

“The Interview: In Which I Ask Myself All The Questions You Didn’t Care to Ask, Along Also With the Answers You Didn’t Care About.”

Script by Maritza Ruiz-Kim

Both roles to be read by William Powhida at #Rank, Winkleman Gallery, Seven Art Fair in Miami 12/2/2010

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Questioner: Thank you for taking time to answer my questions.

Answerer: I kind of feel like I have to.

Q: Well, thanks anyway.

A: *(smile)*

Q: So, you’ve been doing a piece involving Twitter.

A: That’s right.

Q: How did it play out?

A: I spent time reading through the streams on Twitter accounts I follow, around 300 actually. I especially looked for the personal... the original... the universal story to emerge from these varied communities. Some groups have little to no connection to each other. It was disconcerting. I made choices about what to highlight for myself out of the content I saw from my account on Twitter. I wanted to extract all this information & arrange it in a way that made sense to me, so I could handle it.

Q: And how did you sort these tweets?

A: I first culled the ones that were irrelevant to the story I wanted to tell. I glued them on a panel so I could disappear them under other tweets. I categorized the rest with my made-up systems so I could layer them appropriately.

Q: So you picked & chose what you wanted, ranking them according to your own criteria?

A: Yes. Don't people always do that? On a daily basis?

Q: So what did you do after you sorted and separated these people's words?

A: I arranged them next to each other, creating relationships between people's statements that didn't exist before. You can only read the top tweets; the rest are blurry underneath. And remember, I only worked with the tweets of people I chose to follow on Twitter.

Q: So the only people you see in your information stream are those you follow?

A: Correct. If you don't follow someone, they don't "exist" to you because they don't show up in your information feed. People come to Twitter for different reasons. Some people come to be seen. They are here for appearances; the interactions they have are built around that. For some, it's about business, and maybe it's just another revenue stream. Others use what they see to contribute, and some are here to connect. And some come mainly because there is so much to see here... it's a place where all these voices collect in one place, like an overview of the national or international conversation. And then there are those who are really just here for the party chatting atmosphere, so the bar is pretty low on what they want out of it. So you have to make choices on who to have in your information stream.

Q: So, how do you choose which people to follow?

A: Everyone has to make deliberate choices on who is in or out of their information streams, to organize it so it's not cluttered with distractions. People also mirror the choices of those around them and it creates an effect, a groupthink of sorts that tells the outside world who is important and who is not. However, choosing to follow a person can be just a matter of being interested in what a person has to say. I try to follow any individuals that are art related.

Q: It's as simple as that?

A: Almost. There's also the consideration of announcing publicly that you follow a person, a statement of sorts that you are interested in this person.

Q: Do you ever hold out on this public statement?

A: Well, everyone can see all the people I follow by looking at my Twitter account. However, there is a method in which people can use private lists to follow people.

Q: Is that bad?

A: It depends on how you look at it. It's bad if you're the one looking for acknowledgement. But it's not bad for the one who wants to follow a wide variety of voices without making a public commitment. So for them, it's not bad, it's useful.

Q: Is this how people do things all over Twitter? Is this how they sort people?

A: Well, some people use the list feature and make it available for everyone to see. So they put people into different categories. Celebrities- they tend to follow back more discriminately. Anyway, when you follow someone & they don't follow you back, you wonder, am I insignificant? Or maybe its worse. Maybe it's about being annoying. But that's fine.

Q: Is it fine with you?

A: Well, what's really important to me? Just being acknowledged in this place? Not at all. Yet, acting like rejection is nothing takes away from the humanness of it. I'm not going to act like it's nothing because it happens online. Whether people interact using online interfaces or interact in real life, there's a real experience that happens. For both people. Whether they acknowledge it or not. I'm rarely sure what's happening on the other end of an internet connection, and I'm not sure about what I send over, if it's received in the same way I sent it. I'm not going to act like it's nothing just because it happens online.

