



21

**DAYS IN
PUBLIC**

The Social Gesture

Rodrigo Ghattas

Book by RODRIGO GHATTAS

Printed at – Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo.
Lessebo Scandia g/m2 100 Offset-print
1st Edition – 10 copies
“Tracing yellow” series #2
Cover Image Credits: Rodrigo Ghattas

Editor – Nicolas William Hughes
Designer – Victor Paiam
Copy Editing – Martin Berner Mathiesen
OSLO 2018

This book has been developed in collaboration with the participants of the art project *21 Days in Public*:
Nicolas W. Hughes, Leonie Gorlitz, Daria Kozlova, Victor Paiam,
Daria Krivonos and an anonymous participant (AP).

The round table conversations took place in different locations at Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo and were originally audio recorded. Due to concerns of privacy, the group decided not to make these recordings available to the public. The accounts written by the participants that appear in this publication are purposely published unedited, to preserve the voice of their individual experiences.

INTRODUCTION

21 Days in Public is an art project that took place over a four-week period. The project consisted of round-table discussions, talks and art actions in the city of Oslo. The artist, a friend and collaborator took part in informal gatherings once a week together with the projects six participants. In the form collaborative group we set out to challenge the 21-day myth habit formation with a social twist. The project sought to pose questions such as: What happens if we look at our habits as gestures towards a stranger? Does it become possible to enhance our social performance, if we systematically re-enact them on daily basis? Is 21 days a sufficient amount of time for a gesture to become a habit, as an embodied condition of our social body?

There is a widespread myth which assures that 21 days are enough to turn a particular action or behavior into a habit. This myth has its origin in a misinterpretation of the work of Doctor Maxwell Maltz, the author of the famous book "Psycho Cybernetics" (1960) and his notion of the self-image construction. Research has been done into behavioral science similar to this, for example the study conducted by Phillippa Lally titled "How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world" at the Research Department of Behavioural Science and Health at the University College London. The study was published in the European Journal of Social Psychology (2009) and it contrasted the origin of the myth with recent discoveries. Lally argues that the best estimate of the aforementioned myth is 66 days, although the duration of habit formation is likely to differ depending on who you are and what you are trying to do.

In this project I wanted to delve further into the importance of performing gestures that can help us to explore new ways in which we recognize our actions not only as something that serves as a way of shaping our own identity, but also the identity of other people. Each of the participants had created or chosen a gesture individually or in conversation with the rest of the group. This paved the way for what I chose to call "unfamiliar" interaction. The initial idea was that this particular and experimental form of interaction would be a way to re-shape and re-imagine our social world.

**For this project I decided to invite a close friend and collaborator (Martin Berner Mathiesen) to take the lead of the conversation during the workshop, giving me way more freedom to navigate the discussion from a more flattened and loose position.*

COLLABORATOR TEXT

My experience as a non-participant in «21 days in Public Space» was interesting, challenging and inspiring. In acting as an agent conceptually placed “outside” of the active part of the project, my initial role was to function as someone in between an observer, mediator and commentator. In being the only native Norwegian present in the group meetings, I was somewhat subconsciously attributed a role as the insider to the social culture that surrounded us. This resulted in a mutual game of cultural translation of habits and customs. In consequence it had the effect of making me and the other participants able to observe and participate from a reflexive position, without the risk of producing a potential distance within the group.

As a result, 21 days along with the insights of the participants would come to test my own understanding of the project, my own culture and the dynamics of habits as social and cultural eye-openers. My hope is that through my presence, we were able to provide the participants with room for both reflection, balance and friction.”

To conclude this section, we will now move on to the moving, thought-provoking accounts done by the six participants in the project 21 days in Public.

Thank you, and remember by reading this you are also taking part!

Martin Berner Mathiesen

NICOLAS W. HUGHES

“The difficulty of saying hello to strangers”

When approached by Rodrigo for this project I had my doubts that the project would work. My doubts were based on the criticism that I did not believe that one could begin and maintain a habit only after repeating the same action for 21 days. In my view said action would need some kind of mental or chemical stimulation to truly become a habit. The habit here being an action in public by the individual to another person or group.

