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Offerandestraat: Experimenting with Flash Encounters with Strangers on Dress

Elif Alp, Lene Hald, and Peter Sorenson

Abstract

What can you learn about a stranger on the street in under five minutes? What are the best ways to begin a conversation with someone that could lend itself to more in-depth interviews, or quickly establish a small amount of trust interviewer and interviewee? In this experiment, we find that asking strangers about what they are wearing is an effective and surprisingly intimate way to begin a dialogue with strangers on the street. We further reflect on the methodological and creative issues which arose during the editing and presentation of this inter-disciplinary collaboration.

**OFFERANDESTRAAT:
Experimenting with Flash Encounters with Strangers on Dress**



[VIEW VIDEO:](http://youtu.be/QFCuBj0Fvdk)
<http://youtu.be/QFCuBj0Fvdk>

INTRODUCTION:

This project came about during the course of a ten day seminar for visual research methods and sociology. The inaugural Visual Methods Seminar, hosted at the University of Antwerp, brought together a group of international scholars who work in and around visual methods. The organizers of the seminar had built in time for collaborative group work, and our group decided to revisit a street called Offerandestraat. We were all surprised by the diversity of Antwerp, and wanted to spend more time on the busy commercial thoroughfare. The resulting photo essay was shot over the course of a few hours, and edited over the course of a few days. The text below has taken considerably longer to edit, but we believe it helps unpack many of the methodological and creative issues we encountered in collaborating across disciplinary boundaries. The resulting group process was experimental, highly negotiated from beginning to end.

What was your motivation for the project (or experiment)? What did you originally set out to do?

Peter Sørensen: My motivation was to meet some people living in Antwerp, hear something of their experience and experiment with various visual methods of presenting the interviews. The initial idea was to either record each person or take photos. Later we realized we could do both, then edit the material to combine audio with photographs or video—experimenting with different combinations of visual and audio. I also wanted to work with peers from different disciplines.

Lene Hald: Originally I wanted to test a designerly approach to visual field engagement. The 'designerly' approach may be understood as the translation of fieldwork into another—more visual—language mode. Design is often considered as a visual discipline motivated by an artistic curiosity and design disciplines have, throughout their histories, actively engaged visual methods including photography, moodboards, sketches and other forms. Building on that I would say that a designerly approach could be described as a visually skilled translation of a field, site or phenomenon; an exploration of how we might transfer a text from one distinct sign system to another. Even if one doesn't think of representing fieldwork as a form of translation, it's hard not to agree that a certain amount of 'design', deconstruction and inter-semiotic retelling is at stake. So I was intrigued by the visual communication aspect of the fieldwork and in experimenting with more visual and designerly ways of constructing and representing sociological insights related to fashion and social identity.

PS: Another motive, as a communication designer, was to contribute our experiment in visual and audio form to the seminar audience to get feedback on what worked well—or not so well.

Elif Alp: When I heard about the idea of interviewing people on the street about what they were wearing I became intrigued. How would that work out? Would people open up quickly or brush us off with quick answers? So my main motivation was to observe how this sort of experiment worked out, a sort of meta-stance. By this sort of experiment I mean experiments with flash interviewing people, getting a small and fast take on what people are wearing, and what it means for them. But then it came to be about much more. As my colleagues have noted we were an interdisciplinary team, and there was a lot of negotiating in what we were able to put together (this project came to existence in less than a week of collaboration). Still, I think a common

theme emerged, a common feeling to all of our interviews and moments with people on the street.

LH: I was hoping that how we presented our encounters would work on an artistic and designerly level, while still holding potential as a scientifically informed statement. I don't think the potential was fully unfolded, but it might be the beginning of something really interesting. I found out that I had a very designerly approach to the field: My focus was very much on the experiment and the visual translation of our field experience.

How did you sample? How did you choose the participants?

EA: I'd be lying if I said I didn't suffer a small moment of methodological panic when I realized that we really had no sampling strategy. I think I tried to raise this before we hit the streets, but there were lots of other things to discuss, and it sort of never got hammered out. When out on the street I realized it's hard when you're limited by the language and still trying to talk to as many people as possible. If we were to do a more rigorous and explicitly sociological study we'd certainly have to deal with this issue, or at least I would. But despite this, the documentary, ethnographic and experimental sides of the project appealed to me.

