Ident: Serpentine Podcast: Intimacies.

[Soft ambient electronic tones rise from the silence and evolve slowly beneath the speech]


Scottee: The collective of strangers coming together is the thing that makes, I think, the magic happen, but it requires people to reveal part of themselves. And I do a lot of work to make that safe.

Gaylene Gould: [speaking slowly] I live alone on the fifth floor of a block of flats and, sometimes, days can go by without connecting with anyone. And often, because I choose it to be that way. I’m now beginning to worry though about my capacity for intimacy: my ability to open myself to a more vulnerable way of connecting with myself and with others. [Music fades out and begins again in brighter tones]

Hello and welcome to the first episode of a new series of Serpentine Podcast. I’m Gaylene Gould, an artist and explorer of transformative ideas. And in the last series, REWORLDING, we were asking some big questions about how we each might reshape a new world. One that’s kinder, more resilient and hopeful, inspired by the practices of artists and thinkers. Now we are turning the exploration back onto ourselves to focus on intimacy. We’re getting up close and personal, trying to understand what intimacy might feel like at a time greatly divided by global health and wealth crises, identity wars and general peddled mistrust. There’s a direct connection between our inside world and the one outside. Our intimate understanding of ourselves and our relationships will affect the world we go on to create. Personally, I think I need a kind of intimacy M.O.T., a tune up. I want to challenge myself to connect with more courage and ask braver questions. And if you do too, then come with us because we are going in. This series will explore six different kinds of intimacy in all their entangled complexities, [bird song echoes and drifts over the music] from our relationships with family, the things we fear most, our deepest desires, the way our surroundings influence our intimacy, and of course, intimacy with our innermost selves. And in this first episode, we’re heading out from a not so obvious starting point. [Music fades, bird song continues before fading out]

[Whispered]: Episode one, intimacy with strangers.
I’m a person who likes to create spaces where strangers can form intimacy. Maybe it’s because I’m from friendly Leicester, and we’re used to chatting with strangers in a checkout queue or at a bus stop. And some of my most intimate moments are when jumping joyously with a mass of strangers on the dancefloor, or silently standing beside a stranger, looking at the same piece of art, wondering if they’re feeling the same. However, the term stranger danger exists for a reason. Not just fear of violence from those not invested in our wellbeing, but the dangers of being subsumed by others’ needs and desires. This episode will explore both troubling and blissful ends. Each episode in this series will also offer me the privilege of meeting strangers, people whose work it is to explore intimacy. And as we’re sharing thoughts on the topic, these conversations end up becoming an exercise in intimacy. We start out as strangers, but in the end, we get to know each other very well.

After the Tone ident: [Phone dialing, ringing tone, bold string arrangement, choral voices singing to a crescendo]: After the tone, after the tone, leave your message after the tone! [Neutral electronic bleep tone to silence]

Scottee: This time on after the tone, self-care, Harry Styles, a case of laryngitis and growing up in a cult. Hello friends, it’s me, a poor them’s Sam Smith. And welcome back to the O.G. P.O.D., that’s been giving you, the general public, the right to respond for far too long if you ask me.

Gaylene Gould: That’s Scottee and their fantastic podcast, After the Tone. Scottee is a multi-award-winning artist who makes work for theatres and for ears and for walls, which is often about the stuff that we try to keep private. Scottee’s work covers social justice, class, queerness bodies and more, never shying away from confronting and challenging topics and often laying his own soul bare. After the Tone is a masterclass in creating a community of strangers. And listening in makes me feel like I’m already part of that community. This makes Scottee the perfect person to start this series on intimacy with. I got on a train with our producer Katie, to head up north and to meet them at Home Theatre, Manchester, a place they’ve often performed, to have a natter and get some advice.

[Music continues]

Entering theatre] Here’s why I realised I thought you were from Manchester. Even though you obviously haven’t got a Manchester accent [Scottee laughs], it’s because which we’ll talk about is for want of a better term, your friendliness. Is that true?

Scottee: Well, I’m common. [Laughs]
Gaylene Gould: Well, that's true!

Scottee: You know... [laughs]

Gaylene Gould: From one commoner to the other. That's very true. [Music fades out] There's a way in which you are at ease with creating an intimacy.

Scottee: Uh-huh. Yeah. And I'm wondering if that's children and grandchildren of migrants as well. Because my grandparents, particularly my grandfather, taught me to talk to everybody.

Gaylene Gould: And your grandfather was from?

