

## Cultural Probes Workshop

13 October 2015

Bill Gaver & Andy Boucher  
Interaction Research Studio



## Cultural Probes Workshop

### *Timetable*

10.00	Cultural Probes lecture
10.45	Make probes
11.00	Do probes
11.15	Organise and view returns
11.30	Discuss

## Interaction Research Studio

In Goldsmiths' Design Department

12 staff researchers

- design & art
- social sciences
- technology

Est. 2005



## Research Through Design

Making things that tell us about technology (and ourselves).

Photostroller



Prayer Companion



Plane Tracker



Local Barometer



Drift Table



## Research Through Design

Making things that tell us about technology (and ourselves).

Photostroller



Prayer Companion



Drift Table



Local Barometer



Plane Tracker



## Research Through Design

Making things that tell us about technology (and ourselves).

Our projects are often defined around a context (not a technology or a product...).

How do we find out about the situations for which we are designing?

Photostroller



Prayer Companion



Drift Table



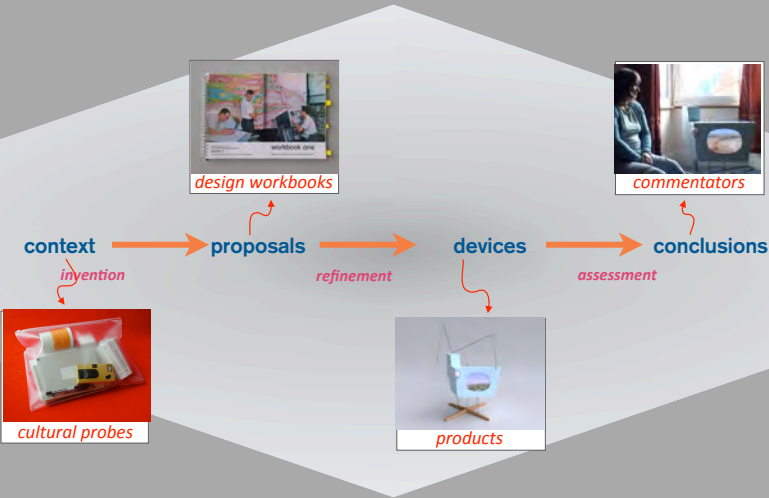
Local Barometer



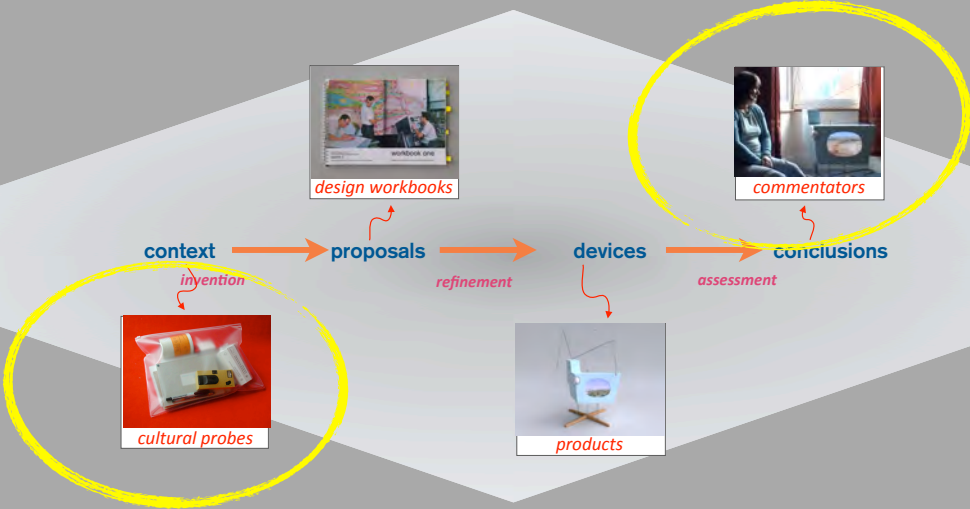
Plane Tracker



Trajectory of Research



Trajectory of Research





## The Presence Project

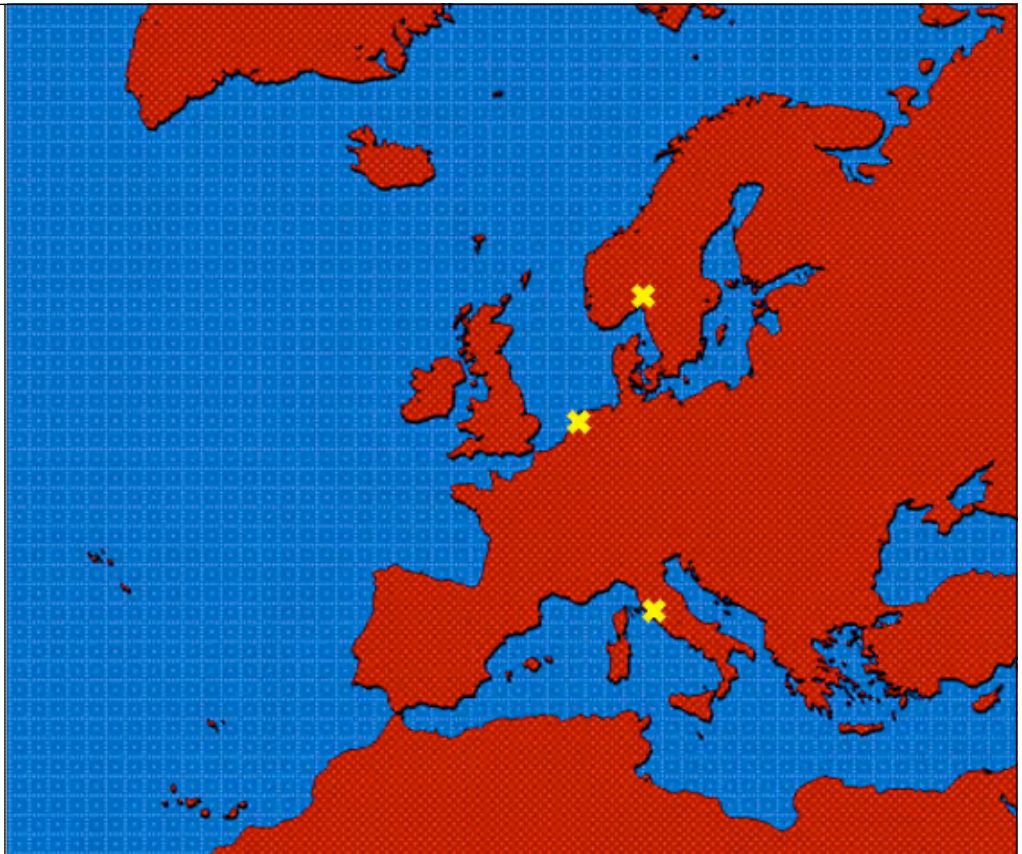
1997 - 1999

## The Presence Project

*w/ Tony Dunne & Elena Pacenti*

Designing for three groups of older people, all in other countries.

How do we learn about them?!?



## Methods for contextual research

### Questionnaires & Surveys

- paper, online
- summaries and analyses

### Focus groups

- guided discussion
- discussion and consensus

### Interviews

- structured, semi-structured, unstructured
- on site or elsewhere

### ethnography

- in situ observation and interviews
- ethnomethodology and native accountability