Q: Isn't this whining?

A: It sounds like it. But that's not what I mean. I'm fine in the end. Big deal. Move on. But I mean, I don't want to act like I'm going to buy into this, thinking nothing's a big deal. It's important how we treat people. Even if we have to sort out where they stand with us.

Q: So you follow back anyone who follows you?

A: No.

Q: Do you respond to everyone every time they say something to you online?

A: No. I can't. Sometimes it just doesn't work out logistically, there's so much information coming at me, I don't have it in me to address everything that comes up. Who wants to be expected to always have something to say? Can't I just live my life without worrying about everyone?

Q: What does that say about you?

A: That like anyone else, I have to decide who to listen to or talk to or how to talk to them. We all make judgments on the content people offer, even in daily life. Like everyone else, I decide what's interesting to me. I unfollowed someone on Twitter, and she unfollowed me back and announced it to the world. Whatever.

Q: What do you do with that kind of thing?

A: Nothing.

Q: What do you think about that in relation to what you said before... rejection?

A: So, I make judgments about people. I'm not going to pretend I don't. If I don't respond to someone deliberately, I do think there's a consequence to it. I have to own it. I guess some people view this following & unfollowing, listing & unlisting—these online connections & disconnections— as just a matter of sorting information. I wish it were that simple. There are people behind those online accounts.

Q: It sounds exhausting.

A: It is. But I let myself experience this on purpose. Because I'm exploring what this means.

Q: And it informs what you're doing?

A: Yes. Most people say not to take things like this to heart. But at some point, if we all decide not to take things online to heart, doesn't it remove some of what makes this great? We are not machines. We do care how we are sorted and

organized when we don't have any say. We don't want to be put *here* when we deserve to be *there*. But sometimes that's not our call to make. Even when we feel like it legitimately should be. Sometimes, other forces are at work.

Q: You sound like you're being over-dramatic about something.

A: Am I over-emphasizing something that should be under-emphasized? I don't think so. I think people want to say it doesn't hurt when someone doesn't reply to a message that they invested a lot in. People want to say it's fine if they get overlooked or put in the wrong place. But I say- yes it does affect a person. I'm not saying that for my sake.

Q: It sounds like you are.

A: No, I'm saying it for the sake of keeping the humanity in how we do things. We all sort & rank people, we all decide who can get into our inner circle and who we keep at some distance. We put evaluators in place to be able to process the huge amount of information that comes at us when groups of people are connected together.

Q: So you're saying it's good when people get classified and processed by a set of criteria?

A: I'm just saying it's what people do. It's what people have done to each other for a very long time. We make these calls based on place, taste, values, & shared interests. We also sort based on assumptions and perceptions. At worst, people make them based on the usual long list which includes: race, gender, religion, socio-economics, culture, money... .

Q: The list could go on.

A: Of course.

Q: And it's obvious that it's bad?

A: It's obvious if you're the one being kept out. Especially if you think you belong. But we don't get to call the shots for how other people define their inner circles. And why do we want to be there anyway?

Q: So just accept it?

A: I didn't say that either. People have to figure out what to do. When it's appropriate to say something. When it's important enough, to enough people, to take action. Especially if you see the system getting out of control. We don't have to pretend it's not a big deal. That somehow we're beyond caring. That it has to happen this way, or that if it's just part of the system, it doesn't matter. The way people treat each other always matters. I don't want us to be beyond being human.

Q: We were talking about how people interact online, but it seems like we're talking about something else.

A: Maybe we are.

Q: So what now?

A: It's about having a conversation. Even though sometimes people have to shout. If someone hears, hopefully they really listen. Oftentimes, they won't. What do we do with that? They return to what they were doing, forgetting the momentary distraction. There's no mutual interest, and there's no conversation. So, people have to figure out how to be heard even when they're telling the truth someone doesn't want to hear. Then there are times when listening seems to be happening, and it seems like there's some connection, but both still walk away with wrong assumptions. And, if a conversation never happens- each is left with her own experience, with what she saw from her own place in the world. And who knows who's right. Well, we tend to think we know who's right: We are.