Scottee: Ireland. And it was very much like, 'this is how you get on.' But my granddad would talk to everybody. He'd make himself familiar to everybody. Because I definitely felt growing up this pressure to fit in.

Gaylene Gould: How do you think that affected your relationship with people you didn't know?

Scottee: I think if, if I spot something in somebody that I feel is close to me, I feel like I understand you or we might understand each other. I think you start to find parallels between people that maybe are slightly abstract from your own, but you can see a gauze through the world in a similar way. And I think my mum and my granddad taught me empathy as well. Particularly if you grow up in poverty and you see that people struggle, you know how it feels. And so if you see it, you kind of want to take upon yourself to solve it and change it. And then you have to do a lot of therapy in your thirties to realise that you're not a saviour, you can't save people. So, I think intimacy's complex to me in that way where I think my friendliness or my approach is not only classed, but I think it's born out of difference and struggle and shame.

Gaylene Gould: I was wondering about this truthfulness that you went into your work with, when you were younger. And I'm wondering about if you can remember at the time what your need might have been to share that with strangers?

Scottee: I mean, we can post-rationalise. I could sit here and be like, 'well, you know, it was this great big plan!' It wasn't, it was purely need. I'd just become homeless and I'd just got this council bedsit and I needed to pay the bills. And there was a sector that was beckoning me to make work because my voice wasn't considered to be heard. You know, I was like, as one programmer said, I was 'the real deal'. You know, self-taught, council, mouthy, not art-
school-trained, any of that. So, it was like [makes summoning mouth clicks] funding! And you know, when people say to you like, we'll offer you space and money and time and you start to get indoctrinated into a sector that enjoys the perversion of your existence. And then people sit and they pay 20 quid to nod and be like, 'oh my God, how awful'. But really what’s going on is, 'thank God it didn’t happen to me'. There’s a dirtiness to intimacy.

On the way here, I was thinking about intimacy and agency, and I was thinking, we think of intimacy as something you offer. And particularly when I first started, I had this idea that I was offering something, I was deciding. And I think if I look very crassly and compartmentalise who I am, growing up in social housing and shoddy social housing at that, and being homeless as a child and as an adult growing up in close quarters with people, intimacy is something you are not afforded. But intimacy is something that you’re not afforded to your neighbours either cos they all know what’s going on in your life because you live in such close quarters. So that intimacy with strangers is there from day one. And I left social housing seven years ago. So, I’ve lived a classed intimacy the majority of my life.

If I think of queerness, that intimacy is robbed from me from very young age because you have to declare the act of intimacy, or your desire, or what it is that you desire. So, I don’t know when I first started making work, if intimacy was ever a choice, it was just a way of being because that’s how it’s all always been.

[10:00]

But ultimately, I am seeking and I’m now on a journey in which what I offer to people in my work, I also offer myself. That I will no longer cut myself for the benefit of middle class education. I will no longer pick scabs so that other people can feel heard. I’m trying to work out a new way, a softer way of moving forward that comforts me, that gives me a sense of softness and hospitality.

Gaylene Gould: There is an element of public service, right? In the kind of work that you’ve been doing in many ways. Yes, it's about you as an artist, what you wanna make, but actually it is about you holding the space and creating an intervention in a space for a range of people, jamming the door open, right, for all these stories. And so, I can imagine why your foot’s tired! [Gaylene and Scottee laugh] What are you discovering in this new side of things, which is radical hospitality for yourself?

Scottee: Well, one of those things was recognising the foot in the door, actually... the tired ankle. I’m gonna really love that phrase. Thank you so much, that’s a gift. And being able to hear people when they recognise, you know, like you just did there, you recognise something and being able to hear it and not make it small or be embarrassed by it... Respecting myself. I think at the moment what it is, is that I’m contributing to other people’s ideas. So, I dunno, I’m figuring it out. I’m working it out. And once I’ve worked that out, I’ll think I’ll understand what intimacy looks like moving forward.
There’s something which I find difficult about theatre, which is that I’ve got my fingers burned. The very act of performance means you have to repeat. You get up there and if it’s a difficult thing for you that you are talking about, you are selling parts of yourself repeatedly until the bucket’s empty. Right? And when I’m on stage, everybody knows what everybody thinks of it because of how everybody responds to it. It’s so immediate. [Soft ambient electronic tones rise from the silence; melancholy and affirmative] But in audio, you are able to create that intimacy cos you’re in people’s ears. You’re in people’s real life when they are on the train, when they are cooking, when they are doing those parts of life that they don’t want to do. So, they want to be accompanied, and you are there. And so, I think I’m being led by form for what intimacy might look like for me in the future.