## Discomfort with traditional research methods

We wanted to avoid science-based methodologies

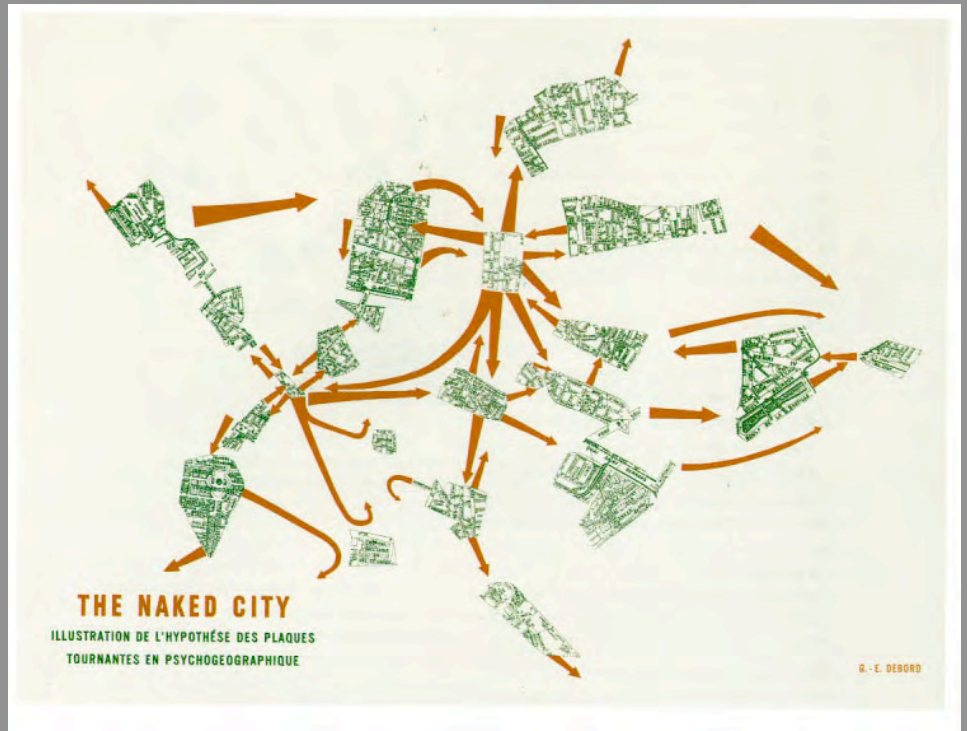
- questionnaire studies
- focus groups
- interviews
- ethnography

because they seemed 'boring' and likely to constrain our design.

We wanted to avoid the role of doctor or servant.

We wanted to avoid being 'faceless researchers'.

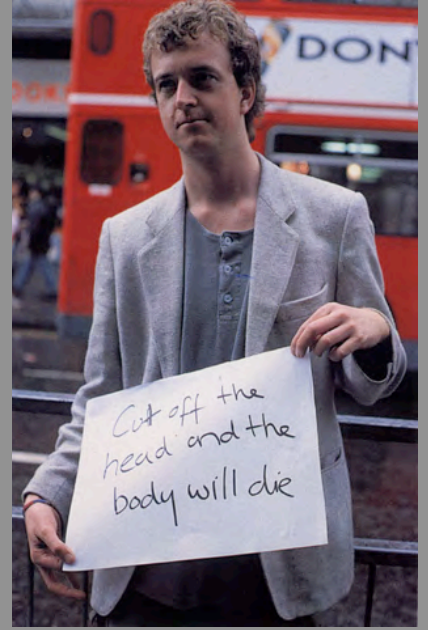
Inspiration from the arts: the  
Situationists



Inspiration from the arts:  
Surrealism



**Inspiration from the arts:**  
**Gillian Wearing**



**Inspiration from the arts:**  
**Sophie Calle**





## Inspiration from psychoanalysis: Projective tests



## Cultural Probes

Packages of materials left with participants to complete and return over time.

Evocative tasks to elicit responses.

Distributed in person, collected via post.

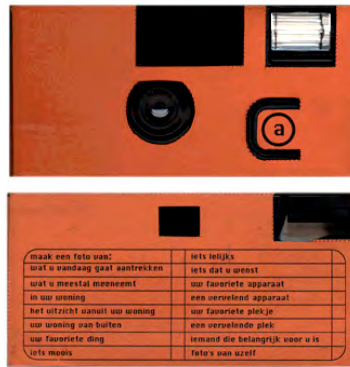


## Cultural Probes

Packages of materials left with participants to complete and return over time.

Evocative tasks to elicit responses.

Distributed in person, collected via post.



## Cultural Probes

High return rates

Rich information about the sites

Successfully gave us a basis for our designs



## **Probes help create a design-led dialogue with people.**

Personal handovers undermine dehumanisation.

Probes serve as conversation pieces.

Multiple items stress voluntary participation.

Posting items emphasises separate cultural and personal identities.

## **Probes as a methodology.**

Uncertainty and ambiguity ensure surprising results.

Truth can come through story-telling.

Interpretation is mutual and reflexive.

Probes are anti-scientific.

## Domestic Probes

~ 2000

## Domestic Probes

*(w/ Andy Boucher, Sarah Pennington,  
and Brendan Walker)*

Equator was a seven-year project with  
seven partners in the UK.

We looked at domestic technologies.

How should we understand 'the  
home'?





