

The Street Debater: From beggar to street artist

Design by Tomo Kihara

Text by Pieter Desmet



The young designer Tomo Kihara was travelling in Paris. Born and raised in Japan, he found inspiration in the bustling European city. There was something, however, that shocked him: people on the street begging for money. He had never seen a beggar in Japan. The image stuck with him, and he decided to use it as a starting point for a design project. The first thing he did was experience it himself:

“To understand what it’s like to beg, I took to the street. I sat in the centre of Amsterdam with a cup in my hand. That was definitely one of the worst experiences of my life. From the moment that I sat down and held up my cup, I felt stripped of my self-worth. I broke out in a nervous sweat and it was as though I was telling the world, ‘I’m worthless.’”

On that day, Tomo learned how it felt to trade your self-worth for a few cents. He asked himself the question: what can I do, as a designer, to making begging more social and positive? With that, he started a year-long discovery trip. He spoke with 26 beggars in London, Paris, Stockholm and Amsterdam. He spent time with them, accompanied them while they begged and got to know them. He observed passers-by and spoke to them to understand their reactions and feelings.

Equivalence

Those emotions turned out to be mostly negative. Passers-by felt confronted by the situation, felt defeated as they ignored the beggar, and then felt shame as they walked on without responding. Beggars themselves also have negative emotions. The begging is at the expense of their self-confidence and sense of dignity. They feel humiliated by the uncomfortable reactions. Tomo's most important insight was that many negative emotions can be explained by the lack of equivalence: in that the activity of begging blocks the possibility of having an open and friendly interaction.

Street Debate

Together with two beggars, he came up with ideas to stimulate an equal conversation. Using cardboard and paper, they tried out different ideas and put them to the test out on the street. Certain attempts failed gloriously, but one idea did work: two cups on a bench, each with a photo: Clinton versus Trump. Behind stood a board with the question: "Next American president?" People stopped to start a conversation about the elections. Some even put in money for their favourite candidate. This minor intervention had a major effect on the dynamics of the conversation. Because of the discussion, both the passer-by and the beggar were just two people talking to each other for a moment—as equals. That's how the idea came about for the Street Debater. Tomo designed a simple wooden scale. The



The starting point of the Street Debater



Tomo with trials

scale has a surface for a question, with an answer on each side. People show their opinion by placing a coin. The movement of the scale makes the winning side obvious, which motivates more passers-by to participate.

From beggar to street artist

Tomo tested the scale in the streets of London with four participants ("Approving of the Brexit? — Yes or No"). The scale immediately attracted attention and people gathered. Discussions about politics developed and some people put money on the scale. On average, 12.5 people an hour stopped for a discussion. The conversations were diverse, varying from friendly political debate to personal stories. At the end of the day, the four participants were very enthusiastic. They had earned an average of £13.50 per hour, more than what begging earned. One of the participants remarked that he had felt more like a street artist than a homeless person that day.



Street Debate prototypes



Participant in London tests the Street Debater scale

Engaged designs

Tomo now promotes the Street Debater as a means of conducting an open dialogue. Anyone can do it, from students to politicians, so that it's less stigmatizing for homeless people. It encourages us to step out of our online social bubble and to engage with people with different opinions. For Tomo, this was more than a design project, it was a valuable life experience. He has a lot of respect for his participants. He talks about his meeting with Renna in Amsterdam.

"Renna tried to sell cheap CDs to passers-by on the street. He didn't seem to sell anything. His friendly appearance inspired me, and I decided to help him. For four hours we tried to sell CDs together,

without much success. We earned just four euros. What Renna told me at the end of the day scared me: he told me that he can earn much more money by begging. Then why the CDs? Because of something more important than money: his dignity."

Conclusion

I admire Tomo for his courage to dive into the world of his target group without hesitation. He read scientific publications about the phenomenon of begging, but he didn't stop there. With an open mind—and open heart—he contacted almost 30 people from his target group. Simply by approaching them, talking to them and getting to know them. He approached them not as a beggar, but as a person. And he continues his Street Debater project.



Tomo Kihara designs playful interventions for reinterpreting social themes. In 2017, he designed the Street Debater in the Exploring Interactions course in the Design for Interaction master's program at TU Delft. The project was his own initiative. His supervisors were Stefan van de Geer and Mark van Huustee. With his design, Tomo won both the Grand Prix and the public award of the 2017 WIRED Creative Hack Award. The design is available free of charge for you to make yourself, and the scale can be purchased through its website: www.streetdebater.com

Colophon

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Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering
Delft University of Technology
The Netherlands

Product concept & design by Tomo Kihara

Text by Pieter Desmet
Photographs by Tomo Kihara
Graphic design by Rozemarijn Klein Heerenbrink

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