[Electronic tones continue, modulating and layering in mood and textures that rise and fall]

**Gaylene Gould:** Well, first off, I think we listeners can agree the audio is indeed a great way to create intimacy. But also hearing that, again, I’m reminded of how at ease I felt with Scottee and I think it’s because of his ease with himself or rather how honest he is about grappling to find ease with himself. And joining me in this very intimate studio now is Tamsin Hong, who’s Exhibitions Curator at Serpentine. Tamsin, I’m so thankful for you to be here with me today.

**Tamsin Hong:** Oh, thank you so much for sharing this space with me. And yeah, it was just so, so wonderful to hear Scottee’s voice and his reflections. Something that really struck me about Scottee and hearing them speak. The term I wanna use is courageously vulnerable in their conversation with you, which I really, really enjoyed hearing.

**Gaylene Gould:** Yeah. I think that courageous vulnerability, which I think is a great term to refer to Scottee, seems to be kind of the life thread of their whole artistic practice, exploring this relationship with themselves, but with others at the same time. There is something there around whose intimacy has a certain kind of value, like who's expected to reveal themselves because of their perceived identity. And people are like, ‘that’s your value in the world. You can tell us all about your tribe!’

**Tamsin Hong:** That’s such a perceptive way of looking at what Scottee was revealing to us because I one hundred percent agree with you that there are those of us who experienced stereotypes who were on the receiving end of that. And we often feel like we’re in the vitrine when we encounter someone else.

**Gaylene Gould:** Yes.
Tamsin Hong: And someone else feels that they have the right to know about you. [Music fades to silence] To have your stories revealed to them because you are different. You are different from them. And they believe that you are performing an identity.

Gaylene Gould: Yes.

Tamsin Hong: Rather than actually being a sovereign person who has that identity as part of the many complexities of who you are. It’s not something that's slapped on, it's something that's in our skin and in our bones. It's right through to our ancestors, perhaps.

Gaylene Gould: Yes.

Tamsin Hong: Perhaps it’s right through our day-to-day experience of the world and how we encounter everything that we experience. It can be how we relate to others, but for whatever reason, this idea of identity for other people can be perceived as something that’s performed.

Gaylene Gould: Yes, that’s right. And this idea of that privacy becomes luxury. Certain people have privilege and certain people are expected to continually be public beings.

Tamsin Hong: Mmm.

Gaylene Gould: And that what that does to intimacy and how that can make it feel transactional.

Tamsin Hong: And I think that’s why so many of us feel exhausted by those stereotypes and having to perform them and respond to them. And so, when I’m thinking about intimacies, I can’t help but think about consent at the same time. Intimacies can be violated if they are taken without permission. And this is where the consent issue seems so important to what Scottee’s talking about. It seems like when they’re performing their intimacies again and again. There’s now an expectation and they’re not able to withdraw from that. They then have to perform it.

Gaylene Gould: Yes. [Clean electronic tones rise from the silence and swell in intensity] So, Tamsin let’s talk intimately about you [laughs] and tell us what you do at Serpentine? How does this question of intimacy with strangers maybe relate to what you do there?
Tamsin Hong: So, I'm a new part of Serpentine. I'm a new Exhibitions Curator. But a part of that is very much working with artists, figuring out ways of sharing their practice with a general audience who they may never meet. [Music fades out] I'm a person who works a lot with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. You can probably tell from my accent, I'm not from here [Gaylene laughs]. I'm born on Ngunnawal Country, which is an unceded territory in the place now known as Australia. And sometimes artists will share with me stories, contexts, intimacies, which they will then let me know are not for a general audience. That it is being shared in trust. And the continued relationship with those artists is very much about honouring those boundaries. [Rising electronic notes return, ascending the scale and repeating inquisitively] I'm sure you know this, that the term curator comes from the Latin root 'to care', which I love. I mean, in previous eras it was the keeper, the keeper of the collection. I think in Greenwich they have a Keeper of Time, which fascinates me as someone who works in performance and liveness, a Keeper of Time, how extraordinary. But curators, if we are care-centred in our practice, then hopefully that naturally comes about.