As much as I had my doubts I began the project. My own action was to be simple in its approach but proved to be much harder in its method. I have now come to terms with the fact this was due to my own incompetence, or my own social insecurities. I chose to say hello to the first person I met each day, this needed to be a stranger. A simple task you may say, but I live in Norway. Since moving to Norway four years ago I was struck how people stuck to their own bubble in public, head down, headphones on, seemingly oblivious to every other human they pass. Where I am from in rural, costal Wales we would always say hello to passers-by, if we were walking, if we came to the post box or bust stop we would greet the people there. When I began doing this in Norway after first moving here I was treated like an alien, people would look at me and you could see the gears turning behind their eyes, there facial expressions of puzzlement seemed to say "am I supposed to know who you are".

This was the normality of the country in which I was to undertake my experiment. This coupled with the fact that I was mostly doing this early in the morning in the darkness of Norwegian winter AM. People do not want to be confronted at this time of a dark morning with anything let alone acknowledgment of another human being.

I began with saying hello or good morning in English, I also had my headphones in so I was probably saying these greetings at a more than normal volume, the first few attempts with passers by either left them confused or seemingly afraid of this stranger before them greeting them.

By our second meeting with the group doing Rodrigo's project with me a saw a complete lack of creativity on my part, which is strange as I call myself an artist. But maybe it is my own approach, I hate speaking to strangers unless it's in a relaxed environment, if I am meeting friends of friends, or in a party or

a seminar, gallery social situation I am fine. However, meeting people on the street or worse using a phone to call someone I have never met scares the fuck out of me. It makes adult life difficult, but I get by ok.

I continued and persevered on my project of greeting strangers, after trying for the first week I had had one conversation with an old man at the train station. I feel that old people in Norway have less boundaries when it comes to speaking to strangers.

For the second part of the project I was in France, specifically a small village in the Beaujolais wine making region. I continued my project there, the difference now was that it was not a challenge to say hello to the first person you meet as it is part of the social construct of the area, people are used to saying hello to everyone else. So here the project was easy.

When I came back to Norway I continued the greeting, this time adding "Merry Christmas" or "Happy New Year" applicably. For the last few days of the project I did not leave the house due to illness or hangover after New Year 's Eve.

I have since come to the realization that the choice of seemingly easy interaction with a stranger was hard due to location. But I think the driving force behind my own "failure" in this project is my own social awkwardness, maybe this is what made my greetings seem or at times uncomfortable. Maybe part of it was location, Norwegians live with an ice-covered bubble that is not instantly crackable but can be melted with prolonged conversation or alcohol.

I feel that although I was not able to maintain this 21 day 'habit' at least I created some data for Rodrigo. That in itself was part of the project.

Now excuse me, I have to get back to my own bubble.

GESTURE: *Greeting a stranger.*

DARIA KOZLOVA

“Why is it so difficult to say hi?”



I chose to greet people in my apartment building or the courtyard. I thought it would be easier. But it wasn't. Even though they weren't complete strangers I knew none of them, and I still don't. Which is odd, since I've lived in this apartment for a year and a half now.

It felt awkward, and several times I skipped. I chose to look other direction and walk like I have nothing on my mind. I was worried what if they misunderstood me? And apparently, they did misunderstand me.

Usually I would get a surprised "Hi!" back. Sometimes a confused smile. I had real downfalls too. I tried my best, I smiled and said loudly - Hi! But at least two times my neighbors just looked at me if I was dangerous and kept quiet.

In a way it was tiring, but very nice too. I thought I continue performing the gesture, but I do not. It seems like it doesn't fit here.

Or maybe it's just winter?

GESTURE: *Greeting a stranger.*

LEONIE GÖRLITZ

After one year of living without a clear routine...rhythm...being with openness...being adventurous...I am trying to create new healthy rituals, routines, habits for me. In my urge to be active in art and to connect with others, I got involved into this experiment while I was experiencing pure exhaustion. Perfectionistic, I was creating complex questions and quotes which I would ask and give every day to others I encountered. I experienced quickly how I was not able to continue with this gesture as I was not able to take care of myself in my exhaustion. For me this experiment creates a clear image and a commitment that I need, and I will take care to create healthy habits for me to flourish ...out of that place I can create gestures and care for others.

