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Extimacy: The Other in Me

Gazira Babeli, Clara Boj, Martin John Callanan, Grégory Chatonsky, Diego Díaz, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Laurent Mignonneau, Paul Sermon, Christa Sommerer, Carlo Zanni, Extimacy. *Art, Intimacy and Technology*, Es Baluard Contemporary Art Museum, Palma (Spain). January 29th – May 1st, 2011

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EXₜIMACY:

The Other in Me

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It is almost a commonplace to state that nowadays our notion of intimacy has been transformed. Every day, millions of Internet users become the authors of their own biography in realtime as they post pictures, videos or comments about their experiences on their social network profiles, blogs or community forums. Communication between individuals is mediated by web 2.0 technologies and mobile phones, allowing everyone to share personal information online and at the same time feed the databases of the companies that will use this data for their own profit. In a society that treats information as a commodity, there is no place for privacy.

It has been long feared that the loss of privacy would be imposed by a totalitarian state, as narrated in dystopian futuristic novels such as George Orwell's *1984* (1949). Yet, and besides being true that governments use technology to exercise control over their citizens, it is the individual who increasingly abandons all need for intimacy and exposes herself on the many platforms that are offered to her. Using the term coined by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, it can be said that intimacy turns into *extimacy*. Lacan once stated that "it is precisely the most intimate that I am forced to not be able to recognise except outside."[1] Several decades later, psychiatrist Serge Tisseron defined *extimacy* as "the movement that pushes each individual to expose a part of his intimate life, both physical and psychic."[2] Lacan and Tisseron thus refer to a need to make one's private life public, which is rooted in the deepest region of our self. The "I" is constructed using elements that the individual extracts from his or her environment. Nowadays, this environment is both physical and virtual, real and fictitious. A place where we develop what Zygmunt Bauman describes as a *'palimpsest identity,' an I shaped like a board on which you can write, rub out and write again*; a temporary identity made of a series of episodes, each one enclosed in itself, as though it were a collection of photos."[3]

This condition of the self in our technology-driven society can be traced in the work of several artists who integrate new media in their artistic research. In *Identidad Fan* (Fan Identity, 2009-2011), Clara Boj and Diego Díaz reproduce a teenager's bedroom in which the wall are covered with posters of her idols and a computer with a webcam rests on a desk. When the viewer approaches the computer, he sees himself on the screen: his face is replaced by that of one of the idols, and at the same time it replaces the idol's face on one of the posters. The fan's desire to become his or her idol is made explicit, the faces, being mere masks, can be easily replaced. The process of identification is also

addressed in the work of Gazira Babeli. An avatar in the online virtual world Second Life, Babeli breaks the bond between the user and his or her avatar by means of "code performances" in which she manipulates the environment or the viewer's digital persona without permission. In *The Bathers* (2010), the artist disrupts the placid environment of a seaside scene by placing a group of naked avatars, all wearing her glasses and tall black hats. The viewer can decide whether or not to take part in the both sensual and unpleasant experience of mingling with this crowd.

In Babeli's beach, as in every virtual environment, the sense of touch is suggested but at the same time neglected. This is also the subject of Grégory Chatonsky's *Se toucher toi* (2004), an installation in which the viewer can activate a video of two hands touching each other by moving her own hand over a glass surface. The viewer instinctively feels that she is touching the hands on the screen, but gradually discovers that she has no control over their movements, revealing the tactile experience to be elusive and to some extent alienating. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Pulse Index* (2010) provides another *extimate* experience in which the image of our own body becomes alien to us. The work consists of a large screen displaying a mosaic of enlarged photographs of fingertips and a device in which the viewer must place an index finger. A sensor captures the viewer's heartbeat, while a microscope captures the image of the fingertip. Both data are recorded on the screen—the image of the finger occupies the lower part of it, pulsating to the rhythm of the spectator's heartbeat. Once the image has been incorporated into the composition of hundreds of other user's fingertips, the viewer can no longer distinguish the part of himself that he has left reflected on the work.

In a sense, Lozano-Hemmer's piece creates an endless amount of portraits. The image of oneself in fact can be portrayed in many different ways, as Carlo Zanni's *Self portrait with dog* (2008-2011) shows. Zanni was captured by the camera of Google Street View as he was walking his dog on the streets of Milan and decided to turn this invasion of his privacy into a celebration of his online presence. He took the images from Google's site and ordered a series of paintings to be made from the photos. The canvases were painted by a company in China and then sent to the artist's studio. The artist states that with this gesture, he intended to lose control over the work just as he had lost control over his own public image, and furthermore, to comment on the tendency to outsource the production of goods in our global economy. Zanni's portrait, captured and re-elaborated as a painting, clearly illustrates the loss of privacy in our connected society, as well as the unstable condition of the self, constantly confronted with its own image as an Other.