Gaylene Gould: Well, another really interesting artist thinking about – among many of the things – intimacy and strangers, is the American conceptual artist and philosopher Adrian Piper. Over the decades, Adrian's works have engaged people in surprising ways from the Probable Trust Registry where she asked people to take an honesty oath, to Adrian Piper Moves to Berlin, a performance work in which she dances alone in the middle of Berlin's Alexanderplatz. Adrian pays critical attention to how we move through the world, perceive one another and interact. And in her early works, she often interacted with strangers in her performances. Now, though, she's highly selective about engagements, no longer does in-person interviews and avoids openings for the most part. So, we were grateful and intrigued when she responded to questions we sent her by email. The whole exchange you're about to hear is read by a voice actor with Adrian's answers, given a special Darth Vader effect as per her request. [Music fades to silence]

Voice Actor: [Voice flat, speaking clearly; continues throughout exchange] What does intimacy mean to you?

Adrian Piper: [Voice distorted through an electronic filter; continues throughout exchange] A meeting of minds.

Voice Actor: Has it evolved over time in your practice or your perception of the world?

Adrian Piper: I never think about it in my practice. I presuppose it. The concept doesn’t enter into my perception of the world.
Voice Actor: A lot of your work deals with ideas of otherness, isolation and perception. How do you define strangers or what it means to be a stranger?

Adrian Piper: I define strangers as other people I see clearly enough not to presume familiarity with. I define what it means to be a stranger as the state in which I'm paying attention to my environment and my environment is paying attention to me.

Voice Actor: What do you use intimacy to explore, expose, or make possible?

Adrian Piper: I don't use intimacy to do anything. It is a rare and valued end in itself.

Voice Actor: Have you come across any risks when inviting intimacy or connection with others in your work?

Adrian Piper: Inviting intimacy or connection with others in my work is not something I intentionally do.

Voice Actor: With your early Calling Cards, you establish who you are and your identity.

Adrian Piper: An interesting interpretation of those works

Voice Actor: While setting boundaries and shifting forthcoming interactions.

Adrian Piper: Again, an interesting interpretation of the work, although not part of my motivation in doing it.

Voice Actor: What happened in relationships, interactions between you and others when you passed out these cards?


Voice Actor: A lot of your works like Funk Lessons engage with public performance in a group setting. But with works like Adrian Moves to Berlin, you still perform in public, but in a more solitary, introspective manner. How has your relationship to audience and public performance shifted throughout the years and with different performances? Why is this?
Adrian Piper: I stopped appearing in public at all in 2015 after my visibility level made it impossible to continue to conduct my life and protect my safety as an anonymous private citizen. Adrian Moves to Berlin depended on that anonymity. That is why I no longer do performances, give talks, or go to openings. My relationship to openings is like a vampire's relation to sunlight.

Voice Actor: Much of your work pushes the boundaries of institutions and their functions. Can you tell us more about What Will Become of Me?

Adrian Piper: Not really. I don’t have much to add to what I’ve already said about it.

Voice Actor: What does it mean for you to make an arts institution responsible for contemporary human remains?

Adrian Piper: What it means would be a question for a philosophically-minded viewer to answer.

Voice Actor: What is your relationship to the institution?

Adrian Piper: My relationship is to particular individuals, not to the abstract object that picks them out.

Voice Actor: What kinds of intimacy or lack of it does the relationship between you and a museum open up?

Adrian Piper: As a museum doesn’t have a mind, my mind can't meet it. So intimacy with the museum isn't possible, at least not for me.

Voice Actor: With the Probable Trust Registry, The Rules of the Game no.1-3, you ask people to take an oath of trust, reliability, and ethics. Can you tell us more about the Probable Trust Registry and what the implications of this might be for communication and connection? What do you hope to do by entering into a contract with strangers binding you for life?

Adrian Piper: I published a philosophy article about exactly these questions around the same time I was conceptualising the Probable Trust Registry. It’s called ‘Kant’s Two Solutions to the Free Rider Problem’. It’s available for free download at the APRA Foundation Berlin website.

Voice Actor: What is the connection between intimacy and honesty?
Adrian Piper: Honesty is a necessary but not sufficient condition of intimacy.

Voice Actor: What is the most intimate form of public space you have experienced, conceived, or convened?

Adrian Piper: On my understanding of intimacy, space has nothing to do with it. Time doesn't either.

Voice Actor: What are some rules of engagement you can give us to prompt interactions and situations that invite intimacy?

Adrian Piper: One, open your mind and close your mouth. Two, look, listen and learn. Three, practice humility. Four, seek commonality.

Voice Actor: What forms of intimacy do you hope to expand and experiment with?

