

Uncovered Agents, Privacy Exposed

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Performance art has interested me for some time now, particularly women artists using the form. It was an almost unavoidable fit, both by natural attraction and necessity, with the firm click of inevitability about it, locks and tumblers sliding nicely into place. The guys, who were painters, big painters, were real artists and they hogged the Cedar Bar in New York and all the wall space at the galleries too. Women, for the most part (Helen Frankenthaler aside), couldn't find the point of entry, maybe didn't have the sticking power, the accoutrements, the necessary talent, were insufficient when it came to scale and were happiest when they acknowledged the way things really were, the way nature and biology meant them to be, recognizing that they did nothing so well as when they were splendid, intelligent, entertaining, supportive, great good gals.

Making the most, then, of the materials they had at hand, many women artists turned to performance and their medium was what they'd been given; they used their bodies – no wall space, no stretchers required. I think of Carolee Schneemann, whom her male artist colleagues referred to as "The Body," using her fine physical self with intelligence and rigour to question boundaries and identity and politics, in fact. I think of Hannah Wilke, who documented external readings of self by adhering small vaginas formed from chewed gum to her naked body, and of her almost unbearable courage later, in refusing to abandon her body as subject and medium when, fatally ill, it seemed to be abandoning her. And of Orlan, the French theorist and performance artist, who, through extended medical interventions, insisted we recognize the self as a construct and set about to change perceived notions of beauty by having hers reconfigured to meet definitions she could control.

Recently I had occasion to attend the performances of

another artist; this extended performance took place in two strip clubs in Winnipeg. The artist was Charmaine Wheatley, a Canadian who lives and works in New York and was here by invitation of Gallery 1.1.1. at the University of Manitoba's School of Art. Now, what we saw was actually only process, since the artist herself videotapes, or has her appearance videotaped, and then later creates installations in which the taped material plays a part. While the end stage of the work is interesting, what engaged my attention was the process segment.

What I'm thinking about here is privacy and how today it is a rarer commodity than kryptonite. I'm not competent to comment beyond speculation on the operations and implications of digital communications and various cyber surveillance mechanisms, except to say that the very nature of involuntary observation and scrutiny makes me uneasy. Not that I have anything to hide, you understand, its just that I prefer to do so – hide, that is. The source of my uneasiness may be as follows. Harkening back to the early days of telephones for domestic use in rural areas, where all lines were shared and no conversations private, my mother has always maintained that it is unwise to tell secrets, or anything private, on the telephone because you can never be certain who is listening. With this conviction she is at once behind and ahead of her time. Her influence prevails.

With the bewildering proliferation of real-time, real-life video surveillance programs broadcast as entertainment without plot save the apparently hypnotic banality of simple, daily existence, and the increasing use, speed and facility of electronic record-keeping in all aspects of our lives from employment to medical care, privacy and its maintenance is assuredly an issue. The scale exceeds me but Charmaine Wheatley's performance provides a context I can at least address.

What Wheatley did was dress in a provocative and revealing manner: thigh-high white vinyl boots, short, easy-to-step out-of denim skirt, a tied-in-front, white, fluffy-bodied top, also easy to slip out of, and not much else beyond her tousled blonde hair and attractive self. In location A, a downscale strip club, she located herself at the bar, wedging between two male audience members who, it could be guessed, hadn't had anything as remarkable as what came

next ever happen to them before. Certainly not its like. Charmaine, chatting them up in her genuinely engaging manner, slipped off her short fur coat. Fine. The guys looked and returned their gaze to the stripper inches from them on the bar stage. They looked and we, who knew it was a performance in a reading that was different from their knowledge of the performance, sat at two tables some distance back. "We" were art critics, writers, art students and artists, including two who wore video cameras inside their coats. We were observing two performances; the other patrons, only one. And this felt shy, which it was.

Charmaine sipped her white wine and slipped out of her skirt, then pulled the tie on her top and there she was at the bar in her vinyl boots. Then, there was the manager and Charmaine's coat was draped over her and she was helped out of the room in a hurry and we, all of us including the camera operators, left as well. Into our cars to the next spot, bar B, an upscale strip club this time, where the manager was hipper, more into play, maybe even irony, and Charmaine was welcomed on stage to strip and twirl on the post and toss clothing into the audience with the pros. Again, the covert cameras rolled.

I found the tandem events fascinating. The audiences' response could be the subject of a book or, at the very least, a study on behaviour and context. In bar A, the less posh of the two clubs, the manager, a short, bouncy man, looked like he could be an off-hours accountant or dentist and maybe he was. When he returned from escorting Charmaine from the room, in order to protect us from lewdness or indecency no doubt, he gestured with his index finger, making circles at his temple to suggest she was crazy. There, irony eluded him because what he was saying was that in a strip club only crazy people take off their clothes.

In club B the audience had been entertained by beautiful, athletic young women whose bodies were perfect, if thin as a nail is perfect, and they'd remained cool, indifferent almost, to the strippers dancing in front of them. Charmaine, who is attractive and young, is not athletic and her proportions, while real, wouldn't qualify as perfect or ideal. When she came on stage the audience went wild and when she took off her clothes there was heat in

the room for the first time.

This is about privacy, I thought, because this involves inside and outside. I was finally getting to a definition that made sense for me. The strippers had no clothes on but they weren't naked. They were working, they were slick and professional, and what we saw was the outside only. Good for them, I thought; they're keeping the inside inside and the outside might as well have been behind bullet-proof glass, for all the apparent contact it offered. But Charmaine was flushed, a little awkward and, voluntariness aside, shy; there was no screen between her and the audience. She had foregone privacy as an issue entirely. What interested her was her response, their response, and its documentation.

The sly part I'd referred to earlier was that we (our group) knew something everyone else didn't and with this knowledge we'd distanced ourselves. Also, people have a right to be comfortable with their reactions, unguarded and at ease, free from scrutiny when they're at their leisure, playing or when they're working and are lawful in their conduct. I'll trust Charmaine's discretion; her chosen form aside, I would bet she is discreet and would find exploitation untenable.

An individual's sense of privacy, their entitlement to it, isn't something that's easy to identify. Technologies can slip and flicker through this line of personhood, which should be inviolable but is impossible to fix or even see.

It's impractical now and possibly futile to deny that the state and corporations and agencies gather information about us as individuals or groups, and assess and collate it and draw conclusions that buttress a particular position or fuel a desired and irresistible economic argument. The argument that presented itself to me later that night as I tried to shake the cigarette smoke from my clothes was that privacy is really a question of the distinction between inside and outside (the performing body carried the message), and finally, what's voluntary and what is not.

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