

**Designing for
the City of
Strangers** (1997)

The messiah interrupts history.

—Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940)

City of the Victors

According to Walter Benjamin, the fact that things "go on" is a catastrophe. The city is a monumental stage for things to "go on" because it perpetuates both a spatial relationship between its inhabitants and its symbolic structures and a psycho-social relationship among its dwellers. These two perpetuations must be perturbed to wake up the city and to save it from the bad dreams of the present, the nightmares of the past, and the catastrophes of the future. I would like to propose the possibility of a design practice that would interrupt these processes and could eventually help to heal the city's wounded psycho-social relations and its catastrophic reality.

Theorist Stéphane Mosès, in analyzing Benjamin's theological-political model of history, focuses on his concept of the *history of the victors*, which operates as a past "transmitted to us through a hermeneutical *tradition* that selects events, preserving some and rejecting others, at times determining their interpretation." It can easily afford to forget the catastrophes it has caused. I recognize this kind of history as the foundation or cement that stabilizes the continuity of the "legitimate" and "familiar" city. The history of the victors, the official presence of the official past, constitutes the *official city*. This official city is a lived tradition that celebrates, in everyday life, "the triumph of the strongest and the disappearance of the weakest."¹ Such a history (as represented in textbooks, national literature, films, and public monuments) cherishes a notion of progress that, according to Benjamin, is inevitably linked to a legacy of destruction.

The history of a nation or city, like every synchronic narrative, collaborates with the *history of catastrophe* by celebrating the lineage of "our" progressive and victorious traditions. To avoid future catastrophes, daily disclosures of the often-hidden destructiveness of the present must be linked to critical recollections of past disasters. This sort of critical approach to history has been—and continues to be—an intuitive and interruptive survival practice of every immigrant.

"The inertia that perpetuates past injustices can only be broken by the eruption of something radically new; unpredictable," says Stéphane Mosès, building on Benjamin's analysis. The history of the victors must be confronted and interrupted by the *memory of the nameless* or the *tradition of the vanquished*.



In staging such an interruption and bringing these traditions to light, the stranger—the vanquished of today—functions as a prophet or messenger. Each time the experience of a stranger is shared and understood, the city revives and returns to its conscious life as a democratic hope for us all. To heal one voiceless stranger, then, is to heal the entire city.

City of the Vanquished

Tremors and aftershocks caused by the end of the Cold War are being felt across the planet. As the old and stable ideological front lines have vanished, a new war has begun, no longer cold and seemingly bloodless, but often hot, like fire, and openly bloody. Refugees are fleeing new religious wars, new chauvinisms, and new nationalisms. For many, the end of the Cold War has been the end of their world, their identity, their community, and the beginning of a new diaspora.

With the official account of the population of refugees soon to reach 40,000,000, the United Nations has called the last quarter-century the "Migration Era." The influx of immigrants to the United States has now reached the historic levels of the nineteenth-century immigration wave. By the year 2010, foreign-born residents and citizens will probably outnumber U.S.-born inhabitants in most American cities. By then, these cities will undoubtedly be the sites of the greatest challenges and hopes for democracy in the United States.

Historically, the city has always been a hope for the displaced. And today, as it was in the past, our cities are worth nothing and will be condemned to destruction if they cannot open themselves to strangers. Look back at Sodom and Gomorrah! Tens of millions of these strangers now traverse and transgress frontiers and borders that are simultaneously internal and external, geopolitical and psycho-social, ethical and spiritual, private and public. Identities and communities are disintegrating, multiplying, crossing, shifting, and reconfiguring, sparking fear and violence among those who feel invaded by others, who import speechless pain.

Immigrant Utopia

As part of the second largest wave of immigration in U.S. history, these wanderers will be confronted by the multitude of divided and competing groups of both U.S.- and foreign-born residents. But unlike the immigrants of the first wave, these new refugees enter cities that are already fully built, with their

7 architectural, ideological, and monumental theaters in place. It is up to these newcomers, then, to transform and unbuild the cities by inserting their presence, their performances, and their histories into the collective memories and democratic discourses of the city itself. The city is reconceived with each new immigrant, assuming that an open communication exists between the immigrant and all others. Too often, however, such openings exist only as wounds, a result of the wars that created the need for these large-scale migrations in the first place, or as a kind of psychosomatic symptom of the fundamentally asymmetrical nature of this passage, for immigrants do not have the rights enjoyed by citizens. But within each immigrant lives an entire city, often richer, more complex, and more hopeful than the public one—the city to come.