Adrian Piper: None. It finds me when I’m ready for it.

[Sof ambient electronic tones return]

Gaylene Gould: So, Tamsin, I mean what an interesting example of Adrian's personal boundaries, right? It reminds me quite a lot of Scottee talking about radical hospitality for the self.

Tamsin Hong: You know, there was so much to take in. I was really taken by this sense of Adrian Piper’s respect for people's sovereignty. She does not demand intimacy. I loved that. That exchange that we were talking about. That transactional exchange is something that she’s not demanding of someone who interacts with her work. And she really respects however someone wants to engage with her. And I kept hearing that throughout her, her deep respect for individuals. I found that very moving. And very empowering, actually, as well.

Gaylene Gould: And also, I love the fact that for an artist who has worked with people a lot and strangers and created spaces for strangers to connect with her and each other, that’s not her goal. Like, her goal isn’t to create intimacy. Like intimacy to her is a meeting of minds, right. It’s not a meeting of blood, guts and soul. It’s a meeting of ideas. I think there is something about artists making these very personal decisions about how intimate and how available they want to be to strangers, I think it’s wise perhaps.

[Music fades to silence]
Serpentine Podcast: Intimacies
Episode 1, Intimacies: Strangers, 22 August 2023

**Tamsin Hong:** We are not fixed. No one is fixed. Artists can't be expected to be fixed either. I really appreciate that we... We adapt, we change, we alter. I want to have the right that in 10 years’ time, when I’ve written something, to have the opportunity to say, I disagree with what I said 10 years ago.

[Soft ambient electronic tones return]

**Gaylene Gould:** Yes!

**Tamsin Hong:** I've learned X, Y, and Z. Yes. And I want to reconsider that position that I had. Because we do alter.

**Gaylene Gould:** As we grow, our desire for shifting and connection with strangers changes. And that’s what I’m hearing with Adrian. And that’s what I’m hearing with Scottee. Talking of Scottee. Some of Adrian’s invitations to intimacy: Open your mind, close your mouth. Look, listen and learn. Practice humility, seek commonality, also underpin Scottee’s work with strangers. As we heard earlier with a clip from their podcast After the Tone, they have a way of welcoming people into their space and holding them with such careful consideration that strangers reveal personal and surprising parts of themselves. So, I asked Scottee a bit more about that.

**Scottee:** Everything I’ve ever tried to make has been about allowing people to exercise their truth, and invites people to celebrate and platform their peculiarness, the thing they’re told to make small. And I think After the Tone, it’s just an extension of that, right? I think it’s working class hospitality. It’s like ‘welcome in, take shoes off. Do you want a cup of tea?’ And of course, it’s audio so it’s all proverbial, you know. [Music fades to silence] I don't think I ever really realised the act of intimacy within that work until started doing the Lives or when it started to become very popular. And I’d meet people in the street, and they’d be shaking and crying or really nervous. And I’d be like, ‘I mean, I’m not Beyonce! As much in my head, I’d like to think so!’ But I didn’t realise the power that it was giving people.

And then doing the Lives and people coming along and like bringing gifts or declaring what it has done for them. But it’s hard for me to sit here and be like, and of course it means a lot to people cos for me it just feels like I’m just having a chat with people that I wish were my friends growing up, who I wished were there when I was in crisis. I wish that I’d known about for me to be able to find normalcy within my peculiarness.

But I do have to acknowledge that I feel sometimes... And I call it a cult. And the reason why I do that is because, you know, I’m sort of identified as the cult leader. And the reason why I call it that is because I want people to recognise that I take it with great responsibility. But that also at the end of the day, it’s an artwork and it’s an entertainment format. You know, it
was really important for me that the expectation that I felt and feel within the arts isn’t handed to these participants. That they feel they self-elect. And that we as a team of people who run that space have a responsibility never to platform something that is active grief, but something that has a question that we could all understand or ruminate on.

[30:00]

Gaylene Gould: I get a good sense, a beautiful sense, a gorgeous sense of the environment you are creating for strangers to come and meet and feel relaxed and show more of themselves. I’m curious about you being the stranger: how you navigate – do you know what I mean? – a world outside of the rules, in a way, that you bring into your own spaces.

