

# schaubühne am lehniner platz

You can't trust profiles.

A conversation between Falk Richter and Eva Illouz

*Falk Richter: I'd like to talk to you about trust in modern relationships. Relationships which are conducted through the internet. The first thing people are asked to do is to describe themselves in a very detailed and formalized way. You have to break down not only your body, your personality but also your wishes, your desires into pieces and places them in specific categories. So you have to scrutinize, evaluate and describe yourself from the outside with the aid of formalized mark schemes. You're encouraged to present yourself advantageously so that you'll quickly find other people who are interested in you. Here you're competing with a great many other users. At the same time you are being offered a vast number of potential partners. To be successful, you've got to be good at selling yourself in a really aggressive market and you've also got to make a decision who out of this flood of options you're actually going to meet live. People who enter internet dating sites often manipulate their profiles. They use the same techniques that are used in advertising to push a product. Do these people actually have any trust in the truth of the other profiles they encounter in that virtual space?*

Eva Illouz: No, not at all. The basic assumption of every user is that you can't trust the profiles. Most users provide false information about their age, their income, and they attach manipulated or completely false photos to their profile. That means you can assume that nobody trusts anyone they date online. Some sites have tried to react against this lack of trust and tell the users not to give any information about their age. Then you just put your birthday and not the year you were born. But there is this basic lack of trust and then when people do meet live, it becomes more complicated. Internet dating has caused a fundamental shift in the way dates happen now. They're like business meetings, where each side assumes the other is lying or hiding something. Both sides try to find out if the product that the other is trying to sell has any errors or weaknesses that they're keeping quiet. Both are principally engaged in passing off their lies to the other. So these meetings are characterized by a fundamental mistrust, and yet they want something from each other: a romantic relationship. And that demands trust. You want to be able to let yourself go. So there is a constant swing backwards and forwards between opposite attitudes of distrust and trust.

*Has this stopped people meeting up live? Do they prefer to spend their time chatting and no longer take that step from the virtual space to the real one because they haven't got enough trust that the person they're going to meet there has got anything in common with what's in their profile?*

Online Dating is enormously popular, despite this distrust, especially in the USA. So that mistrust is not preventing people from meeting live. A lot of them just don't want to be alone and are looking for a relationship and keep on believing that they can find that relationship through dating sites.

*The dating sites offer an enormous number of profiles, that always give you the impression you're bound to find someone eventually.*



It's particularly the portals which design questionnaires with a lot of very detailed questions which are being used more and more.

*The greater complexity creates confidence again. Do we have to think of these dates as highly paranoid occasions where neither of the participants trusts the other?*

There's this film [Mr. und Mrs. Smith](#). The structure of the relationship the film describes is almost the exact equivalent of the structure of modern internet dates. Mr. und Mrs. Smith both work as undercover agents but don't know anything about their partner's secret activities. So they're pretending all the time and at the same time they're trying to find out what the other one is really like. Their relationship and what they know about each other and gradually experience of each other is constantly shifting, they're continually having to recalibrate their relationship and keep checking if the new information they are getting about the other one can give them a more certain picture of the other's true life, their true self. They're lovers, they're business partners, they are also agents and they have to gather new information about the other's true identity. This seems to me to be one of the fundamental changes in relationships: you're always trying to find out who the other person really is. Is he really how he claims to be, is it true what he says, is he really feeling what he claims he feels? And the fundamental difference to previous centuries is that this mistrust has no end. The relationship of mistrust keeps going. In the 17th century for example there were particular ways of checking the claims and statements of a potential partner. You would obtain information about the other person and check whether the claims about their profession, their income and their origins were correct. If someone hadn't lied, then the situation would calm down and you could embark on a relationship of basic trust. You didn't ask any more. Today it's completely different. We have a basic mistrust of other people. And we have a basic mistrust of our ability to really check up on them. Once we've checked the details of income and education, we carry on asking: is the other person really how he claims to be? Does he really mean everything he says? Does he really feel the way he claims to be feeling? Mr. and Mrs. Smith can't overcome their mutual mistrust, it's still there. They are constantly interrogating each other, they are agents who spy on each other and try to read from each other's behaviour whether something isn't right about them. The relationships are like those in business where you assume that the other party is not going to fulfill a contract or that they're going to dissolve the contract at any time. So there is never any relaxation in the relationship because you are always assuming that the other person can dissolve the relationship without warning at any time and start a new project. So you remain constantly suspicious of the other person. And you're always busy checking up on them. We're like policemen, keeping each other under surveillance and interrogation.