GESTURE: *Asking random questions to strangers.*

ANONYMOUS PARTICIPANT

*“The story about how I failed to complete the
21 days, but still learned a lot”*

I moved to Norway a couple of months ago, and still didn't know too many local people. I was just going through a tough period in my life. New country, new apartment, new life... Just quit the job I didn't like, haven't seen my dog and my family and friends for about seven months, and basically, I was just waiting to go back home for holidays.

One of the afternoons in late November, I was reading articles about anxiety and various mental disorders. That's kind of what I'm into these days. I just realized that only my lack of enthusiasm and energy beat my other repetitive thoughts and patterns. So, when Rodrigo, one of the few friends I made in Oslo sent me an invite to his art project, I kind of just forgot about it, seeing it's something about public, and well, I don't do well with public.

After ten days, I have gotten a sudden burst of energy and enthusiasm, and I texted him and said "Ok, I'm in!" As I knew I was going to be in the city for just two weeks, and then out for twenty days, he said it's not going to be a problem. It would be interesting to do the project while I travel as well, to compare countries.

I knew right at the beginning of the project that I was going to have trouble with it, as I am overly shy and introverted. But I didn't want to let that beat me. I had to start with little steps.

My gesture was kind of a smile and a nod when I catch the person's eyes. It might not be the most 'loud' or obvious gesture, but for me, it was more than stressful and exciting at the same time.

Who knew what was going to happen?

I remember the first day clearly. I nearly gave up the project.

The snow just fell, and I was shoveling my driveway. At one point I had to go up the road to get the mail from my mailbox, and there was a neighbor across the street, shoveling snow too. Have in mind that I'm new to the block and didn't know anybody yet. Anyway, our eyes met at one point, and I smiled and nodded. I have to say that I almost wished that the snow started falling on my head at that moment, because I felt my face going red. I was out of my comfort zone.

The neighbor ignored my gesture so hard that it was funny. I knew he saw me, but he chose not to react. Which I understand, because I'm a stranger to him, and what the hell am I smiling and nodding out on the street, right? Never mind. I went back to my apartment and thought about that whole situation for the rest of the day, wondering if I'm going to keep it up the next day. I did keep it up. I kept it up until I went out of the country. I can say that the majority of young people and senior citizens smiled and nodded back to me. That was a wonderful feeling. I had the most trouble with middle aged people. They kept ignoring me.

However, nothing ever happened besides that first gesture. Nobody started talking to me, nobody did anything out of the ordinary. Nor did I. Which was just as I wanted at the time, since I am a socially anxious person, and I still don't know the language, and I kind of didn't want the attention.

I remember one afternoon after around seven days into the project, I was in the metro, and I saw a guy a bit older than me, staring. I smiled and nodded. And regretted it immediately. I was panicking on the inside and had a really bad vibe about him. The guy literally hadn't even blinked his eyes once! And to top it off, he went out of the metro on the same station as me!

Nothing happened. You can relax. It was a false alarm. He just went the other way when I crossed the street, so I'm guessing he just has that kind of a look. I now doubt he was going to do anything bad.

I suppose he was just thinking whether or not he knows me.

I did most of my gestures in the public transportation. Senior citizens were very attentive and happy to smile and nod back. Young people up to 25 as well. However, when I went back home for the holidays,

I got sick on the first day, and didn't go anywhere for three days. I knew that was going to be a problem for the project, because I will lose the momentum. I just broke out of my shield of shyness, and now I was getting back in. I kept telling myself "Don't worry, it will be easier now in your hometown with the people you can actually talk in your own native language". But as I suspected, it wasn't as easy to get back to the previous state of bravery and openness.

After a couple of days, I went on another trip, outside of my home country, and stayed there for ten days. I wasn't alone at any moment, and as I was sick every single day of the holidays. I didn't have the will to go out and smile and nod to people anymore. And that was kind of a deal breaker.