This Benjaminian utopia is, according to Stéphane Mosès, “a hope lived in the mode of the present.” To survive, the immigrant must establish a utopia, a “no-place” that is located in the present time, not hidden behind the horizon of some idealized future. Why should the immigrant just add to the perpetuated misery of past immigrant experience? Why should this degrading experience, now taken for granted as part of the romantic patrimony, be endlessly imposed on every future immigrant, who must wear it like a pillory of American identity? No! The “no-place” should be a “No!-place.” And once formulated in the immigrant’s mind, it must be projected onto both the future and the past. The No!-place is an unacceptable place, the site of “my personal experience that I refuse to accept for today, for tomorrow, and forever, for myself, my children, for everyone, immigrants and nonimmigrants alike.” “My utopia,” says the immigrant, “proposes a vision of hope in which the society of tomorrow houses no place for the perpetuation of the kind of experience I am forced to live through today, the kind of misery that your immigrant parents and grandparents were forced to accept yesterday.” The immigrant’s No!-place is at once a vision, a criticism, and a resistance.

Cultivation of the tradition of the nameless has a self-defensive function as well: to survive, the stranger must guard against the fate of nomads, who, first deprived by the victors of their history (and even the right to have a history), were later forced to function as merely geographic subjects. As the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari teach us, “The defeat of the nomads was such, so complete, that history is one with the triumph of States.”² Just as we have been told that nomads “invented nothing,” so we have presumed that migrants and immigrants have nothing to contribute to public discourse.

But the most questionable question, "Where are you from?," should never replace "In what way can your past and present experience contribute to everybody's well-being today and tomorrow?"

The infusion of the tradition of the vanquished (a critical-visionary history) into the history of the victors (a catastrophic-progress history) can be made by strangers thanks to their *political intuition of the present*. Such an intuition realizes the danger of repeating yesterday's injustices today and tomorrow. Every day a new history needs to be written, one that will retrieve the tradition of the vanquished. This new history, what Nietzsche would call a "critical history," is announced by the stranger and can help to sustain the agonistic democratic process. As philosopher Simon Critchley points out, "Democracy is the form of society committed to the political equality of all its citizens and the ethical inequality of myself faced with the Other. . . . Thus the rational order of the *polis* is justified by a philosophical language which criticizes the *polis* in the name of what it excludes or marginalizes, the pre-rational one-for-the-other of ethics."³ In other words, democracy can be kept alive by an ongoing recognition, exposition, and legalization of the strangers' "illegitimate" experience, their "illegible" past, and their "illegal" present.

Transitional Artifice

As psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva writes, "Your speech has no past and will have no power over the future of the group: why should one listen to it? . . . One will listen to you only in absent-minded, amused fashion, and one will forget you in order to go on with serious matters. The foreigner's speech can bank only on its bare rhetorical strength, and the inherent desires he or she has invested in it." Unfortunately, this perception by the nonstranger also conforms to the symptomatic condition of the stranger: "Settled within himself, the foreigner has no self. Barely an empty confidence, valueless, which focuses his possibilities of being constantly other, according to others' wishes and to circumstances. I do what *they* want *me* to, but it is not "me" — "me" is elsewhere, "me" belongs to no one, "me" does not belong to "me," . . . does "me" exist?"⁴ As Kristeva's statement suggests, strangers need to gain confidence in the possibility of communicating their own experiences, and they need to be able to communicate this confidence as well. The stranger must learn to take his or her own experience seriously. To gain this confidence, however, the stranger must find a communicative form for the experience, then establish a playful distance from it.