Scottee: I think I’ve learnt that I’m not an imposter, but it’s okay to feel peculiar. And when working class artists often ask me like, how do you make peace with it? I’m like, ultimately our stories are better to tell than theirs. Use that as your, moving forward, your drive: you’ve got more to say about the world. You’ve got a more interesting viewpoint. That’s how I think I try to survive and move through those spaces. But I feel that in lots of different ways. So, I like if I go into a queer space, I feel like, ‘oh God, I’m not queer enough. Okay. I’m not the right sort of queer. Like, I don’t have blue hair and a septum piercing.’ And if anybody else was to say that to me, I’d be like, ‘don’t be daft’. But the rules that we impose on ourself as opposed to what we offer other people are very different. Right. We did a whole episode and it was co-presented with my mum, which was like: no more labels. And my mum really respects the labels that people bring to After the Tone. You know, she loves being Scottee’s mum. She loves being on it. But her ethos is, is there a better utopia in us not having to hoard such a difference between each other?

Gaylene Gould: [Snapping fingers in agreement] I’m snapping your mum.

Scottee: [Laughs] She’d love that. But it’s difficult because people have fought for that space. But I think we have to move away slightly from the individual and more into a collective ideal. Because I wonder what happens when those of us who have been marginalised come together and we actually become normalcy. We become centre stage. What happens then?

Gaylene Gould: Obviously, collectivism is all about the meeting of strangers, you know. What have you learned about that? Strangers coming together to collectively offer a voice to something?

Scottee: A big artwork that sort of stands out for me is a show that I made in 2017 and toured until 2022. It’s called Fat Blokes. And I just put a call out to say were there any fat queer individuals who wanted to make a dance show with me? And on day one of rehearsal, we’d never met each other. We all have very different life experiences. I think they were thinking I
had the answers and I was like, ‘no, this is gonna be, we’re gonna make this together!’ And what happened was we made this very beautiful piece of work, which acknowledged the different ways in which we approach fatness and what fatness means to us. But very much a collective idea that we felt like we shouldn’t be punished or killed because of it. Touring that work and making that work and seeing the impact... I don’t think we’ve ever done a performance of that show where we hadn’t had a standing ovation. Because not only are fat people seeing their story and their experience played out, but anyone who was in that room who’s ever critiqued themselves, who ever looked in the mirror and thought, ‘I don’t like this person’, was able to understand themselves through the collective of five strangers coming together and being like, ‘we don’t have to put up with this. Let us show you what we put up with that’s led us to this point of revolution.’ So, I think the collective of strangers coming together is the thing that makes, I think, the magic happen. But it requires people to reveal part of themselves. And I do a lot of work to make that safe.

Gaylene Gould: And what does that entail, that work?

Scottee: It requires people being able to change their story slightly. So, the detail doesn’t feel so true. It requires a cuddle on stage, a check-in. It requires a really fancy cold beverage of their choice in their dressing room mirror afterwards. It requires a show parent who sits behind the set who’s ready and waiting, just in case. So, it requires adaptability, it requires hospitality. It requires you as an artist to listen and understand that your version, what you need, might not be met. And that’s okay, if it means that somebody’s happier and the audiences are leaving with something proactive, then why wouldn’t you do that version?

How I care for myself is a way more complex one because over the last few years I realised the damage that making work like this and then it becoming a commodity that was, you know, paying my bills and the responsibility of it, having to pay other people’s bills as well, became too much of a burden. You know, being not only the storyteller, but being the carer and being the responsible adult, being the human at the end of the day who’s left on stage, and online, to answer all the questions and the declarations. So, you know, like, something that we put in place now, particularly with After the Tone when we do a live show, is that after the show, I’m more than willing to like meet people and never laugh and have a giggle, but I’m not there for you to tell me your story.

And it feels so cruel. It feels so cruel. But I can’t take on more, and people tell me stuff. My mom always said, my mom said, ‘if you started a religion, people would join’. She’s like, there’s something about who I am as a person that means that within all of my work, whether it be about fatness or queerness or mental health or class, people feel safe with me because they know I’m not there to exploit it. I’m not trying to sell it, I’m just trying to get us to recognise it. To start the revolution. [Scottee laughs, Gaylene hums in agreement], I think, maybe... But for us to feel less lonely and isolated.
Gaylene Gould: I’m so relating, relating, relating, relating, cos so much of my work is similar. You know, I’m trained as a coach and facilitator, but I also convene spaces, often for people of colour. And that burden of expectation of like being the healer within that, right, becomes... I don’t know what I’m doing, you know! [Scottee laughs] I can barely heal myself. And so, I really recognise... Which is why I was really keen to talk to you today about this question of care that becomes very, very important when you’re working with strangers who have needs. And who aren’t afforded spaces everywhere to have these conversations. It becomes a very beautiful space and a very precious space, but also quite a burdensome one. So, I appreciate.