Would I do it again? I probably would. Would I do things differently? I like to think I would, but honestly, I doubt it would be any different. Maybe in the future. Did this project help me learn something about myself? Oh yes. I learned that I can actually make a first step with people I don't know yet. I would probably be much better at it with time too. But I did reach my personal goal. I went out of my comfort zone, and I am so thankful for Rodrigo to have invited me to this project, because if he wasn't there to motivate all of us, I doubt that I would even be a part of this.

In the end, will this gesture become a habit, a part of my everyday life? I did notice that I smile to people more often than before. I don't think I do it every day, but I do smile more often, and I am more relaxed in the public these days. Who knows, maybe I am growing out of my shell as we speak?

GESTURE: *Smile and nod at strangers.*

VÍCTOR PAIAM

*“Norway Has Changed Me,
but We Are Changing Norway As Well”*



In this short time at Rodrigo's 21 days project I realized more stuff about myself than about Norwegian society, or at least nothing that I didn't know already and I'm confirming everyday with my human interactions in Oslo.

My bit here was using a couple of cards with the meme "Skiddadle skiddodde your dick is now a noodle" as a fun-curse, because why do we have to be good all the time? If it is from the comedy still good enough and also fun. I realized I didn't give it on my way to home or work. I wasn't open for a conversation with a stranger in that moment, but I gave plenty at events and parties, I feel people way more open to it, and we laugh, we make it short, long it doesn't matter. Different nationalities have different reactions, different ages have different reactions. But with some surprises.

I got a "how did you know", "I'll check it at home because is snowing pretty hard now (with a dead serious face)" even some confused faces who didn't know what to say. But the general feeling was laughs and fun.

Leonie made me notice I gave it just to boys, but I easily broke that paradigm and gave it to girls as well, I guess I was more comfortable joking with boys. Sincerely I still am.

The second bit was a card meant to be given if the interaction went big enough, as in, I like this person and I would like to be in touch with him/her. This second card said "Hey, you deserve a bird drawing" I wanted to give freely what I really like to do in my life right now which is drawing nature. Big note here, I just gave two, and none of them went bigger than the first conversation.

Norway has changed me, I wasn't the party core at Spain either, but here in comparison I feel myself the most extrovert in a Norwegian environment. I realized now that I'm going from home to work and back, and within that time I'm just thinking on getting to work or getting home, I don't want any human interaction, and in the same way I don't want to disturb anyone, I have my phone, I have my friends in there. Shit! I wasn't like that in Spain, was I?

The only moments I get to know people or interact with them more than just work or family are actually scheduled events and The Drawing Night, which is a scheduled event that I host, (same same). And I can be perfectly friendly and open, as a drunk Scandinavian without a single drop. I kind of get it, the life of an immigrant is different, and I haven't grown up here, didn't make friends when I was at school, like I did in Spain, here I'm focused on working and spending time with my family.

But we are changing Norway as well, I'm seeing it now, in every corner, the amount of immigrants in Oslo is so big that is impossible not to notice changes, not good nor bad, just changes.

If you just ask some of the old fellas you met, they are going to tell you how Oslo was just 30 years ago. All the projects I'm involved are 80%-100% with non-Norwegian people and the cherry on top was this week, when in my Norwegian class, the teacher told us some sentences that sounded better in "kebab-norsk" to her Norwegian ears than actual Norwegian.

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Oslo - 29-01-2017

GESTURE: *Handing out funny cards to strangers.*

DARIA KRIVONOS

NO RECORD.

GESTURE: *Acknowledge and compliment strangers clothing and accessories.*

FINAL THOUGHTS ON THE EXPERIENCE

By Rodrigo Ghattas

Habits are routine behaviors done on a regular basis. They are recurrent and often unconscious patterns of behavior and are acquired through frequent repetition. Many of these are being performed unconsciously as we don't even realize we are doing them. We know that habits are formed through a process called 'context-dependent repetition', everything is conditioned; it means it is always in a context, connected to other things, becoming something other than itself, formed by its conditions. We often form a mental link between a specific context and a response to it. Habits do not rely on conscious thought, memory or willpower, but in its automatization.

