THEATER

The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

Gideon Lewis-Kraus

Call Cutta in a Box,
written and directed by Rimini Protokoll (Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi, and Daniel Wetzel),
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YOU DON'T buy a ticket for the German experimental theater collective Rimini Protokoll's *Call Cutta in a Box: An Intercontinental Phone Play*; you make an appointment. My appointment was for two P.M. on May 2, and as I walked west through Kreuzberg toward the designated location, I picked my way (with limited success) among the crags of glass broken in the protests and celebrations of May Day. I passed the squat yellow cylindrical building at Hallesches Tor, hastily blocked out and pasted up for the first waves of Turkish "guest-workers" who arrived in the early Sixties, and turned north into the bottom of the Wilhelmstrasse.

The Willy-Brandt-Haus, the headquarters of Germany's Social Democratic Party, forms an unprepossessing triangle distinguished only by its sleek corporate fungibility: it could house an insurance company, or a glossy magazine, or an advertising agency. You walk through the plate-glass doors and present yourself to reception, and are guided into a plate-glass elevator and directed to the second floor. The elevator runs a panoptic route up the base of an isosceles atrium, lined on all sides by young men and women in bare white-paneled offices in front of computer screens the size of bus windshields. On the second floor you are quietly greeted by a young and discreet professional who leads you to a hallway and tells you that yours is room nine.

It is hard to get an immediate impression of room nine, both because of its calculated blandness and because the cordless phone on the desk is already ringing. As I pick up the phone, I glance at some business cards lying next to it, and while an Indian woman's voice on the other end asks if this is Gideon Lewis-Kraus, I am simultaneously reading that this is Sunayana Roy, Callcenter Service Representative, Descon Limited, Plot no. X1-2 & 3, Salt Lake City, Kolkata, West Bengal, India. Sunayana asks how to pronounce my name, which she has pronounced correctly, and guesses that I am twenty-six, which is off by a few years; the first personal thing she says is that she is twenty-six, well, almost twenty-six. She asks what I do, and I say I am a freelance writer and she laughs, a laugh that seems a little anxious and hasty and not at all performed, and says that I am not going to believe her but she is also a freelance writer, and if I think she's just saying that I can please feel free to Google her when I get home. (When I eventually do just that, I discover, in addition to her blog, some articles she has written for newspapers in India.)

She almost forgot to ask, did I want some tea? She asks if I've ever been to India—I haven't—and she says that whenever you are in someone's home in India, you are offered either coffee or tea, and she would like to make me tea. It seems rude to say no. I hear a small click, and a red light alerts me to an instant hot-water heater on a tray with a mug, some sugar and condensed milk, and a small variety of tea bags beside an armchair. Sunanaya says to pay attention to when the water boils and then pour the tea. She invites me to take off my jacket and my shoes, if I like. At the callcenter, she does not wear shoes.

The desk is a broad, flat laminate with a Descon Limited blotter containing a small map of India and a detail of West Bengal. There is a lamp and a computer screen set to a log-in page, and a plant in a box. The room is devoid of anything but the detritus of middle-management: there is a large laser printer on the blue corporate carpet, an easel, an armchair, a small desk clock, and two small photographs, one of the Descon Limited building in Calcutta, the other of a man who appears to be Descon's founder. Sunayana asks if I'd like music and I say sure and now there is white noise coming from the desk clock.

I can hear desultory voices in the background of Sunayana's call. She tells me she is in a room with eighty people in it. Sunayana says that we are running short on time so we are going to skip right to Scene II, which is about me, and that we can talk about her in a little while. She asks me about my work, and if I like it, and if I do drugs regularly, and how is my health—her knees are bad, she says, from playing volleyball on a concrete court as a girl—and am I seeing anyone (it's complicated) and then am I satisfied with my life. (I have nothing to complain about.) She is angry with her husband but has decided to forgive him, though she hasn't told him that yet. Sunayana asks if I believe in reincarnation and karma and I say no and sip my tea. She says if I had to be reincarnated as an animal what animal I would be, and I say that I just read a story in the *New Yorker* about the tigers of the Sundarbans and she says she has friends in the Sundarbans (she corrects my pronunciation) and that the tigers there are endangered; it might be better to be a crocodile. She laughs and asks me about the worst mistake I've ever made. I say I need to think and in the meantime she says that her biggest regret is something she did for or to her husband three years ago, and she's afraid she will never get over this experience, and she thinks about it every day. She laughs again but seems very serious.

Sunayana asks me to close my eyes while sitting in the straight-backed office chair. She sings me a song in Hindi and at the end of it asks what I saw when my eyes were closed. I tell her. She says that the song is an old song, a bittersweet song about two former lovers meeting after twenty years; each asks the other how life has turned out, and both of them say that their lives are okay but there is the feeling that perhaps they ought to have been together. She said when her mother sang this song to her when she was young, she thought it was very sad, but now that she's older she can see how it is not just sad but sweet. We sit in silence on the phone for a minute.