We recruited volunteers from the greater London area.

suffer from the above to take part in  
confidential interview.  
es will receive a gift in appreciation.  
**246 4644 for more details**

**TS**  
t & sold,  
Bkg fee.  
2763

**HOUSEHOLDS WANTED** for  
design research. Our Royal  
College of Art team will use  
innovative methods to under-  
stand your home life, and  
design electronic devices for  
you to try. Interested volun-  
teers call 020 7590 4292/4296

**Herbert R**  
5AT and I  
Doswell W  
RG21 2HI  
  
The First M  
above, agai  
Order was  
will be held  
February 20  
below.  
  
R A Albon,  
Tylers Hou

to our Terms and Conditions, which are

We recruited volunteers from the greater London area.

volunteers							
	A	B	C	D	E	F	
1	evening standard	Time Out	Loot	yes/no	am/pm		
2	Name	address	telephone	date	time	how many people do u live w	
3	John	12 ... Place, SW6 2BT	020 7736	24-Jan	left msg	lives with partner. Unemploye most mornings. Stock excha	
4	Sharon & David	55 ... Rd, Walthamstow E17 4BN	07720772928 020 8531	24-Jan	left msg	very interested in bill gates in ancient archeology and p Merrill Lynch and she's a se Department Transport. He-l	
5	Denis & Maryanne	9 The ... Sandgate, Folkestone, Kent CT20 9TA	020 7034 01303 255	24-Jan	UNABLE TO PARTICIPATE. FAMILY PROBLEMS HAVE COME UP.	A couple, living in house tha London, near the Dartford-T administrator-swinton-galler lighting, fountains, "working	
6	Penny	Flat 13 ... Court, Curlew Street, Butlers Wharf, London SE1 2NN	020 7407 /0795023	24-Jan	YES	anytime	lives with partner, swim's ev Has a dog
7	Guy	2nd floor, 55 ... Street, London E1 5JP	020 7247	24-Jan	left msg	lives alone. Self employed an renovating/diy & made it in	
8	Anna	112 ... Court, Wrights Lane, London W8 6TX	020 7938	25-Jan	YES	afternoon only	lives alone, montessori teach cooking, cinema. Sounds slig
9	Heather	32 ... Close, ondon NW5 4AW	07419	24-Jan	wrong number !	disabled, 17yr old boy, 17yr lived through machines!	
10	Michael	28 ... Close, Hendon	020 823	24-Jan	UNSURE - CALL		

**...and distributed Probes packages to them.**

We visited their homes for 1 - 2 hours.

In addition to handing over the Probes, we had a general chat and toured their homes.

Probes served as 'tickets for talk'.



**...and distributed Probes packages to them.**

We visited their homes for 1 - 2 hours.

In addition to handing over the Probes, we had a general chat and toured their homes.

Again, Probes served as 'tickets for talk'.

