

Michael Landy on Acts of Kindness

In celebration of [World Kindness Day](#), artist Michael Landy talks about his project Acts of Kindness with its curator [Cathy Haynes](#). Acts of Kindness is an Art on the Underground commission calling for stories of kindness on the Tube. Since the project began in June 2011 the public has sent in over 300 stories. Over the coming year Landy is placing his selection of stories as artworks in Central line stations and trains. To send in your own stories of kindness on the Underground, [visit Michael's pages on the Art on the Underground website](#).



Image: Michael Landy taking a break from installing the first Acts of Kindness artworks in Central line train carriages, London, 2011. Commissioned by Art on the Underground. Photo: Thierry Bal.

Cathy Haynes: On the Tube on the way here, I had this weird little shock of self-awareness. I'd settled into my seat a bit like I would at home and was vaguely watching all these strangers around me almost as if they were on TV. I was daydreaming and wondering about their lives, but making no real connection. Then my eye drifted onto a safety sign and it broke the spell. I suddenly became properly aware that I was surrounded by real people. And I remembered how at the beginning of this project you talked about the way we retreat into a bubble on the Tube. We're in intimate proximity with strangers Underground but we do our very best to ignore each other, in an amplified version of the way we treat each other in the city above.

Michael Landy: Yes. You enter the Underground and suddenly the atmosphere is completely different: how much eye contact you can give, how close you get. You become much more aware of people because you're in such a condensed space. Perhaps because of that we close off and disappear into ourselves. And

because of the way we act there, the Underground is the perfect platform (boom, boom) for this project to manifest itself.

I'm interested in what makes us human in a basic sense apart from our economic identities, especially at this time when people have lots of financial worries and the world seems to be a very troubled place, and we don't really know how to move forward. I want to find out what makes us human, and what connects us, beyond material things. For me the answer is compassion and kindness. And this project is a way of collectively exploring that idea. I mean I don't know if it's going to help create a kinder place on the Underground. I think that's probably too big an ambition to have. But, in the way that it can make you feel uplifted when you see someone be kind on the Tube, I'd like to think that the artworks presenting the stories will also do that – that they'll become life-enhancing for people. In other words, I hope the artworks are an act of kindness in themselves.

I'm trying to place the story artworks on platforms and in trains in ways that echo the unexpected ways you encounter acts of kindness in the flesh. They pop up when you least expect them. And I'm hoping the stories will have the same kind of effect on the reader as *seeing* an act of kindness. That's what I'm hoping.

CH: When we began the project, you described *Acts of Kindness* as a way of asking what the exchange of trust is that happens between strangers in an act of kindness. Five months in, how has that question unfurled for you? Do you have an answer?

ML: I wish I did! I don't have any real answers. I guess the answers are coming from the artwork – from the stories people are sending in.

CH: Let's talk about the stories. The number that the public have sent in has been overwhelming. Which have been the most poignant to you?

ML: I read through them all again at the weekend and there's a lot of weeping going on on the Underground! When you see someone crying on the Tube it's hard to know what to do. I try and weigh up whether to say something or not. Generally I don't. But the stories show that a lot of people do get involved and maybe say a few supportive words or give a hanky.

I like the story sent in by the person who described how, when she was distressed on the Tube, the woman next to her said, don't worry, I'm a therapist, I can help. It turns out she's a *beauty* therapist who's used to talking to her clients about their problems. And she did really give that person comfort.

CH: Those stories are amazing because someone's been brave enough to risk saying it's going to be okay to a stranger. It's a bold thing ...

ML: ... completely ...

CH: It could be misinterpreted or have some unpredictable consequence. But the stories describe how people have got a lot of solace from it. Though there are one

or two people in the stories who've said, well, it did comfort me at the time but it didn't change my situation. But at least someone reached out and was there.

ML: There are certain occasions in life where you just can't stop the tears, no matter how hard you suppress them. And doing that in front of strangers – that can add to how awful you feel. People don't know if it's because you've lost your job or someone has just died, or it could be a very small thing. It's hard to know how to respond or enter into that conversation. But in the stories sent in by those who were helped, the people who are kind to them mostly don't go into the details. They might drop a little paper horse sculpture into their lap or a note saying it'll be okay as they leave the train. But they don't lengthen it into an embarrassing interaction.

CH: You were explicit from the start of the project that you wanted to focus on the tiny gestures we pay scarce attention to in everyday life. The results of that focus have really surprised me. The little acts of connection that get described in the stories are often really creative. For example, those stories about people making and giving little paper boats...

ML: ... or doing origami! Yes. There's the balloon story as well, where a little kid lets his balloon go and gets really upset as it floats away down the train carriage. And, one by one, the passengers bat it back to him. That story came in around the same time as the one about someone finding a discarded pot of soap-bubble stuff and passing it round for everyone to blow so the carriage was filled with bubbles.

CH: Each story reveals its sender's own interpretation of what kindness means. And I was surprised at how often the theme of conviviality – rather than explicitly helping someone – comes up in the stories.

ML: Yes. People want to be connected to each other. And there are a lot of people having bad days at the moment, aren't there? So those little things help pull us out of ourselves and the world doesn't seem such the gloomy bad place it felt like just ten seconds ago.

Also, we've received lots of stories about strangers reaching out to help each other in straightforward ways. Like the heavy bag stories. Come to think of it, I'm amazed at the size of the bags you see people with on the Tube sometimes. You don't know how they manage to get on the Tube in the first place. I might actually design a huge bag you can't get out of the carriage – maybe build it in situ ...

CH: ... as your closing gesture for the project – a vast bag lodged inside a Tube carriage ...

ML: ... yes, and lots of unwitting members of the public trying to help get it off the train. But, jokes aside, I'm always amazed at those massive bags and the relatively diminutive people standing beside them. How did they get them on the Tube? How will they get them up the stairs?

CH: With the kindness of strangers?

ML: With the kindness of strangers.

Cathy Haynes was Curator for Art on the Underground for Acts of Kindness until September 2011. She is now the Curator of Public Programmes at [The School of Life](#).