Habits define our character, our thoughts and feelings and our 'usual' behaviors. We can also see that habits are behaviors that are nearly or completely involuntary and because they are repeated frequently, we become "better" at them (increased facility of performance).

What I sought through this project was an attempt to mirror habits and gestures, to contrast them, explore and discover similarities, and how we do this in public in relation to another human being. I see a gesture as a simple but significant spoken or un-spoken action towards someone else. It does necessarily require and demand the presence of the other. A gesture displays kindness and concern for others and is both playful and open-ended. It could be gently-disruptive or abrupt depending on the situation and the person we are engaging with. It is an opener rather than an accomplished action and tends to be impacting experiences that breaks the constant flow of our daily life.

As I said before a gesture demands the presence of the other, and by doing so implies an encounter that is driven by a "touch" – as Judith Butler writes in "Senses of the Subject" (2015): The very nature of embodiment entails our relation to the vast fleshly web of mutual touching and being touched, a condition that is not only unavoidable but fundamentally constitutive and enlivening in the sense that it is what gives rise to our sense of being a subject in social matrices of interaction. Our common vulnerability to one another as beings who touch and are touched and who are therefore mutually susceptible to harm and affection. However, the question remains: how do we perform the repetition of the "touch" or what we can call a gesture? Taking into

account that repetition in this context is never the same, the conditions and the outcome are always transforming. That's one of the questions that this project sought to explore. In *21 Days in Public* six different individuals repeat-perform a gesture towards random strangers for 21 days. Some did it every day, others took pauses in between, and a few decided to stop. It is not easy to face our own social anxiety, our perhaps shy-introvert character, our fear to talk to the opposite gender and/or specially the fear of being rejected. We bounce when we encountered a thicker personal bubble, we don't want to bother or disrupt other people's comfort zone. It is definitely awkward not to be acknowledged sometimes.

On the other hand, during the project we discovered some strategies to make our "life easier" when performing a gesture. We noticed that often the most creative actions are more welcome, along with the ones that complement the uniqueness of the stranger. In different levels we all seek for some attention, it is more likely to catch the others attention when we put into action a more genuine mind-set approach. One that can make feel the other special, particular and empathetic.

We found out that apparently it is more likely to have a better response in country side areas outside Oslo and abroad, like in the French village called Leynes where e.g. Nicolas went for holiday, in Croatia where our AP (anonymous participant) spent some days during the project, or even in Russia where Daria Kozlova found it easier to perform her gesture in her own language and in her own hometown. The condition of community seems to be whether a facilitator or an impediment for these encounters. But also the weather, people's mood, the context itself, the time of the day, the place, all these factors play an important yet almost uncontrollable role. We were forced to find our own ways to go around those quotidian set conditions.

I believe we shared a sense of satisfaction and happiness when we accomplished the repetition of our gestures after 21 days, some of us managed to go further the first face struggles and overcome all those confusing feelings, collecting our one-self and continue moving. Over time -by repetition- we enhance in many degrees our ability to interact with other people, putting in motion different methods to reach our goal by also improvising on the move. I came to understand that gestures cannot be time

framed. The evolving of a habit from a gesture made each day for 21 days it seems a myth. A gesture needs the freedom of the spontaneous, and a detachment from all time format ties.

I think the key relies in the recognition and respect of the individuals and unique rhythms of the other. Preserve the particular, pay attention to the waves, move with fluidity, and remain consciously in the process. That's what is going to keep us together even for a small period of time when our everyday automaticity goes crazy as a result of a surprising, sudden and spontaneous encounter with another human being and their rhythm. When we mark our space by actions towards the other, we expose the different temporalities and tempos of our daily life.

If habits can shape our character, our thoughts and feelings and our usual behaviors, thus I believe the reproduction of a gesture has potentially the same power to shape and re-shape those very same human conditions. Not only as a way of helping to shape the construction of our own identity but at the same time of the others too. Indeed, increasing our facility to "perform" as individuals as well as collectively in society, ultimately influencing the relation with one another. Making us aware of connectivity and coexistence, will hopefully someday create a wider harmony for all of us.

Oslo 2018



Hey!
You deserve a
Bird Drawing!

collect it at victor@basta.no

**Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo
2018**

