Stockphoto

RSVP

RSVP is a series of meals taking place across the city, borrowing the format of the dinner party as a model for unscripted yet conscious social performance. At these dinner parties, nominally hosted by local figures accomplished in performance-based disciplines, audience and actors are one and the same, emphasizing the performative nature of not only social gatherings, but also other social practices such as negotiation, friendship, service, networking, competition, and civil affairs.

HOST BIOGRAPHIES

Sophie Dikeakos is co-owner of Sophie's Cosmic Cafe and a community leader. She and the restaurant have been well-known Kitsilano institutions since the 1980s, providing an anchor of authenticity as the neighbourhood has changed around them.

Maren Hancock is a vocalist and MC, promoter and DJ, academic and feminist activist. As DJ Betti Forde, she is one third of the "cougar rap" band Stink Mitt. Amongst her DJ gigs, she founded and continues to be resident DJ for the infamous Stacked Tuesdays at Celebrities. As an academic, she has published journal articles and the book *Lady Lazarus: Confronting Lydia Lunch*.

Joanna Robinson is Research Assistant in the Masters of Digital Media Program at Great Northern Way Campus and an MA candidate in Popular Culture at Brock University. Her research explores issues of gender representations, performance, identity, and implications for everyday life in online game- and virtual communities. She has spoken at key conferences about this research and about her experience using virtual environments to augment and enhance learning experiences.

Tahmoh Penikett is an actor and kick-boxing enthusiast. He plays Lt. Karl "Helo" Agathon on the television series *Battlestar Galactica* and has appeared in *Cold Squad*, *Smallville*, and *The L Word*.

Tony Penikett is a mediator, negotiator, former asbestos-mine labourer, former Leader of the Yukon Government, teacher, and playwright. He has written the books *Reconciliation: First Nations Treaty Making in British Columbia* and *Breaking Trail*; the films *The Mad Trapper* and *La Patrouille Perdu*; and the plays *Separatism Comes to Squatters Row* and *It, She and Me*. He teaches in the department of Public Policy at Simon Fraser University.

Dr. Cynthia Verchere is a plastic surgeon, administrator, researcher, teacher, mother, and stilt-walker. She is Head of the Division of Plastic Surgery at Children's Hospital, and former Director of Undergraduate Teaching in the Division of Plastic Surgery at University of British Columbia.

Ian Verchere is a video game designer and producer, former pro skier, writer, visual artist, and punk singer. He is Faculty in the UBC/SFU/BCIT/ECI Masters of Digital Media program. His book *V0N 1B0: General Delivery, Whistler, B.C.* is an anti-guidebook to Whistler's creation myths, and his screenplay *Mom's Cookies* (co-written with Douglas Coupland) was bought by Disney. His games include the best-selling SSX Tricky and NBA Street V.2 for Electronic Arts and Beavis and Butt-head for MTV.

PROGRAM

DOWNTOWN LOFT DINNER

Home-cooked by your hosts, featuring local ingredients
Date: Friday 19 October, 7 pm
Location: Downtown loft
Hosts: Tony Penikett and Tahmoh Penikett
Cost: $40 contribution to costs

CAMPUS AND SECOND LIFE BAG LUNCH

Bag lunch at the Masters of Digital Media program campus and in Second Life. Bring your own laptop to participate in Second Life
Date: Monday 22 October, noon
Location: Centre for Digital Media in Vancouver and Second Life
Hosts: Masters of Digital Media Program: Joanna Robinson and Ian Verchere; Second Life: JoannaTrail Blazer and Georges Joubert
Cost: Bring your own or reserve $15 lunch from Meinhardt's

DINER DINNER

Comfort food at a local dining institution
Date: Wednesday 24 October, 7 pm
Location: Sophie's Cosmic Cafe
Hosts: Maren Hancock and Sophie Dikeakos
Cost: Dutch treat

NORTHWEST COAST RESTAURANT DINNER

Fine regional cuisine at a celebrated new restaurant
Date: Sunday 28 October, 7 pm
Location: Gastropod
Hosts: Ian Verchere and Dr. Cynthia Verchere
Cost: Dutch treat