*A very paranoid structure for a relationship..*

I've got a friend who every time her husband is invited to a conference in another city checks on the internet whether this conference is really happening, or whether any of his ex-girlfriends are attending the conference. She remains in this shifting state the whole time backwards and forwards between trust and mistrust. She has to calm her mistrust every day by gathering facts which give her security that her partner is really doing what he said he was doing. In the 17th century this concept didn't exist of trying to find out how the other person is and thinks and feels on the inside. What are you like REALLY? Here the experience that people have had of internet profiles – in other words the vast discrepancies between how people present themselves and what they really look like – has carried over into real relationships. Are you really always faithful? Do you really love me unconditionally? Are you really the husband or the wife I can trust forever? We ask these questions, but we have no mechanisms for checking the answers.

*There is a desire for excessive romanticism. I want you to love me forever. I want you to be just the way you really are. I want to know exactly who you really are. At the same time a lot of*



*people can't exactly say who they really are and are trying to find out with the help of life coaches and psychotherapists. These coaches have to take them through complicated processes to find out what it is of themselves they should actually sell as products and who they actually are. And maybe there's no answer to this. Who am I really? I'm always different, depending on who I'm with at the time. I've spoken to Richard Sennett on another occasion about this irresolvable mistrust: I know that consultants are trained in a very specific type of language and behaviour, they learn a technique to gain my trust, to get me talking, in order to sell me something. Then just at the point when it seems I can trust them, because they give me that impression so perfectly, I become extremely suspicious. So I must develop mechanisms to see through how I can scan the signs that these people transmit for points of trustworthiness.*

In real life you can trust your intuition.

*What's that like dating on the internet? When I'm not meeting the other person in reality?*

It becomes complicated. Essentially when people meet in real life they work on the basis of attraction, which either happens or it doesn't. They rely on their intuition. Someone's voice can be very important. The way they move, their gestures, their gaze, the way they look at you, the way they laugh. I experience them and I react to them and we start to interact and develop our relationship which we share. When internet dating I have a huge amount of information at my disposal, but I can't check any of it straight away. And the only point of contact I have is the picture. Instead of intuition, appearance or beauty becomes the category which guides me through searching for a partner. And here I can always be wrong, because the image could have been manipulated. So I have no trust in what I see and the image I desire. Perhaps it doesn't exist.

*Maybe you start to develop ways of checking these pictures. Were these pictures photoshopped? Are they current images? You start to look at the pictures for signs that might tell you whether you can trust the profile or not.*

Exactly. Everything is concentrated on the image. Not on meeting directly but on evaluating pictures. The picture has to speak to me and I also harbour suspicious about the picture.

*And I harbour the same suspicions about the profile that I have about advertising for a product or a derivatives fund where I don't know what it actually consists of. The profile is the promise of a relationship just like the derivatives fund is the promise of a big profit and in both cases I don't know whether they will ever be delivered or whether they're both actually fantasies which do not correspond to anything in reality.*

Trust is questioned over and over again every day and is always being refashioned and negotiated. Mistrust is always re-entering the relationship and then has to be calmed down.

*Of course this is very stressful I can never trust you, not even if we've been together for years. There's another kind of desperation comes into this, which you describe in your book [Emotions in the Age of Capitalism](#). When I'm internet dating I enter a space with a vast number of potential partners. If I meet and select a partner, I still have in the back of my mind that maybe one of the 20,000 others who the computer picked out for me on the basis of my profile search might actually suit me much better than the person sitting opposite me. There are so many possibilities, it becomes difficult to decide. If I have a date, I keep thinking of the other options which are still open, which might be better. Internet dating promises to make the search for a partner much simpler but I think it actually makes searching for a partner extremely complicated and uncertain.*



What's more, it's always being assumed that people know exactly what they're looking for. But people don't know exactly what they want, that's clear from all the studies. And the more choice they have, the more confused they are in terms of their desires. They understand the other users as a commodity, and they sell themselves as commodities too, but they don't know precisely how to orientate themselves, they don't know exactly which of the many profiles they really desire.

