and how it will influence the social field in which strangers relate, or a specific type of interaction. To be very clear: the work here is still documentation, rather than implementation.

Your work will be circulated in advance to a small group of your fellow students prior to your in-class presentation and discussion with the larger group.
**Grading**
Participation: 40%
Field assignments: 30%
Final paper and presentation: 30%

**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**

**Part 1: Understanding Strangers and Public Spaces**

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

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

Field assignment #1: General observation
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?

**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 due end of day Monday.
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: 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?

Assigned reading:
Erving Goffman, selections from Behavior in Public and The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life (Handout)

Field assignment #2: Sociological observation
Same rules apply: unplug, etc. Using Goffman’s notion of paying attention to behaviors and extrapolating unwritten rules that guide us, spend two hours in a public place, observe and take notes. You can use a place you’re more familiar with than last time, but not somewhere that you’ll be known (too distracting for you). This time you will make close observations like you did last time, and try to draw conclusions from your observations about the unwritten rules of the place (or the type of people).

Week 5: 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?

Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Chapter 2,” The Uses of the Sidewalk: Safety” and Chapter 3, “The Uses of the Street: Contact” (Handout)
Sophie Watson, City Publics, “Introduction” (Handout)

Assignment #2 due end of day Monday.
**Week 6: 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”

**Field assignment #3: Iterative Requests:**
This assignment requires you to interact with strangers. I suggest working with a partner—for your safety and to embolden you. It works like this. You start by asking someone for directions. If they give you directions, ask them to draw a map. If they draw a map, ask for their phone number in case you get lost. If they give you their phone number, call it. You’ll need to document each encounter carefully, so write it up as soon as it’s concluded. Note who you approached, why you chose them, what your impression is of the kind of person they are (i.e. what you can observe directly—male/female, tall short—and what you infer), and how they respond to your requests. Your partner should keep distance enough so they’re not detected as part of the experiment, and should take their own notes on your interactions and vice versa.

You may choose to construct your own sequence of iterative requests. If you want to do this, I’ll have to approve them, so talk to me after class on Week 6. A bit of advice: I won’t approve a sequence of requests that concludes with, “your place or mine.”

**Week 7: 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:
Bertold Brecht, “The Alienation Effect in Chinese Theater” (Handout)
Walter Benjamin, “Interruption” & “The Quotable Gesture” in “What Is Epic Theater” (Handout)
Situationist International, “Preliminary Problems in Construction a Situation” (http://libcom.org/library/internationale-situationiste-1-article-6)
Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments*, “On Risk and Investment” (Handout)
Sophie Calle and Paul Auster, “Gotham Handbook” (Handout)
Note: don’t worry, these are all very short.

Assignment #3 due
Part 2: Things Strangers Do

Week 8: Watching & Listening
Some stranger interactions are uni-directional: they comprise one person’s attentions to an unwitting subject. 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:

Field assignment #4: Discoverable Strangers
Make contact with strangers via bluetooth or other discoverable networks. You will need to construct a viable plan to initiate contact and to (attempt to) sustain it for at least a few volleys. Work in groups and discuss your plan with me after class or in office hours during Week 8. You will document your plan, your attempts, the results, and if/how you make modifications to the plan as you implement it. Each person’s role in the assignment should be specified, and shared to the degree that is possible. You can submit your writeup as a group, but each of you should document your experience of the assignment individually.

Week 9: Following & Prying
Continuing on the theme of Week 8, behaviors like following and prying are more active (though still uni-directional) ways that one stranger engages with another who is unaware. What is the emotional and social difference between passive and active uni-directional engagements? What happens if they become bi-directional interactions? Are there specific meanings or pleasures here that are different from watching and listening? Why do we seek out information about people we don’t know?

Assigned reading:
Sophie Calle, “Suite Venetienne” and “The Hotel” (Handout)

Assignment #4 due

Week 10: 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)

Guest speaker TBD

Assignment due: final paper topics
Write a short abstract and preliminary list of sources for your final paper (or project proposal). Schedule a meeting with me during this week’s office hours to review and refine your plan.

Week 11: Scamming & Lying
What are the contexts in which strangers lie to each other, and to what end? Why are some people better liars than others, and better detectors of lies than others?

David Maurer, selections from The Big Con (Handout)
A.F.L. Deeson, selections from Great Swindlers (Handout)

Week 12: 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:
For this week, since the articles are long and you’re finishing your papers, we’ll break up into small groups. Each group reads one article and presents it to the class.
Irene Beattie et al, “Momentary Pleasures: Social Encounters and Fleeting Relationships at a Singles Dance” (Handout)
David A. Snow et al, “‘Cooling Out’ Men in Singles Bars and Nightclubs” (Handout)

Week 13: First group of paper/project proposal presentations

Week 14: Second group of paper/project proposal presentations