TO RESERVE YOUR SEAT OR TABLE, CALL 604 681 2700

RSVP GUEST-CURATED BY GERMAINE KOH
PRESENTED BY CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY

PLEASE RESPOND

Aside from spectacles and performances publicized as such, there is a world of social forms and actions each of us performs as part of daily living. We act us as friends, employees, fun-seekers, political animals, consumers, and so on. Competing, maintaining relationships, conversing, providing good service, making a great party, fulfilling professional duties: all are situations that develop only through the effective performance of the individuals involved. Some are rituals with set roles, but many others unfold with no fixed guidelines. In situations that collapse distinctions between performer/supplier and audience/recipient, all in attendance are embedded performers equally responsible for the development of the action, defining their own roles in the moment, face-to-face, with no script.——

The dinner party is one of these social forms whose intangible success depends on the active participation of a group of people and their will to forge a remarkable yet intrinsically ephemeral experience on an intimate scale, through improvisation, with no "set menu" of moves, but only the social and personal expertise and intentions that each person brings to the table. It combines openness (in its lack of script and unknown end), constraint (in unspoken rules of etiquette), and pressure (to navigate these). As such, it seems a rich format to borrow in order to table various issues around negotiation and networking, role-playing, obligation, and social anxiety – and to consider the ways in which these are in flux in today's society.——

One historical precedent for gathering people in an intimate setting for the conscious pursuit of enlightening cultural exchange is the salon, a form particularly associated with 17th- and 19th-century literary circles. The salon has recently been revived as a reference-point for contemporary cultural producers, as seen in various dinner-and-discussion series, music shows in private homes, book clubs, and so on. Within contemporary art, the trend of turning galleries into temporary clubs, kitchens or arcades, also reveals a current interest in the potential of social exchange and the meaningfulness of human relations. Relating to mid-20th-century movements (such as Fluxus, Happenings and the Situationist International) that provoked unplanned outcomes, this tendency has been categorized – but not fully theorized – as "Relational Aesthetics".[1]

Even in the staid corporate world there is a growing understanding of the importance of undirected, participant-led discussion, which has led to the formalization of new models for usually-hierarchical forms such as meetings, conferences, and even intellectual-property development. The concepts of "unconferences" and meeting processes such as Open Space, which grew out of recognition of the effectiveness of undirected exchange and which emphasize active participation, have become increasingly common.[2]

Perhaps the resurgence of salon-like activities within cultural discourse and the opening of hierarchies to participation both arise from a perceived need to pay attention to the current state of social conventions at a time in which their rules are changing quickly. It seems relevant to look at such forms as the participant-led discussion or the dinner party as types of unscripted performance because they seem especially representative of the changeable character of current society. Today, formerly-certain rules of social etiquette are being ignored or substantially modified, reminding us that in fact social customs are not legislated but rather the result of cumulative collective habit. Furthermore, the evolution of social practices is continually accelerating, so that each time we participate in certain social phenomena, we are contributing to their very (re)definition.——

There is a growing awareness that, in our electronic-media society, our lives are open to each other in an unprecedented way – and that the rules of etiquette are shifting accordingly. Today, with masses abiding Technology's call to "Broadcast Yourself™[3] , an awareness of performing one's life in the public eye has been extended from public figures to the average person. The notion of our being ensnared in a "Society of the Spectacle" might not seem as radical today as when Guy Debord pointed out the alienating effects of spectacle and consumption in 1967. Indeed, the thought seems hardly worrisome to many now – which perhaps illustrates the seductions of self-entrapment. Although many of us still cling to the belief that we are in control of our self-presentation, the question remains to what extent we are free agents in the dramas in which we participate.

One can think of the crafting of a lifestyle as an extended public play – or ploy – in which the markers of identity we choose (and how we deal with markers out of our control) are means of broadcasting the social roles we have selected for ourselves. In this view, social interactions are moves in a strategic game of self-elaboration and, in order to understand them as such, one could consider the structure of social networks. Social networks operate at many levels, from the intimacy of a family to the impersonal scale of a nation (and even relate to phenomena that might seem categorically different, such as synaptic networks, epidemics, and market dynamics[4]). Network analyses map out ties between people or nodes, allowing individual actors' "social capital" to be described or quantified. In non-hierarchical, rhizomic networks, the value of particular nodes derives from peer-to-peer connections rather than top-down organization. This fact – of individual value accruing through connections – is key to understanding that it is strategically advantageous to participate in situations of social exchange.——