PS: Lene wanted to focus on the participants' dress and ask them to tell us about what they were wearing. We agreed this would be our approach. We decided to go to a street in Antwerp that attracts a wide number of people from many cultures, Offerandestraat, so that we could obtain a variation in people we met, especially in terms of their dress. We approached a range of people—a family of four, groups of two to four people, individuals—and asked if they would like to talk to us about what they were wearing. A number of other people declined so the 'sampling' was, in a way, skewed towards those with time, confidence, and interest in participating.

LH: Our sampling strategy was rather undefined. However, we knew Offerandestraat was a very diverse setting with multiple nationalities. So the question became how to make sense of this setting? In many ways it makes sense to think of place and space in terms of the people who cross it—to understand the city as an emotional space for identity construction, or a social scene for image performance. While photographing, many questions arose. Where does this place extend itself to? Where are these individuals coming from? What are their daily routes and journeys? I think our small interviews and our film somehow, in a suggestive way, answered some of those questions.

EA: Yes, without even necessarily asking the question! If we had stopped random people and asked them where they were going, they probably would not have answered, or been uncomfortable answering. But entering into that kind of conversation by way of something publicly visible—their clothes—builds a shared space between stranger and stranger and sometimes makes next questions arise on their own (such as the man who explains he is on the way to the Buddhist temple as he explains to us what it is he's wearing).

How would you "label" this project?

LH: I liked the idea of flash ethnography—a term introduced by Elif. However brief our encounters were, I do believe we addressed some interesting ethnographic themes in the interviews. Through these brief encounters we scratched the surface of how dress relates to identity, memory, self-perception. It helped explore views on own social and cultural standing, and how our respondents understand themselves in relation to a community. I think our respondents are, in a way, acting out biographies and showing how our ways of world-making are multiple and different. These aspects might be read as tentative beginnings of a more in depth—and more visual—ethnomethodology.

PS: I think 'flash ethnography' is a good descriptive label, as we met and spoke to each of the participants for only a few minutes. Such short encounters with people we'd met for the first time were both fraught with unknowing, with the possibility of being with a stranger—hearing something of another person's life—and being touched and inspired by them. Documenting this process meant that we could reflect upon the encounters and express them in other forms.

EA: I'd been wanting to experiment with flash documentaries for a few months. I'd been wondering, for example, how much can you learn about a person in one minute with them? This project became a chance to experiment with flash interviewing people in a collaborative group setting, getting a small and fast take on what people are wearing, and what it means for them. But I suppose the bigger question here, about how we understand this project, is wrapped up in the issue of what we think the question really is. For me it started as an experiment in one minute encounters—which to my surprise all went beyond one minute. Fashion is a really great way to quickly gain some, albeit controlled, insight into a stranger's life.

How does the way you present your work matter? How do the different formats of presenting the fieldwork affect your understanding of the material?

PS: The presentation format evolved as the material was mediated by our ideas and opinions throughout the editing process. We wanted to convey the 'essence' of what participants expressed in relation to their clothes and the meanings they gave to these and other objects, such as necklaces. With time limitations we cut what we saw as less relevant to this focus, hoping that the final form would communicate our intentions to our audience while maintaining the integrity of each participant's story.

EA: Our editing process definitely raised a few issues for us. One of them was the question, if you can show something instead of telling it, why not just show it? So for example when the young man tells us he is wearing blue pants, blue shoes and a pink shirt, do we need to see these items? I would say yes, but some will disagree or find this to be overkill.

PS: A key issue for me is intention—relevance, accuracy and contribution to a research topic or question — explicating that intention and integrity in communicating the intention. There is something to be said for using images and audio 'objectively', without designerly effects, but for me the reality is that editing of any form is constructive; and our interpretation of the work is constructed, even if we view unedited video.

EA: Then there was the audio track, and the editing of a story from our participants. Peter noted that the audio was driving the editing process, and so we tried to experiment with what it would be like to NOT have to worry about the audio in the editing process. This is what you see with the character we've affectionately come to call Miss France, the woman in the dress worn by Miss France.

PS: One comment from the audience about reading the interview rather than hearing it was that the ability to read and re-scan the conversation, rather than hearing the words only once, enabled a different way for the viewer to reflect on what was said.