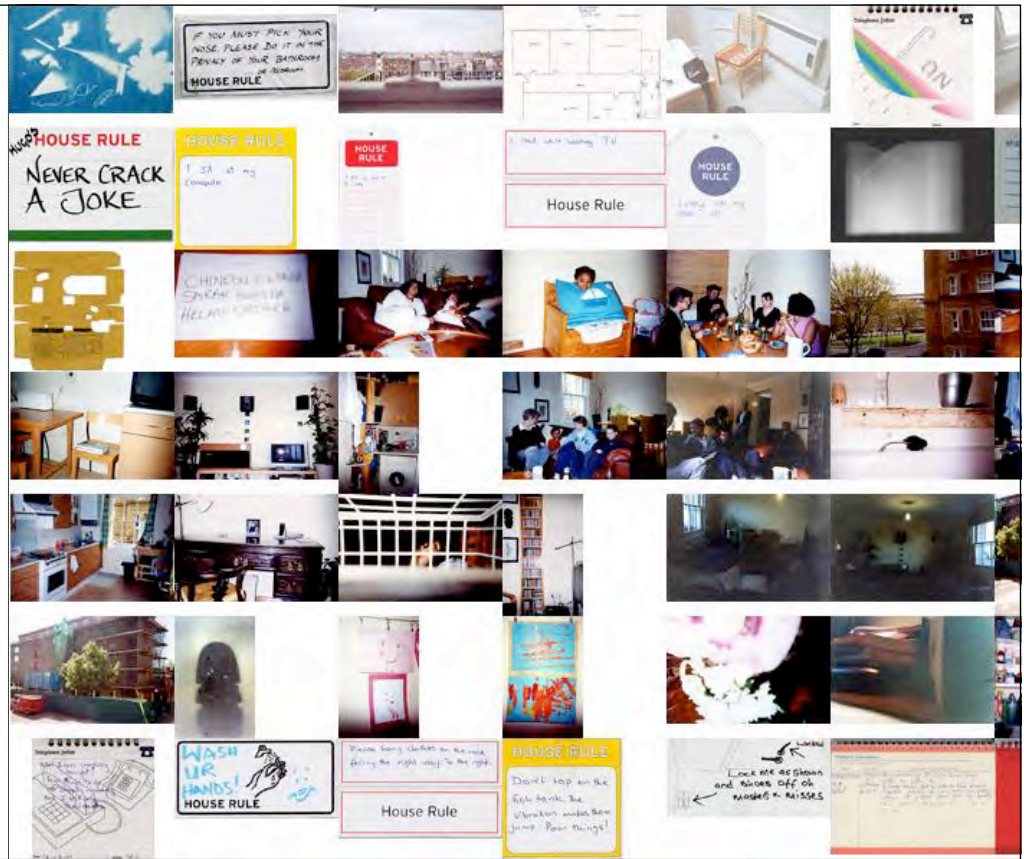




## The returns create a rich texture

We collected the returns after about a month.

There were hundreds of photos, masses of writing, diagrams, dreams, images...



## Working with returns

Organising, not analysing



## Working with returns

Organising, not analysing

Textures



## Working with returns

Organising, not analysing

Textures

Landmarks





## Working with returns

Organising, not analysing

Textures

Landmarks

My house has the Rule on the Door.  
It says DO NOT DISTURB SLEEPING GULF AIR.  
Some say do not disturb the humidity.  
This house does not like trivial disturbance.  
The House Rule is to be, not negative here  
demanding 100% attention as you will be slung out  
no matter who you are.

## HOUSE RULE

## Working with returns

Organising, not analysing

Textures

Landmarks

Narratives

### Binky's Character Profile

#### Name, age, place of residence...

Elizabeth Jane Woolcroft, aged 24, resides in Stoke Newington.

#### Likes...

Isabelle Allende, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Roland Barthes,  
Cindy Sherman, Tracey Emin, dance music, bright colours, old  
Italian movies, junk shops, Buddhism, tequila, pasta,  
chocolate.

#### Dislikes...

Bridget Jones, Nick Hornby, Damien Hirst, boybands,  
consumerism, globalism, Nike, Gap, McDonalds, weddings,  
church, suburbs, semis and school runs.

## Fragmentary insights

Probes afford intimate glimpses & feelings of familiarity

and

A sense of provisionality and uncertainty

simultaneously



## Probes in the world

Probes as accepted method  
(and sometimes methodology)

Google search results for 'cultural probes'. The page shows several search results related to the topic.

- Kim Reede Art 470: cultural probes - response**  
kimreedeart470.blogspot.com/2009/04/cultural-probes-response.html  
24 Apr 2009 - **Cultural Probes** This article explained the process of using **cultural probes** for a project intending to increase the presence of the elderly in a ...
- Designing with Care: Adapting Cultural Probes to Inform ...**  
65.54.113.26 > Publications  
Accordingly, we report on our experiences of adapting **Cultural Probes** to explore care settings, to develop a design dialogue with participants, and to gather ...
- [PDF] \_컬처럴프롬 Cultural Probes**  
takeyonlee.com/portfolio/.../1121\_culturalprobes.pdf  
토크는 직접 종묘공원과 주변에 계. 신 노인들(각 팀 당 3분)에 배포되. 있으며, 일주일 뒤 토크를 수거 하. 면서 인터뷰를 행하였다. \_컬처럴프롬. **Cultural. Probes.**
- Wyld Collective Ltd: Services**  
wyldco.com/services/eval  
Popularized in the field of interaction design by Bill Gaver at the Goldsmiths University of London, **cultural probes** are a design-led method emphasizing empathy ...
- Informatics 131: Schedule - Ellie Harmon**  
ellieharmon.org/teaching/2014-131/  
Bill Gaver, et al. "**Cultural Probes** and the Value of Uncertainty" (2004) pp. 53-56."  
Design Resources: Universal Methods of Design: **Cultural Probes** and Collage.
- Nicola Hume Design - Cultural Probes The first two ...**  
nicolahumedesign.tumblr.com/.../cultural-probes-the-first-two-questions-...  
**Cultural Probes** The first two questions I want to answer in order to start refining my ...