The fact that the concepts of self and intimacy have become elusive and contradictory has been made explicit by our current use of new technologies. However, the accelerated pace at which these technologies are being introduced in our

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. *Pulse Index*, 2010. 147. 3 cm, plasma screen, computer, digital microscope, industrial camera, metal enclosure, custom software.
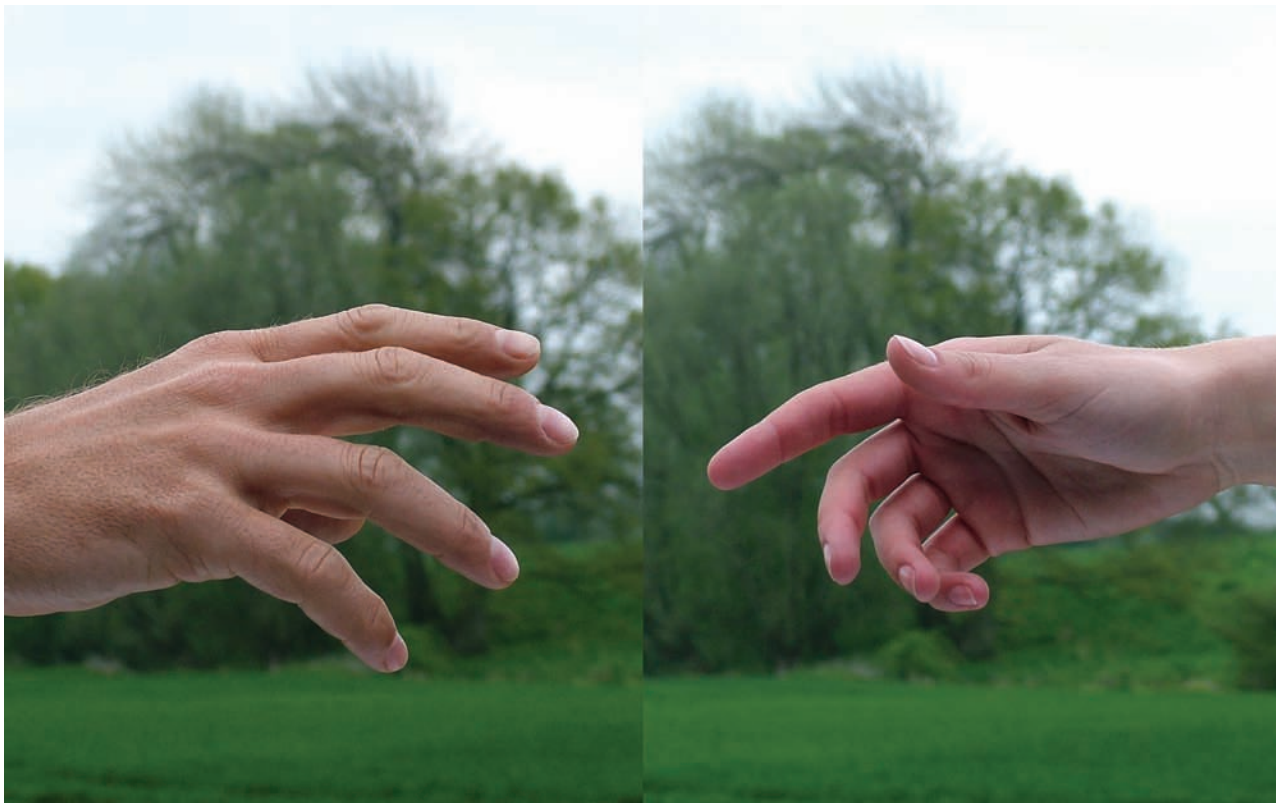
Gregory Chatonsky. *Se Toucher Toi*, 2004. Computer, monitor, webcam, custom software. Programming / Software: Vadim Bernard, Stéphane Sikora. Production: Le Fresnoy studio national des arts contemporains.

Gazira Babeli, *The Bathers,* 2010. An avatar in the online virtual world Second Life,

Clara Boj and Diego Díaz. *Identidad Fan,* 2009.
Computer, webcam, custom software, projector.

daily routines does not allow for a cultural framework to develop around them. Thus we are not totally aware of the transformations that are taking place in our society, and it is the task of these artworks to provide us with a space for reflection and understanding.

Pau Waelder

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Notes
[1] Jacques Lacan. *Seminario 16. De un Otro al otro.* (English title: "From one Other to the other"). Barcelona: Paidós, 2008, 246.
[2] Serge Tisseron. *L'intimité surexposée.* Paris: Éditions Ramsay, 2001, 52.
[3] Helena Béjar. *Identidades inciertas: Zygmunt Bauman.* Barcelona: Herder, 2007, 127.

Carlo Zanni. *Self-portrait with dog,* 2010. Oil on canvas. Triptych, each panel 150 x 250 cm.