EA: Right, so it gives a different effect to read the words without hearing the character's voice, but what is it? I'm not sure. It's certainly different from the young man on his way to the Buddhist temple, where we see our character speaking to us in sync.

PS: In a later conversation about the video, one member of the audience was adamant that the Miss France track had audible voice. I found that was an interesting example of how we perceive and construct language. Our intention was to experiment with different approaches to presenting flash interviews. So if we were to use only one

interview, and present it in different ways, the question remains: how do different forms affect our understanding? What difference does transcribing the audio rather than playing the person's voice make? What difference does showing still images make compared to showing video? More information on the effects of these different approaches on a viewing audience would be required to better answer the question.

EA: But the question is there all the same. And there were gear choices that affected the final outcome too. As the sound person, I used a shotgun microphone riding along the top of my camera instead of hooking people up to a wireless lavalier microphone, mainly because I didn't want people to feel this was a longer sit-down sort of thing when we had hooked them in with some variation of "it'll just take a few minutes." As a result you can hear the interviewers, the team, in the background. So the choice of gear comes with an implication for who becomes present in the material in what ways.

PS: Another comment made was about image manipulation in the case of the photographs that had been colored and blurred or faded. This was a topic of vigorous discussion in our group—the difference between presenting the photographs accurately, 'objectively', without photo-manipulation, or to present some that had been manipulated as mentioned above.

What is gained from working with more expressive formats, and how does one validate more expressive, artistic and designerly ways of constructing and representing sociological insights?

PS: As a communication designer it depends in part upon the intention of the project. Do we want to influence a wide range of people, or is the work limited to a specialist cohort of viewers who have clear expectations of 'objective' work being presented? What are the effects of expressive and artistic forms? One advantage of such forms is they can cut through normal perceptions and open windows into new ways of seeing. Art does this in some instances by enlarging our vision, heightening our sensitivity, and potentially leading to new ways of understanding. On the other hand, some argue that all work should be 'objective', without expressive or artistic manipulation, and that only this portrays circumstances with integrity.

LH: I think there is a lot to gain from working with more expressive formats. I like the idea of putting the image in front; "caring" about it. In other words placing it as a central element in the end product and not reducing it to serve a merely illustrative or decorative function. Photographs represent knowledge of a moment gone by and can bring

back blurred memories. Building on this I would say it makes sense to use blurriness in narratives where history and memory play a central part, and I do believe history and memory played an important part in all of the narratives presented in our small video. This came out most explicitly with the woman who spoke about her dress as a copy of a dress worn by Miss France 1998, and the young boy who spoke about his grandmother in Afghanistan whom he had not seen for 16 years.

EA: A big conversation arose around the use of the color filters. In the end we decided to leave the filters and blurs in to see how they would be received. Is it a step too far, or just expressive enough? I think if this were a group project with only sociologists on board, color filters would not have even been considered as an option, so in some cases the issue might be a bit moot. Part of the appeal for me in collaborating with colleagues from different disciplinary backgrounds is being freed for a few moments from my own disciplinary constraints. Of course ultimately I am a sociologist, and I think a lot of what is gained from the color filters maybe says more about us, the endeavor, and how we approached the material than it does about either Miss France or the young boy with the necklace.

LH: I think that by letting some of the images work through metaphor, meaning they were suggestive, empathetic, descriptive and linked with either voice or text, they somehow offer inspiration for alternative methods within visual research, while suggesting that the duality of social research and narrative art may be a productive path to enter when attempting to broaden the area of visual sociology. I think we could have pushed the boundaries more, and made the different ways of presenting the stories even more diverse. However, time was limited and our concept was not fully developed before entering the field. I was the one photographing and I only took classic portraits of our respondents, since our original plan was only to use face and body. In the editing process it would have been valuable to have had a more diverse catalogue of photographs for our film. In that way we could have experimented with even more different versions. These photos have some sort of metaphoric quality to them—even though not fully developed—which may open up towards the viewer's own investment and put storytelling and memory into play. I am not claiming I/we succeed in this endeavor, however, I think it is an interesting experiment that may serve as a point of discussion.

How does your study reframe questions of dress, fashion and identity?

