

Become something new to each other  
Roz Crews

As a young person, I thought romantic relationships with deep conversation, eye gazing, and full disclosure were the most powerful form of connection. Even more valuable than familial relationships and friendships, two other highly prized forms of relationship. This intensity wasn't something I ever experienced, rather it was an invented amalgamation of examples I saw in movies and TV shows and heard about in songs. With that belief came a lot of pressure—pressure to conform my desires around social expectations of love and marriage, pressure on myself to find someone with whom I could share everything, and pressure I put on other people to experience that “joy” with me. As people do, I've aged and had more experiences with relationships, and my tone has shifted. One of the most influential causes of that shift is my experience as a socially engaged artist. Before getting an MFA in the field of “art and social practice,” I was a very social human with interests spanning art, archaeology, public education, pop culture, and sociology, but when I realized that I could combine those interests into an art practice that would intersect with my social abilities, I thought I stumbled into a dreamland.

As my art practice became more social, I gradually started to withdraw from social experiences that weren't part of my work. Doors shut on close friendships, familial connections, and my romantic partner and I split. A few things were happening simultaneously. I was becoming aware of larger societal structures and systems of oppression as I deepened my understanding of how artists can engage and interact with those structures. I began to see my own intimate relationships in a new light: flooded with privilege, injustice, power struggles, trauma, and conflict. My naivety started to dissipate, and I found myself asking new questions: of myself, my peers, and society at large. Suddenly, romance didn't seem important. Friendship felt fraught. I was living 2,500 miles away from my family. What mattered most to me at that time was my art, and I was exploring how other people, especially strangers, could weave in and out of my projects, filling the work with meaning and taking with them their own unique experience that wouldn't have existed without the frame of an art project. I was operating on the assumption that the experiences engendered through my practice were mutually beneficial despite being imbued with power differentials.

Eventually I found myself practicing in the context of academic institutions, being asked to think publicly about how universities can foster intentional space for “community building.” This task caused me to consider the questions: “Whose community?” and “What methods do these institutions use to divide, oppress, and disempower specific communities while privileging others?” I became more socially withdrawn than ever before, and I spent spare time reflecting on how I've been affected by academic institutions—who I've hurt along the way, what I've done to “succeed” as an “individual,” wondering who I can trust and who can trust me. Simultaneously, I was engaging hundreds of college students each month in a variety of workshops, activities, events, and processes that took many shapes. Sometimes an exhibition, a publication, or a public dialogue would emerge as a punctuation mark in the process. Other

times, the “art” manifested as private conversations behind closed doors where I heard first-hand accounts of people’s experiences being harmed by the institution and the powers that uphold it. The thread connecting each activity is me, exerting a lot of social and emotional labor in the context of my art practice. During my romantic-relationship priority phase, I only shared this type of labor when I was designing themed parties or coordinating elaborate, absurd obstacle courses with my closest friends and lovers.

The shift from exerting emotional and social energy only for my friends and family to prioritizing that energy for my art practice caused a lot of rupture in my life. Using that type of energy as a tool gave me a new way to express myself as an artist, and that has become extremely useful, freeing up how I think about the limits and forms of creativity. I’m really proud of that, but that shift has also challenged where I find joy, support, compassion, and stability. In 2018, I was at the peak of being unsure how to balance my practice with my life. The two had become so entangled that I couldn’t point out what was personal growth and what was professional growth. I found more love and companionship in relationships that I had with acquaintances participating in my projects than I did with people who I’d known for years. And somehow, I found power in the gray area between estrangement and friendship. On a personal level, I’ve struggled with mental health, abuse, and trauma throughout my life, and in some ways, I think my budding art practice gave me an opportunity to actively avoid intimacy with close friends and family as a way to cope with past trauma. It seemed like I could have the meaningful conversations I craved and depended on without having to work through conflict or express my true feelings, giving me the pleasure of intimacy without the dangers of close relationships.

I’ve found a lot of personal power and healing through my relational art practice because it’s made this space for me to have intimacy and connection with strangers. I tend to imagine the strangers as people whom I can trust, talk to, be vulnerable with, and at the same time, I can carefully outline and determine what I owe them—being sure to follow through on my promises. I get to hold the power and choose when to share it, and I have a responsibility to not exploit. For a moment, my practice somehow gave me the courage to have the types of relationships I wanted without the shame and guilt of not having deeper or more committed connections. This is obviously complicated - shouldn’t I have real relationships outside of the connections I make through my art? Maybe, but what if I let myself be empowered to exist how I want to or need to exist? What’s the problem with that?

More recently, my projects have taught me crucial skills like negotiation, cooperation, and conflict resolution, and I have started to develop some of my deepest friendships as a result of this work. I still relish in the in-between, and I make space for relationships along the spectrum of total stranger to life-long partner—there’s something valuable in each type (and there are endless types), something powerful in knowing that our relationships can shift and evolve, that we can become something new to each other.

In the last year, I’ve committed myself to becoming a better friend—someone who listens, who apologizes, who enjoys company, who initiates plans, who responds to messages, who holds

people accountable, who genuinely cares. I'm attempting this new phase of life because I've spent a long time regretting the way past relationships ended and I'm trying to move through feelings of anger that I've held towards family and friends. I've learned the skills of negotiation, collaboration, and non-violent communication that are helping me in this exploration away from privileging acquaintances over friends.

I've witnessed the power of extending a hand or an ear to a complete stranger even when it's done in a purposefully constructed way that is not intended to produce life-long friendships. For this reason, I believe in creating social scenarios that ask us to question our own expectations of relationships and challenge the idea that socially engaged art has to solve a social problem or produce everlasting connections. Sometimes there is power (maybe even catharsis) in knowing you (or me) for only a brief moment.