Probes as accepted method  
(and sometimes methodology)

Wikipedia article for 'Cultural probe'. The article describes the technique used to inspire ideas in a design process.

**Cultural probe**

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Cultural probes** (or **design probes**) is a technique used to inspire ideas in a design process. It serves as a means of gathering inspirational data about people's lives, values and thoughts. The probes are small packages that can include any sort of artifact (like a map, postcard, camera or diary) along with evocative tasks, which are given to participants to allow them to record specific events, feelings or interactions. The aim is to elicit inspirational responses from people, in order to understand their culture, thoughts and values better, and thus stimulate designer's imaginations.<sup>[1]</sup>

**Contents** [show]

**Background** [edit]

Cultural Probes was developed by Gaver, Dunne and Pacenti in 1999. They were inspired by the art movement **Situationist International**. This technique does not follow the scientific approach. It follows the artistic approach, which is characterized by being irrational, uncontrolled, getting inspiration, and cannot be analysed systematically.<sup>[1]</sup>

**Applications** [edit]

Cultural probes can be used for idea generation, inspiration, values and dreams in a design process. The technique is about opening up the design space, instead of narrowing it. Cultural probes aim to seek out subjective thoughts, values and dreams and surprise and uncertainty is a key value. The probes provoke inspirational responses by using a creative approach in questions instead of analytical and descriptive question usually asked in **User Experience** Research.<sup>[2]</sup>

Since the initial publication in 1999 of cultural probes in interactions, the use of probes has been interpreted broadly and used in a wide variety of projects within user experience. Some cases are grounded very much in the original cultural probes work, while, in other cases, 'probes' has become an



Other Probes

Caravan Probes

Sound Catcher

- electronic probe

Self-Portrait Camera

- self presentation

Snowglobe

- capturing moments





## Storybook Probes

w/ Alexandra Antonopoulou, a  
children's book writer & illustration

An unfinished picture book for adults.

"I awoke to find I was the size of a  
pea..."

Successful, but...

over-designed = intimidating

over-structured?



## Pop-Up Probes

At a major conference

Web-based tasks and returns

Low uptake

networking difficulties?

too short/busy?



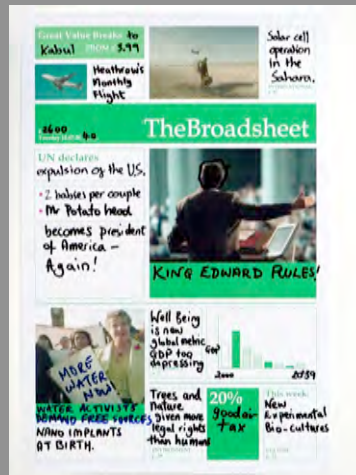
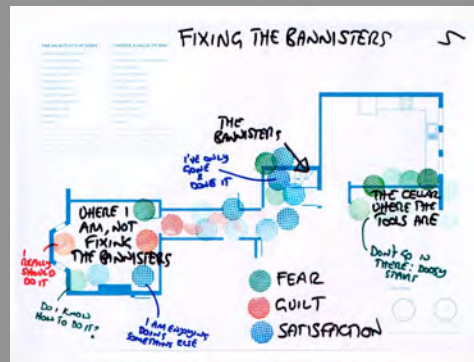
## Workshop as Probe

Bringing together six existing 'energy communities'

Exploring agreements and differences

- Diagrams
- Maps
- Newspapers/Magazines

Tickets for talk, joint endeavor, playfulness



## Make a Cultural Probe Postcard

Work in pairs. Each team should make two (2) probe postcards.

Design the cards to *find out something interesting* about the person to whom you give it.

Ask a question on one side, and draw / put an image on the other.

Use your name on the address.

## Do a Cultural Probe Postcard

Take one of the two cards your team has made.

Find somebody who was *not* in your team, and trade your card for theirs.

Answer the question / do the task on their card.

## Discussion

*What worked?*

What questions spurred the most interesting answers?

Are some too specific? Too general?

Do humour or playfulness help? Do some go too far?

Do intimate questions / revelations feel comfortable?

What role do the images play?

What else?