Scottee: I think sometimes those spaces can become centres of trauma if they’re not held and anticipated properly. They can just become places in which intimacy is used as a way that we do harm to each other. And I want to understand what’s beyond this trauma-informed work that is currently being platformed across the arts. Because we are more than, we have escaped from, we have survived. And we are representatives of those who have survived and we then become representatives of those who didn’t. And so, it’s difficult because you’ve gotta acknowledge the stuff, but you also have to ensure your own survival. And so, I always come back to this thing in my brain, which is like, who cares for the carer? And then, who cares for that carer? You know, like what is the reciprocal nature of care? What is the potential for radical care? [Soft ambient electronic tones return and swell] And you know, I might not know the answer to that. So, let’s not ask artists! [Laughs]

Gaylene Gould: Yeah, that’s right.

Scottee: Ask the collective.

Gaylene Gould: It’s interesting actually, here, cos in our exchange I hear my own vulnerability. I was divulging things I didn’t expect to divulge to Scottee, which I think is his superpower! He really gets you to do that. So many thoughts here around care, collective care, self-care, the way in which they’re intertwined and really connected. And also, this idea that intimacy can generate a cult-like religiosity. If someone touches you, you really feel this like deep connection to them, even though that might just be part of their work.

Tamsin Hong: Absolutely. I mean, what really struck me about hearing Scottee’s conversation with you was how at ease they are with those parts of themselves, which I would find quite vulnerable, that would need a lot of protection. And they were so generous and comfortable with that in the conversation. I felt like I was listening in on something that was very precious, but I’d been given permission to hear it as well.
Gaylene Gould: But talking of generosity, [Tamsin laughs] you Tamsin have brought something for us and for me to hear. So, would you like to introduce what you've brought today?

[Tamsin Hong: Yes. So, before the pandemic I was treated to seeing, well, not just seeing, but being part of Cecilia Vicuña’s Clit Nest, which was part of Park Nights in 2019. Cecilia Vicuña is an extraordinary artist who is from Chile and was in exile during the coup d’état in 1973. [Electronic tones fade out; Cecilia Vicuña singing gently, vocalising sounds without words that echo eerily from the silence: hisses, mutters, tutting] And she has created some extraordinary works, but they, they tend to be rooted in these quipus that she creates, which are these ancient systems of knowledge. She’s got this really great way of saying that these quipus that she's created since the 1960s are a way of hearing an ancient silence waiting to be heard. [Bird song echoes amid the singing] And so that was my first experience of her work at Serpentine. And we all gathered there, I think it was a September evening. So, it was dark. We all gathered. You couldn’t really see each other. And there was just this extraordinary unspun wool around, it was like being in a giant spider’s cave, [rustles and voices echo in space] but it’s not sticky. And the spider is a very small, friendly artist.]

Gaylene Gould: [Laughs] Okay! [Singing continues quietly]

Tamsin Hong: You didn’t know where she was because of the lack of clear lighting, which actually made it very womblike, which was what she wanted. She wanted this to be a womblike nest that we all sort of gathered in there. And then this wonderful textured, unspun wool was then wrapped around us as she emerged from the darkness. But before we even saw her or knew that she was present, we just heard this voice. They were without words, just vocalisations and you didn’t know where they were coming from. There were speakers everywhere and then words started to emerge.

Cecilia Vicuña: [Vicuña’s voice singing words in staccato rhythm, cavernous echoes, breathless, spooky and strange, playing with the texture of the words] Cli-to-cli-to-clitoris! Here we are. Two become a double clitoris! How about that? How about that? A clitoris, two heads, can you imagine that? What fun. Ayayayay... [People laugh in the audience]

Tamsin Hong: [Mysterious wordless vocalisations return: singing, groans and gasps] But she started to move around delicately and wrapped us with this wool. So, we were all connected. And not only was she sharing words and poems and singing, but she was cracking hilarious jokes. She harnesses that very important aspect of any form of activism, that
humour is such a great way to transform violence or trauma into a shared experience of joy. And she does that so beautifully.