9 Conversely, the nonstranger, or "local," must gain a playful distance from his or her own fear of the stranger to establish a healthy curiosity that will foster communication and closer contact. The presence of a stranger evokes in the nonstranger a well-hidden secret: the recognition of one's own strangeness. The stranger is unfamiliar and uncanny (*unheimlich* in German, or "unhomely"). The uncanny, Freud says, is everything that "ought to have remained hidden but has come to light." Kristeva claims that the ideal situation would be one in which the nonstranger recognized his or her own uncanny strangeness. As she says, "The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners." In search of an antixenophobic society, Kristeva notes Freud's stress on "those [esthetic] works in which the uncanny effect is abolished because of the very fact that the entire world of the narrative is fictitious. Such are fairy tales, in which the generalized artifice spares us any possible comparison between sign, imagination, and material reality. As a consequence, artifice neutralizes uncanniness and makes all returns of the repressed plausible, acceptable, and pleasurable."⁵

In sum, the state of being a stranger accumulates as an experience with no form, no language, no expression, and no right to be communicated, and thus becomes a dangerous psychic symptom. This stranger-ness is a strangely familiar, secret, and uncanny condition that we all share and that, when repressed in the ideological caves of our subjectivity, can sometimes explode in the face of an actual stranger. Between the speechless pain of the actual stranger and the sequestered fear of one's own strangeness lies the real frontier to be challenged. Can art operate as a revelatory, expressive, and interrogative passage through such a frontier? Can it be an inspiration, provocation, and opening act for a new form of communication in a nonxenophobic community? If the stranger is a prophet who interrupts history, today's artists and designers should help the prophet by designing special equipment for such an intervention.

The Prophet's Prosthesis

Such equipment would be the result of "interrogative design," a critical articulation of what is most questionable and unacceptable in the present: the stranger's pain in survival. The oldest and most common reference to this kind of articulation and design is the bandage. A bandage covers and treats a wound while at the same time exposing its presence. Its presence signifies both the experience of pain and the hope of recovery. Is it possible to develop this concept further? Could we invent a bandage that would communicate,

Allemagne : extrémisme

Un Polonais de 19 ans a eu la langue sectionnée, vendredi à Berlin, par des agresseurs qu'il a identifié comme des extrémistes de droite, a indiqué hier la police. Par ailleurs, à Francfort-sur-l'Oder, deux demandeurs d'asile ont été blessés, samedi soir, à l'issue d'une bagarre entre des réfugiés et des Allemands.

A nineteen-year-old Pole had his tongue cut out on Friday in Berlin by assailants identified as right-wing extremists, police reported yesterday.

Elsewhere, in Frankfurt-amder-Oder [on the Polish border], two asylum seekers were wounded on Saturday night, while trying to escape a melee between refugees and Germans.

interrogate, and articulate the circumstances and the experience of the injury? Could such a transformed bandage address the ills of the outside world as perceived by the wounded? To see the world as seen by the wound!

In the complexity of the contemporary urban context, this equipment becomes a device for communication and mediation—design as tactical media, its purpose being to treat not only the individual human suffering but also the external society that produced the wound. Could this device create new conditions that would soon render the need for it obsolete? Or, if needed, could it become a prosthesis, a (semi)permanent extension of the body (politic)? Such design requires thinking both clinically (therapeutically) and critically.

Over the centuries and millennia, the memory and tradition of the nameless developed certain *tactical* features against the *strategic* character of the history of the victors. Those features, according to Benjamin, have a profoundly “interactive” character based on “nonlinearity, radical negativity,” performativity, and “arrest of time.” The tactics of this tradition consist of storytelling, magic, miracle, humor, and entertainment (refer back to Freud). This is a “discontinuous tradition while continuity is that of the victor.”⁶ The tradition of the vanquished brings something new and unknown to the understanding of lived time, transposing subjective experience from the personal sphere to the historical.

Even in those societies that are most open, inviting, and attentive to the displaced, the psychological needs of immigrants are far less recognized than those of children, for instance. But like children, immigrants must develop their autonomous identities in the process of psychic development, independent of internal and external conditions or personal cultures. And they must do so in an experimental, creative, and playful way, in an atmosphere of internal and external trust. Yet, unlike children, they cannot expect the necessary protective space, normally provided by parents or society, for such experiment and play. On the one hand, then, immigrants are treated as hopeless and voiceless, incapable infants or defiant children. On the other hand, they are expected to be super-adults, self-motivated entrepreneurs, and fully independent individuals capable of facing a harsh new world. At the same time, the locals are treated as infants by the immigrants, who believe that the hostile or “naive” native residents do not understand the “sophistication” of the newcomers. The immigrants expect the locals to be super-adults and to extend themselves in special ways to understand foreign customs, ideas, and experiences. Both locals and aliens must refuse to be infantilized or expected to be super-adults.