She says that the scene about me (which seems to me to have been in equal measure about her) is coming to a close, and she ticks off what she knows about me—my age, my profession, my fraught relationship status, my satisfaction with life, my health—and tells me that I am a Category 3G. I ask what that means, and she says that in a callcenter they are encouraged to typecast their callers as personalities, because that helps them understand what the caller wants, and how they can best help the caller, or how they can best sell to the caller what they are trying to sell: insurance or a vacation or a credit card.

Scene III is about images. She directs my attention to the picture of Descon Limited's corporate headquarters in Salt Lake City, Kolkata, and says that if I look in the upper right-hand corner by the big X, I can see where her office is, though she is in the back, not near the window. She also tells me that she is three and a half hours ahead of me, so that I should imagine not the partly cloudy sky of the photograph but an amber sunset. There is a breeze, she says, like the ones that come before a summer storm. As Sunayana tells me about her office there is a sound near the floor to my right and I see that something is coming out of the printer. I lift it out of the printer bin and it is an eight-by-ten printout of a camera-phone image of an Indian man backlit against a window. She tells me that this man is the person who saves her an hour of sleep each morning by taking out her garbage, and that she took this picture this morning when she had forgotten to leave the garbage by the door and he woke her by ringing the bell. Her first impulse, still asleep, was to take a picture of him. Sunayana laughs but I don't. She says you needed to be there.

Sunayana asks if I'd like her job, working in the callcenter in Calcutta. There are two types of jobs there, she explains, inbound calls and outbound calls. She has only worked there for six months—it is a job she is taking to help support her young son, while she awaits full-time work as a journalist—so she is only trained to field inbound calls, which are complaints or requests for customer assistance. The people in the next cluster of cubicles over are navigation experts for the city of Perth, Australia. They have been trained to speak English with an Australian accent, and they have studied maps and photographs of Perth, and newspapers from Perth, so they can chat knowledgeably with their callers. She says some of them know Perth as well as they know Calcutta, even if they have never been out of India. She says she would like this job but that the Australian accent is too difficult for her to learn. Right now she mostly receives complaints.

I say I'm not sure if I'd want her job.

Sunayana suggests that if I've finished my tea I might want to try an Indian specialty, and instructs me to open the top drawer of the slate-gray filing cabinet to my left. There is a small packet that says ChutKi mouth-freshener. It is not easy to open and I admit this sheepishly. She asks if I know what Descon Limited's motto is and I say no. She says it is "Redefining Dependability" and asks if I know what that means, and before I can come up with an answer she says that it means I should look back in the drawer and use the scissors to open the packet.

While I am sampling the vile metallic-anise Indian mouth-freshener, she asks me to describe a beautiful experience I once had. I tell about a time when I was in college and watched a sunset with a very close friend on Pfeiffer Beach, in Big Sur. She interrupts me and says, "Kerouac!" I remember what she's said about her neighbors talking about sports in Perth and skeptically ask if she's just looked that up on a monitor in front of her, and she acts as though I've insulted her; she tells me that lots of Indians have read Kerouac, and then asks me to continue telling my story. I finish the story of the beautiful experience at Pfeiffer Beach and then there is a shower of clapping. I ask why there is clapping, and she says that she was proud of herself for knowing Kerouac and at that moment had put our conversation on the loudspeaker at Descon Limited, and that her colleagues were clapping both because it was great that she knew Kerouac and because they liked my Big Sur moment.

Sunayana asks me to draw a picture of her on the blotter in front of me and asks if I need more light, and then the desk lamp switches on and she giggles. She says she likes doing these things—remotely activating the instant hot-water heater or the lamp—because these tricks make her feel like God or a really good magician. She says she feels the same way about being a parent sometimes.

The next scene is about her, and she tells what seems to be a rather pointless story about going with her son and her husband to a rally-car show and riding in a convertible jalopy. The printer prints out a picture of her. She is holding her son, who looks big for his age, and she is demurely pretty, dressed in a blue jumpsuit in front of an old MG. She says you had to be there for this story and then quickly says that we should use the computer. The password is "India" and I log in and all of a sudden there is a screen-filling pixelated human eye looking at me. She asks if I can see her and I say yes, but only her eye. She tells me that Sunayana, in Sanskrit, means "large eye." She pulls her camera away from her face and I can see why she has been named Sunayana: she has enormous, round, deepset eyes behind short bangs, her hair tied up in a ponytail. She is beautiful and I am not sure why I am so surprised by this, so pleased by this. She tells me to lift up the potted plant on the desk and below it is a tiny stage, in red and black. The curtain is drawn back and there is a camera there, and then she can see me, and she is telling me that I don't look anything like what she expected. She shows me the drawing she had been making of me on her desk, and in the drawing I have a long,

sharp chin and glasses. She sweeps her camera across the inside of her office; her co-workers wave at me and I wave back. On the far side of the room are the outbound callers, whom she talks about with great admiration. She says she is supposed to be ready to make those calls in six months but she's not sure she will be.