It is also worth considering the motivations for participating in and building networks, communities and other group works. Self-organizing social networks and collective projects such as open-source code development are some forms in which individual contributions might seem likely to be lost within the larger work, so that one might expect that selfishness or competitive instincts would condition us to "lurk" in the background rather than extend ourselves publicly with no apparent promise of personal gain – yet vast numbers do. It is arguable, though, that this participation is motivated not by altruism but self-interest. One analysis of contributions to on-line communities has identified some of these motivations as: an anticipation of reciprocity from one's peers, increased public recognition, and an understanding that one is personally capable of effecting progress.[5]

Within these motivations, the expectation of *reciprocity* would seem to apply to other sorts of social acts that, on the face of it, are enacted freely but which may entail an expectation of return, and to situations of social obligation, in which the "return" may be quite diffuse. On the other hand, the sense of *efficacy* – effecting results through one's actions – must be a factor in activities such as civic action, public demonstrations, and rioting. Phenomena such as runaway fads, protests and flash mobs[6] that are generated by urban legend and word-of-mouth, are forms of viral public performance that stimulate public imagination about a connected individual's ability to affect a crowd, and also reveal the desire of masses of individuals to be a part of an efficacious body. With evidence now of the ability of large, all-but-leaderless groups to assemble and self-organize, there seems to be a pervasive sense of the theatrical possibilities of being in society.

Still, one should not forget the less spectacular performances of everyday life. Certainly, some daily performances – competition, professional practice, etc. – have public, even legal, consequences: other actions depend upon or are triggered by them. Yet even without public liability, tasks are performed every day for audiences of employers, peers, families, and clients. Other actions are even more incremental, slower or lower: processes such as developing friendships and trust or gaining reputation, or modest individual acts that advance a drama (gossiping, meeting). There is also a gamut of social roles – moderators, servers, negotiators – whose players are traditionally expected to recede into the background in favour of a seamless show. Of course, these roles are no less performative for being publicly self-negating.——

With regard to public service, it might be worth adapting terminology from the branch of semiotics that focuses on performative "speech acts": phrases that, by being uttered under the right circumstances, accomplish a task (for example, the words "I do" in the context of a wedding). Rather than focusing on singular utterances, however, it is worth thinking about entire lived scenes (and roles) as extended, improvised *social* acts that, as they are performed through time, modify the very social conditions of which they are part.——

Social performance – negotiating a range of situations, understanding when to switch roles, judging how to present oneself – has always been a series of complex acts. Negotiating today's culture, we are also repeatedly reminded that its unspoken rules are continually being modified. Certainly, for many of us, this entails anxieties about our abilities to adapt and to evolve the new forms of social intelligence needed to understand and perform our shifting roles. Yet we have to understand that in this play – the performance of daily life – there is no off-stage; we are the players, and the spotlight is constantly on.——

Germaine Koh

1   Nicholas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Paris: les Presses du réel, 1998), also published in English as *Relational Aesthetics* (2002).

2   Open Space is a framework for conducting meetings: www.openspaceworld.org.

3   Trademark slogan of YouTube LLC.

4   A Duncan J. Watts, *Six Degrees: the Science of a Connected Age* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003).

5   Peter Kollock, "The Economies of Online Cooperation: Gifts and Public Goods in Cyberspace," in *Communities in Cyberspace*. Eds. Marc Smith and Peter Kollock (London: Routledge, 1999).

6   Although flash mobs were an invention, their creator understands that they reveal the potential of connected culture: "You could use flash mob as a metaphor for some of the ways in which the netroots will leverage the power of all this collaborative energy and all of these people in remote locations and have them come together on a single project." – Bill Wasik interviewed in *Mother Jones*, 29 June 2007, www.motherjones.com/interview/2007/07 bill_wasik.html.

BIOGRAPHY

Germaine Koh is a visual artist, independent curator, sessional lecturer at Emily Carr Institute, co-founder of the salon and record label weewerk, and a former Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Canada. Her artwork has been presented internationally at institutions such as the BALTIC Centre, De Appel, the British Museum, and the biennials of Liverpool and Sydney.