This situation demands a new artifice that would serve both needs: inspiring playful distance and playful contact, as well as reinforcing the stranger's confidence in communicating the experience of alienation. To defuse xenophobic paranoias, one important function of this psycho-social artifice would be to neutralize the uncanniness evoked by the presence of a stranger. To do this, such an artifice should take the form of a special kind of equipment designed to function as a "fictitious narrative," one that nonetheless preserves and disseminates an emotional understanding of a painful and unacceptable reality.

On the other hand, if this psycho-social artifice is to be of any use to the stranger, it would have to function as, in D. W. Winnicott's terms, a "transitional object" or "transitional phenomenon," or, in extreme cases, as a transitional prosthesis. For the immigrant, such equipment would have to be perceived as neither internal nor external but belonging to a "[third zone] of experience in the potential space between the individual and the environment." This space "depends on experience which leads to trust. It can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living."⁷

The zones, spaces, and objects that immigrants invent are the territories of play, distance, irony, and humor: the uncanny in the locals' terrain, where the familiar and the unfamiliar wrestle with each other and where the lost land argues and jokes in a mother tongue with the promised land, speaking in the newly acquired language of a new critical history and a new vision of hope. The new kind of "transitional object" must be created here, where the zones of experience of the newcomer and the local can be encouraged, overlapped, and shared. But it is the immigrant who must introduce such an object first. The immigrant is the one who, in order to survive, must learn how to be both provocative and tactful.

Left alone with such newly designed equipment, the immigrant could create a space where he or she could accept, shape, even enjoy the complexity and originality of his or her own strange and often painful experiences. Bringing the instrument into the open would create the sacred and ethical space of the "third zone." This space exists not only between the stranger and the non-stranger but also between the inner and outer worlds of the stranger; between the stranger, the nonstranger, and the "third person" (who may or may not be a stranger, and who represents the point of view of "we," of the larger society as a whole); and, lastly, as in the case of the *Alien Staff*, between prerecorded

speech and improvised live speech, contained and "broadcast" by the instrument and performed by the stranger.

In this way, the newly designed equipment could inspire a birth of a new community, even a temporary and momentary rebirth of democratic public space based on the agonistic speech acts and discourses that Hannah Arendt supported, enacted in a place that allows for the "unleashing of passions." Georges Bataille called such a place "sacred." This space will be constituted through the use of the Immigrant Instruments, which, in this way, will become "sacred objects." It will be constituted on the site of the newcomer, who is the stake of the society to come and the new mentality to be born.

The Return of the Said

To summarize, the interruption of the victors by the nameless can only happen through the design and implementation of a new psycho-cultural artifice—transitional object, which, on the one hand, will help the stranger to open up and come forward and, on the other hand, will encourage the nonstranger and other strangers to bring themselves closer to the stranger's experience and presence. This will inspire the new discourse in which the strangeness can be shared across all social boundaries.

In doing so, such new equipment will provide both the means and the field of play, where the speechless can creatively articulate their "saying," interrupting the flow of the "said." Armed with the new equipment, strangers will hopefully gain new rhetorical power to wrestle with the power of the "said." The interactive character of the encounter with the "said," the irony and humor of this unsolicited performance, will help to articulate, expose, and eventually disseminate the image of their unstable identity as well as the complex world of their multiplicity and their internal antagonisms, all overlapping in the process of becoming. Despite all of the power thus gained, the stranger, speaking from the bottom of the experience of the vanquished, will not resemble the victor in speech. As Emmanuel Levinas would say, the stranger, during the performance, will appear as the "said," but this time as the "justifiable said," since the traces of the original "saying" will remain the sole basis of his or her speech act.⁸

The stranger equipped with the immigrant instrument will be able to speak back to all of those strangers or nonstrangers who would like to cast the stranger in some preconceived mold of an individual or collective identity. The strangers and their doubles—the instruments—could disagree with each other

or with anybody who wants to fuse the strangers into a particular culture or community. The use of the immigrant instruments, while encouraging trust, can displace any preconceptions of communion and commonality, protecting the stranger's right to exist as a unique singular human being and the right to announce or denounce his or her affiliations and associations.