Sunayana swivels her webcam around and gives me a vertiginous tour of her cubicle, with icons to Kali and Ganesh and a picture of her son. She offers to tell me a secret about callcenters. She says they have six important rules, and she asks me to give her a number between one and six; I say three, and she thinks for a moment, closing her eyes, and then reopens them to say that rule number three is "Never say you're sorry." She explains that saying you're sorry to a customer admits there is guilt, and that all admissions of guilt have to be stated passively: it is too bad that there was a problem.

She says the most important part of working at a callcenter, especially when you are making outbound calls and are trying to sell insurance or a vacation, is to keep someone on the phone. She says that recently she was on the phone with a woman and the woman said she hated talking to callcenters and Sunayana said that the woman sounded exactly like Sunayana's dad, who hates callcenters too. She said that telling the woman this made the woman feel better about staying on the phone. Sunayana says that her dad does actually hate callcenters, and doesn't know why Sunayana studied literature just to work in a callcenter, but then she stops abruptly and says she doesn't want to talk about her dad anymore, or her husband.

Sunayana tells me to look down at the computer-tower below the desk, and I see that the CD drive is opening and there is a key taped to the inside of it. She tells me to take the key and open the bottom drawer of the slate-gray filing cabinet, which is locked. I unlock the drawer and I find a small shrine to the god Asoka: there is an Asoka figure surrounded by floral leis and some postcards of Bollywood stars. She tells me that this is the kind of shrine that bus drivers in India might have on their dashboards, and that they would be playing music like this: Indian music begins to play from the clock on the desk, and she gets up and begins to dance, and asks me to stand up and dance. I can see her co-workers huddled in chat behind her, casting us dubious glances, and she is dancing and showing me how to dance, and I am here on the second floor of the Willy-Brandt-Haus in an eerily antiseptic middle-management office and we are both dancing on the screen in front of me. There is a clock on the screen and it is counting down from two minutes and I imagine that both of us are genuinely sad that our call is coming to an end. Sunayana waves good-bye and wishes me good luck. And then Sunayana is gone, and the computer's monitor flashes me a final message: *Descon Limited thanks you for attending this call.*□

The Invention of Photography

The adenoidal, glass-brick Fifties,
Tarzan featured on the cell block
for Moyamensing's livid inmates,
doing their screening room shuffle,
while Uncle P. talked to a guard
and I feared things that they did not.

*

In the fearless 1850s, mad-hatters forged
images of dolls, doilies, sewers,
eight-year-old odalisques
in off-the-shoulder nighties...
Gentleman Brits claimed their Sphinx
and Hindoo temples. We had our Civil War,
rail cuts and silver mines,
darkroom vans racked with plates,
jerky, mule feed, cameras
the Sioux called shadow catchers.

*

Pull the lens cover,
the ground glass blinks a century
to a two-minute wonderment,
when every decent family craved
its Polaroid and waited to see what
it would make of us, how inhale
blood matter and lick it into life.

*

The string-bean screw says, "poor creeps,"
and leads us through stone
MGM Egyptian gates
to sunlight's harsh hurrah outside,
shows off his sedan's crimped,
toasted fender that Uncle P. shoots
for insurance evidence, then,
more evidence, a conversation piece:
me, guard, and penitentiary.

*

I later found inside a drawer
a foxed Sixties print. A secret
about a secret. Sunday morning,
there they stand, fertile forms,
grinning, hamming it up,
uncle, wife, and son,
a standardized toxic family
the squeezebox resolved into color,
still a little liquid with the past:
they stare into the yonder yonder,
with no hint of the old eternity
we all heard so much about
in the church conspiring behind them,
or eternity's simulacrum
where convicts served their time.

*

Fast times now lead us through
our small malarial wars for the millions,
platoon grins, cemetery symmetries,
a bullet in a flattened head, dead men's dumps,
Pol Pot's carefully numbered portrait archive,
the fallen and the disappeared from city towers:
a double-page spread, a yearbook layout.

*

But now here we are in Sharon Meadow,
pixelled in the viewfinder screen
by an accommodating stranger,
we and background congas and bongos
freeze-dried in the sky's micaceous green.
We smile for the moment filed away.

*

And now, love, tip the screen just so.
Now we see us, now we don't,
digital daguerreotype spooks,
chromed noses, iridium eyes,
who fade, just so, to slate or silver.
There we lie in wait for ourselves.

—*W. S. Di Piero*