**Cecilia Vicuña:** [Vicuña’s soft, almost whispering voice echoes in cavernous space] When you look at the desert, how did they live in a place without water? Because they observed the cyclical movement of water. And water was born at the top of the mountains and came down. So, the mountains are the clitoris of the earth. You contemplate the mountain, the rain comes, caressing it, and the water flows down... Once I was in a little rotten museum in the south of Chile and I encountered a little vessel, a little vessel about this big. If you could touch it and you could lift it, it will be light and light and light, composed by women’s hands that knew how to work the clay so fine. And all it had was nine clitoris [speaks slowly and falls into song-like rhythm, like a nursery rhyme] one in each direction. That’s when I got the image for this flower of clitoris, me imagining you, you as clito-, you as seed, bringing water back to the earth. The earth is me saying it’s water. it’s me saying it's clitoris.

[Soft ambient electronic tones return and rise with a sense of positivity and resolution]

**Gaylene Gould:** There’s something that’s so... Uh, the joy and the play that I really get a sense of, you can kind of hear the connections that happening between people because of this ritual of binding or something, the playful binding that’s happening.

**Tamsin Hong:** It was a really nice communal experience, witnessing this precious moment of this extraordinary poet emerging from the darkness and aligning our bodies with the mountains, which she describes as being like a clitoris and then joyfully evoking the clitoris word again and again and again knowing that it’s a subversive word in a way. Like it’s a word that we say in hushed whispers apparently. And she kind of celebrates that. It’s a little subversive to sing it out loud.

[Soft electronic tones merge into rising scales of electronic notes]

**Gaylene Gould:** Tamsin. We’ve heard from Scottee, we’ve heard from Adrian, we’ve heard from Cecilia, we’ve had some reflections on this. I’m curious what your thoughts on intimacy in relationship to strangers are now.

**Tamsin Hong:** Leading up to me having this conversation with you where I was thinking about intimacies and strangers, what I love about it is that I actually cannot resolve it. There’s so many tensions bound up with that. I do often feel that in the art space, we give ourselves permission to have those encounters. But I also find in myself, because the pandemic evoked so much mistrust in each other, I find myself reflecting on that quite a lot and trying to find ways where I remind myself of the great nature of human beings. And I
think about that often, about how fundamentally, even though we are weird and awkward in public, at the core of it, we connect with each other.

Gaylene Gould: Tamsin, thank you. You arrived a stranger or something and now I feel like you are definitely not that to me. So, thank you so much for your honesty and openness and thoughts on this topic.

Tamsin Hong: Thank you so much for having me here and for asking me some really good questions.

[Music fades to silence. Soft ambient electronic tones return.]

Gaylene Gould: Well, already, I see how this series is going to challenge any cosy ideas around intimacy. Often when we meet strangers generously, we can be seen as kind of angelic, an example of compassion and kindness. But in reality, our need might simply be to conduct a philosophical experiment, or for a personal desire to replace missing friendship, or because it’s the only way we have of making a buck. Intimacy can be expected of some of us. There can be a toll when creating intimacy with strangers. One that depletes us physically and mentally. And yet, and yet as Tamsin reminded me, we mysteriously continue to do so.

Go to any supermarket in Leicester. Listen to the way people reveal their vulnerabilities to Scottee or see how in every hospital right now, where despite being paid very little, thousands of nurses continue to care for us intimately every day. People are risking intimacy with strangers all the time. And it’s most likely a compulsion that we are designed not to resist. The survival of the species rests on our desire to be met and to meet.

Listening to Scottee, Adrian, Cecilia, my intimate conversation with Tamsin, I’d like to also remember why boundaries are crucial for intimacy. Rather than defending against other people, they remind us to be aware of the space we each need to connect from a truthful place. If we honour each other’s, somehow we can create a Venn diagram of care. How might you care for the strangers you meet and for yourself in equal measure? And when we are the stranger, how do we remember that our strangeness might just be the thing that is enriching the world. It’s been lovely and little unsettling to share this space with you today. And thanks for committing to the intimate act of listening. We’ll be continuing our fantastic voyage inward in the next episode, so look forward to connecting with you then.

[Electronic tones swell and slow]

Serpentine Podcast: Intimacies is presented by me, Gaylene Gould. The series was produced by Katie Callin with support from Nada Smiljanic and Anishka Sharma at Reduced Listening, and was curated by Hanna Girma and Fiona Glen.

[50:00]
Thanks to all members of Serpentine’s Programmes, Communications and Audiences teams for their direction and contribution. Special thanks to Yesomi Umolu, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Bettina Korek. The theme music for *Intimacies* was conceived and produced by Hinako Omori. Our thanks go to all guests, contributors and advisors.

[Music fades to silence]