The summary of the main points for the design of a new equipment for strangers:

Proposition 1: Strangers in their relation to the self and to the nonstranger (as well as to other strangers) need a thing-in-between, an equipment-artifice that will open up discussion and allow them to reveal and to share (communicate) their experiences, identities, visions, and unique strangenesses.

Proposition 2: Such equipment (communicative instrument) is an emergency need in today's migratory era, and the first user of the instrument must be the immigrant, followed by other foreigners, and then all of those native locals who are so profoundly estranged, infantilized, silenced, and excluded that they resemble the immigrant, even if they did not experience crossing the "proper" geopolitical borders.

Proposition 3: Such equipment, which I call the Immigrant Instrument, must offer healing powers to its users, overcoming the ever-present fear of one's own strangeness, as well as communicating the strangeness with playfulness, confidence, and power. For this purpose, the Instrument must operate as a psychological container (the confident companion) and as a social opening (displayed-presenter), the stranger's speaking double.

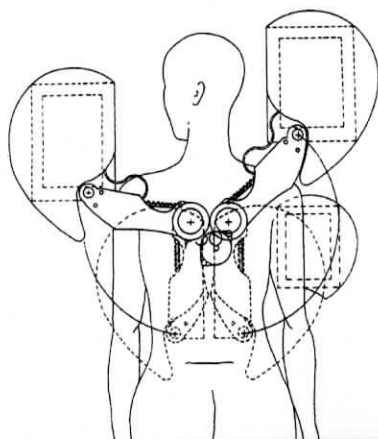
Proposition 4: The Immigrant Instrument must bring the interlocutor closer to the stranger. To achieve this goal, the Instrument must first take attention away from its user and bring the focus on itself as a "bizarre," "magical," "strange," or "curious" object, cliché, totem, attribute, technological gadget, or prosthetic device. In the second stage of its operation, the Instrument will expose, at a close distance, the stranger as speech-act virtuoso, who, armed with and empowered by the new media technology and ancient instrumental know-how, will be able to entertain and announce her or his critical and prophetic presence. Achieving such goals, the Instrument will increase the user's communicative abilities despite all psychic, linguistic, and cultural barriers in the context of the present-day xenophobia.

Proposition 5: The Immigrant Instrument must operate both as a transitional object (Winnicott) and as a communicative artifice (Kristeva).

Proposition 6: The Immigrant Instrument must function as an artifice, inspiring playful distance and playful contact. The foreigners must learn to take their own experience seriously; to see, however, that one's own often painful experience requires the ability to establish a playful distance from it. Conversely, to establish a communicative contact with the stranger, the nonstranger must gain equally playful distance from his or her fear of the stranger.

Proposition 7: The situation of today's immigrant (who is both a psychic and a social symptom) requires an instrument that would help its operator to become both the patient and the doctor. Self-healing must be combined with healing others, being healed while healing, making whole, and articulating and curing wounded psycho-social relations.

The Immigrant Instrument must aid the stranger in making the transition to nonstrangeness while assisting the local in recognizing his or her own strangeness. This will contribute, as Kristeva would like, to the formation of a communicative cross-stratum based on shared multiplicity of identities in an unstable process of becoming a community or, better, a community of becoming, the only commonality of which will be its communicated uncanny strangeness.



1. Stéphane Mosès, "The Theological-Political Model of History," *History and Memory* 1 (Tel Aviv University, 1989), pp. 11, 13.
2. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986), p. 73.
3. Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 235, 239.
4. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 20–21, 8.
5. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), vol. 17, p. 225; Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, pp. 192, 187.
6. See the discussion of Benjamin in Mosès, "The Theological-Political Model of History."
7. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971), p. 103.
8. For an elaboration of the Levinasian concepts of "saying" and "the said," see the chapter "A Levinasian Politics of Ethical Difference," in Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, pp. 229–236.

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