

issue 04: touch

private2public

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL:

ADVENTURES IN INTIMATE

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FRAGNITO

What do Web cams, reality television, the cell phone conversation on the bus, credit cards "for identification purposes only," confessional talk shows like *Gerry Springer*, surveillance cameras, mandatory drug testing and wearable computers all have in common? All mess with the lines we have drawn between public and private.

One of my all-time favourite books is called *Sex Tips For Girls* (Simon and Schuster, 1983) by Cynthia Heimel. Located in the humour section at your local mega bookstore, it is a funny and welcome antithesis of Fein and Schneider's *The Rules* (Time Warner, 1996). Heimel's main tenet is one that I share: She says that, basically, everything we do — going to work, eating cheesecake, watching movies (even writing this essay!) — is just marking time until we next have intercourse. In other words, our prime directive is to have sex. Of course, Darwin's theory of evolution says almost the same thing... Heimel just puts a sassier spin on it.

So, if we are going to talk about intimate technologies such as wireless communication and the incredible shrinking microchip, can we please just get straight to the nitty gritty and talk about how this convergence of public and private affects our sex lives?

Part of the messiness of this meeting rests in the fact that we all draw different lines between public and private. Perhaps my own privacy filter is lower than others', but I only realized it when I started making comparisons. Take, for example, Artist for the Ethical Treatment of Humans, a series of three postcards I created as my own personal "subvertisement" campaign, using my boyfriend and myself as models. The images are close-up glimpses of intimate moments that range from overtly sexual to just plain sweet. The postcards were disseminated via e-mail and, in the real world, through Go-Card displays (those racks of promotional postcards often found in restaurants and bars). I would insert them behind the cards that showed the most familiar sexy imagery, so that collectors reaching for the hardest body, the poutiest lips, or maybe the barest breasts, would get us instead.

My boyfriend was fine with all that. However, when I gave the card to someone who knew one of his colleagues, he got upset. He had not anticipated that his identity might be revealed and his privacy jeopardized. His public/private line was breached.

Intimate technologies threaten, or at least complicate, these boundaries. It is pretty hard to argue that devices like cell phones and personal digital assistants have not made our lives safer, more organized, and even more fun. I became a true believer in the cell phone when I got lost driving in San Francisco and was guided into a parking space by a friend on *his* cell phone. I am also the proud owner of a teensy hand-held computer on which I can play my video art in all its thirty-frame-per-second glory for anyone who'll watch. But, as great as they are, in the final analysis these toys function mainly to pass the time until I can have sex again.

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My first sex-and-technology experience was in a chat room. We exchanged basic information: "a/s?" (Chat abbreviation for "age, sex?") Then my on-line friend whispered to me: "Let's get a private room." Those of you who are familiar with chatting know that this means a section of the chat space where others can be barred from entering. As silly as an animated digital penis might look, it is still frowned upon in the common areas of chat rooms.

The details of what we did in there have blurred, but what I remember clearly is how absolutely turned on I was, sitting there, typing madly, "Yes, yes," and, "Mmmmmmmmmm," and, "Now I am sliding my hand down your thigh."

As time went on, I became more adventurous, brazenly (for moi) approaching female and male avatars alike, and thoroughly enjoying this anonymous, no-strings-attached, safest-ever sex. It was lots of fun, but eventually I found it... frustrating. The best sex, the sex we crave, is intimate sex. And by this I mean the kind of sex that engages all the senses.

The now familiar sight of someone at a tourist attraction, concert or even a wedding, slowly walking around with their video camera in front of their face, recording events instead of experiencing them, makes me think of "cyborg" Steve Mann. For years, he wore a wireless Web cam all day long, recording every interaction and uploading it to the Internet. But my question is: Did he wear it in the bedroom?

I have no interest in bringing any devices into my bed (except maybe a vibrator, in a pinch). Can a wearable computer augment one's sex life? I can just imagine the pleasure recognition software:

"Honey, move your hand a little further down."

"Here?"

"Almost..."

"Here?"

"Almost!"

"Here??"

"YES! YES! YES!"

"Okay, one second while I input the coordinates and frame-grab your face."

Just think: all of your ecstasy-filled faces, uploaded to the Web for potential lovers to sync to their handhelds. My boyfriend would be very upset, indeed.

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Skawennati Tricia Fragnito is a content developer who uses both new and not-so-new media in her art, writing and curatorial work. Her projects have included CyberPowWow and Imagining Indians in the 25th Century. She is presently very excited about making a DVD video jukebox called 80 Minutes, 80 Movies, 80s Music. Visit www.skawennati.net to find out more.

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