LH: In a way dress studies became analytical keys for unlocking the complexity and the diverseness of the city. I think our study somehow

shows that fashion and dress behavior is indeed a “kaleidoscopic theater” that (as our field work shows) generates stories. I believe that exploring the shifty face of fashion and dress behaviors constitutes a meaningful way of gaining insight into the myriads of modern life.

PS: Yes. What is plainly evident in these interviews is the meaning with which the participants have imbued objects such as clothing and jewelry.

So is this an experiment about method or content?

LH: I am not quite sure. I feel like the project became very much about the communication of the fieldwork, and how far one might go when experimenting with representations. I think it might be seen as point of discussion on whether more expressive representations are acceptable in a social research setting, and what this might bring to our understanding.

EA: I wanted to put together something experimental, and see which methodological issues would come up for us as a group if we were to continue a project of this sort. So initially I walked into it thinking it would be an experiment about method, but when people opened up so quickly about themselves, their families, their memories, I realized this experiment yielded rich content as well. But I agree with what both Peter and Lene mentioned, that the editing of the material very much became an integration of method and content, and that we reached some limits too. In a way we tried to reach the limits, especially with the editing. So it’s an experiment on method, content, and presentation.

PS: I think that negotiating the ideas, collecting the primary material and editing for form and style demonstrate an intrinsic nexus between method, content and presentation.

In conclusion, what would you like to highlight from the project?

LH: The project was very rewarding to me on various levels. I had to argue more for my positions — which I actually found really hard. However it also became clearer to me what one as a designer might bring to the field of visual sociology: I believe designers have some sort of visual competency. As a designer you are trained to value the image—and work as visually skilled translators. Our experiment made me want to explore even more the potential of this designerly approach to visual engaged fieldwork.

EA: I was really freed from a lot of the conventional confines of sociology for a moment, and it was helpful for me to find the edges of the discipline and think about where I want to be in relation to them. Being able to step outside one's discipline and realize that what constrains you may not cause colleagues in other fields any concern at all is really valuable for evaluating what aspects of one's discipline one cares for and why. That said, I still think some kind of sampling scheme would make me feel better about, well, sampling, but at the same time I think many sociologists are painfully out of touch with what is going on around them. Sometimes I think all of the fancy sampling strategies and accuracy tests and measurement schemes we come up with are impediments to being more in touch with the people actually around us, now: the living, breathing people with grandmothers they haven't seen in sixteen years, or the woman in the wheelchair whose most prized possession, next to her two children, is her pendant of them. I suppose I reserve the right to listen to people's stories, even if I don't have a very systematic way of collecting them.

PS: Given our multitude of aims and the spontaneous nature of the projects, our different ideas and academic orientations could easily have been disadvantages. Instead, mutual respect and a desire to learn from our interviewees and each other, and to present engaging work to our peers, resulted in us acknowledging our differences, then, finding creative ways through these. I am inspired by the generosity of our participants and my group members, and hope that this video makes a contribution to the idea of cross-disciplinary collaboration, flash encounters with people, and ways to present such encounters in a stimulating and reflexive way.

About the authors

Peter Sørensen's research is in the areas of user-experience in communication design, and in the application of art-making and reflection to elicit and clarify rich unconscious and unresolved ideas for individual development, design and business. He has practiced as a communication designer in Australian and international companies, led an award-winning visual communication program at RMIT University and lectures in areas including learning styles and group work, concept development, art direction, publication and promotional design.

Lene Hald is a Ph.D. student at KEA Research and Innovation Centre and The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts - School of Design, Copenhagen, Denmark. She holds an MA in Photography and Urban Cultures from Goldsmiths, University of London (2011) and an MA in Visual Communication from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts—The School of Design (2005). Her research is within the areas of visual ethnography, visual communication and photography. In her Ph.D. thesis she explores the meeting between social research and narrative art, specifically focusing on how visual methods may be used as an engaging tool in the transformation and communication of identity. Furthermore Lene Hald has written on cultural currents for various media and her photographic work has been exhibited both nationally and internationally.

Elif Alp is a Ph.D. Candidate in Sociology at Columbia University. Her dissertation explores different censorship and reviewing tactics in American cinema from the 1930s through the present. She is also a documentary filmmaker whose work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Gothamist*, and *Animal New York*.