*So people don't necessarily trust that what they've put down in their search is really what they want and therefore they also harbour suspicions that the profiles which the computer has picked out for them are not a true reflection of their desires. And then they meet these people who they don't know whether they really want and who they believe from the outset don't correspond with their profiles. These meetings are marked by great misgivings that will always characterize the relationship if it should ever come about. In the rehearsals for [Trust](#) we worked a lot with this kind of fundamental mistrust which runs through all relationships. There were improvisation exercises for the dancers : »You don't trust each other but you want to build up intimacy between you.« This question has preoccupied me in my work, how can you establish intimacy in relationships without trust, is this even possible?*

*I've got another question which is related to your book [The Saving of the Modern Soul](#). It's about anger. It seems to have become really difficult for Western Europeans to express their anger. It seems as if people who feel anger don't trust this emotion and think of it as a defect. They don't trust that their anger can be justified on the basis of a political or social situation. Rather they assume that anger is an emotion from their childhood and relates back to unresolved problems with their parents. Anger is seen as a feeling which shouldn't be expressed, it is completely discredited and repressed.*

Yes, that's exactly how I see it.

*Can you explain to me why it's so difficult for people in Western Europe and America to express their anger?*

Relationships are always defined by power relations. And power and anger are historically regarded together. The one who has power may express their anger. The one who has no power may not show their anger. Today we live in democratic societies where it is regarded as illegitimate to demonstrate or live out one's power. Anger is always a manifestation of power. And an open demonstration of power and anger breaks with the unspoken agreement that everyone in our society is equal, that they have the same rights and that we live in a democratic and not a hierarchical society. That's why anger is largely banned from our society. This is a very specific characteristic of the twentieth century. For the first time the idea appeared that a good boss controls their feelings completely and does not show their anger. If an employee has made a mistake it used to be standard that a good boss would express anger. Today it's different. Anger belongs to the emotions which you do not bring into the workplace as it inhibits team work, thinking in flat hierarchies. Conversely, the person who feels anger demonstrates their own vulnerability, that something one of their colleagues or boss says or does can hurt them or affect them emotionally and that they are not in a position to distance themselves from their own feelings and to control them. An employee therefore does not show anger towards their boss openly because this would be an acknowledgement of weakness, of their own vulnerability. They would be admitting that their boss has the power to make them angry and would therefore show themselves to be subordinate and that would be unpleasant for them.

*The ability to develop a distance to your own emotions, to analyze them and apply them in a controlled way is now regarded as an important aim.*



This is about autonomy and the feeling that you have acted by making your own decisions. There are a great many workshops where you can learn to draw a boundary between yourself and your own emotions, to separate your emotions from you, get to grips with them and to apply them in a controlled way. Here you learn to distance yourself from your own anger, to put feelings of anger under the microscope using psychoanalytical criteria and you learn to divorce yourself from your anger. You no longer express anger, you control it. And this is regarded as a sign of self-determination, of power and autonomy: nobody can harm me, nobody can get to me so much that I feel anger, I am invulnerable. There is one emotional state which is now promoted very heavily: I accept everything very calmly, I stand above my feelings, I don't get angry.

*Can that be described as a feeling of the powerless? The powerless learn to control their anger in order not to have to reveal their impotence and describe this as calmness, as a state where nothing can get at them anymore which could hurt them.*

Exactly.

*To go back to the beginning again: to express anger is a privilege of the powerful. That would make it logical that people without power are trained not to express their anger. You describe in your book *The Saving of the Modern Soul* that people in leading positions also learn not to express their anger.*

Anger is regarded as an unspoken feeling as power relations should not be laid bare now. If you have power, you do not reveal it.

*Because it is our social contract that all the decisions in our society are not made on the basis of power relations but on democratic majority verdicts or force of circumstance.*

Exactly. Power structures remain hidden. In the employment world too, people try not to live out power relations openly. The focus is on the project, the work, not the hierarchy. People talk about the team completing the job together.

*The fact that power structures are concealed and have to be circumscribed with force of circumstances makes it difficult to direct your anger against anything. You can't find the guilty party any more. You don't know who it is you should be directing your anger towards. At the same time anger is an emotion which has been completely discredited. Anger is considered fundamentally inappropriate, as a personal problem of the one who feels it, anger is seen as embarrassing, unseemly and it indicates that the person who displays anger is still on a very primitive level of self-management.*

Psychoanalysis has contributed a great deal to the categorization of emotions into mature and immature emotions. Anger is regarded as an immature, lowly emotion. Composure is rated as a very mature emotion on the scale of values. Psychoanalysis demands from us that we are able to express our frustration without anger. The technique of speaking about your emotions without feeling these emotions is trained in their therapies. You free yourself from your emotions, you rework them. And the ideal of a mature psyche, which has prevailed everywhere, knows no anger, instead it only knows the person who is completely in control of their anger all the time. Losing control of your emotions is regarded as immature, childish behaviour and has led to anger being seen in our society as entirely inappropriate. Anyone displaying anger is displaying weakness, and is, psychologically speaking, on a very primitive level.

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