Q: Do you have this preoccupation with being heard?

A: Yes, I do. I like to explore that process. Why does one talk to another? What's the purpose? What's really going on? Why am I on Twitter? Am I really going to insert myself into someone's system that serves the purposes of something I don't believe in? What do I get in return? Are they using me? Am I using them? Sometimes this whole thing hurts.

Q: You mean it hurts feelings? I hate that saying: "hurt feelings."

A: Yeah, me too. It's so whine-y.

Q: And yet these feelings add to our humanity.

A: Exactly. That's what I'm saying.

Q: And how does that fit into these tweets back & forth with people you don't know? Are you obligating them to respond to everything you say? Are you obligating yourself to build an online relationship with everyone who wants to build one with you?

A: It's complicated, isn't it?

Q: I'm starting to see that.

A: The truth is, it's not possible to let everyone into your sphere of influence. It's just not. By necessity, we sort each other. People have to figure out for themselves the way that works- both parties do.

Q: Both parties?

A: The people reaching out, and those being reached out to. At different times, we play each role. And there can be power in being the one who's wanted, the one someone wants to interact with. And that doesn't mean it feels good, either. It can be hard to know what someone really wants from you. So, one can hesitate to respond. One can want to protect the status-quo.

Q: I see.

A: In either position, it's not always easy, but that doesn't mean I feel sorry for people (or myself) when in positions of power. Hard conflicts come when someone doesn't agree with the values used to sort & rank who gets in the place that's wanted. When those values prevent people from getting in who *should* get in, or someone who we think *doesn't* deserve to get in *does* because of favoritism or some other invisible purpose, it feels especially wrong.

Q: Do you think everyone is sensitive to these separations?

A: Well, the one doing the separating is usually less aware of it. Because the sorting serves their values & purposes, which are often unconscious, buried under

layers of supposed correctness. And maybe there's a person out there—or maybe lots of people— who can completely separate themselves from these subtle social layers that can happen. Maybe I'd like a conversation with one of those people.

Q: Really?

A: Well, maybe not. Maybe I don't want exposure to their convoluted value system. Maybe I want no part in it. I've been told I'm embarrassing myself when I have explored these connections online.

Q: And did you?

A: Sure, it was sort of embarrassing. Like, asking for the 3rd time for a response when I had received none, when I thought that the content I offered would be specifically interesting to that particular person. Initially, I hadn't been looking for anything more than something like "thanks for sharing." But... nothing happened, and I wasn't sure why.

Q: Why did you push it?

A: Well, I didn't at first. But then the experience just kind of added to this discussion I was having with myself.

Q: And then?

A: There was kind of an opportunity. An "in." So I jumped on it. I mean, why not? I wanted to force the issue & see what would happen. I wanted to see what conversation or lack of conversation would take place, to explore how we interact with each other. If it's possible to shift the structures that other people put in place. And maybe I like to cause trouble.

Q: Did it work?

A: Some people made assumptions about what I was looking for with that interaction. I'm not sure that means it didn't work. I think I got what I wanted. Something did happen. It was different from the previous time. But on the level of anyone really getting what I was doing, then no, I don't think so. It just looked like I was desperate for attention and feedback.

Q: Were you?

A: Everyone loves some kind of attention. But that was the smallest part of what I wanted. What I do want is to insist on one person seeing another and doing something with that. I believe in engaging people. Insisting that the recognized system of evaluating gets evaluated, blown apart as needed. So many people don't want to deal with the truth of what happens and why it's happening. I want to break it apart.

Q: That's what you really want?

A: What I want is to always try to reach for answers and find truth. I've said it to you before... I'm exploring what it means to be human these days. I am here, you are there, and what's in-between?

Q: Thank you for talking to me today.

A: You're welcome. Anytime.

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