

of self-regulation. While such an authorizing gesture may seem prescriptive, and may demand that the addict return to a socially sanctioned model of normalcy, it ultimately redeems the demonized individual. I do not believe that *Intervention* can be dismissed as yet another incarnation of television's co-optation of neoliberalism; the program is not an empty call to citizenship, though it may indeed seem to be outsourcing the therapeutic exchange to its cast of interventionists.<sup>17</sup> I argue that the program outlines the process to further the process; it reveals more than it conceals.<sup>18</sup> Thomas Elsaesser reminds us: "Remembering, giving testimony, and bearing witness can be tokens of a fight not only against forgetfulness, but also against history."<sup>19</sup> Addicts do exist. Teenagers do go astray. Families can be dysfunctional. While our fears may be manufactured, their traumas are certainly not. *Intervention* takes the only tactic possible with vocalizing trauma; it engages with narrative. But rather than letting the ideological work of convention take hold, the program sets its sights much higher and aims to bring us to a much more productive understanding of crisis rhetoric.

## 5

## The Architectures of Cyberdating

*The nature of things, their coexistence, the way in which they are linked together and communicate is nothing other than their resemblance. And that resemblance is visible only in the network of signs that crosses the world from one end to the other.*

MICHEL FOUCAULT, *THE ORDER OF THINGS*

In the previous chapters, I have identified a number of distinct drives that motivate the use of personal images, urging us to send them out into various public domains. We use them as devices of memory and recovery, as agents that can serve these restorative impulses. But, on occasion, we use our images to fulfill a different desire as we forge a forward-looking narrative. In a move that seems counter to fear and paranoia, many of us have thrown caution to the wind and joined online social networks with no decided aim other than to find old acquaintances and double our connectedness to those who are already a part of our daily lives. But others of us have done so much more purposefully, turning to cyberspace to become romantically (or simply sexually) entangled. Technophobia has given way to technophilia, and even though common generational distinctions still seem to inform the relative appeal of new technologies, for every cautionary tale of a rape in cyberspace there is a recuperative tale of kinship found and life's promise fulfilled.

Socialization has been altered dramatically since the introduction of networked communication and, with it, traditional notions of family and locality no longer seem to dominate the formation of our private lives. No longer bound by these conventions, our personal attachments have become individualized, freed from the moorings of such outmoded contextual (and place-bound) constraints.<sup>1</sup> With the aid of print- and Web-based dating services (both commercial and noncommercial), we have been able to make contact with potential partners in ways that complicate traditional notions of locale and even bodily copresence.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that information

technologies (the combined resources of computing and communications) and the Internet in particular have long since exceeded their initial status as tools of workplace productivity and have become increasingly important in leisurely pursuits (which might nevertheless still be understood as productive), helping us create and mediate our romantic attachments, and hastening our evolution into efficient desiring machines.

Technologies always have played a significant role in interpersonal relations, even when they have not been designed to do so. One of the first commercial computers, the UNIVAC, became a staple of popular entertainment in the 1950s; host Art Linkletter began using the machine to match couples during the 1956 season of the NBC variety show *People Are Funny*. Video dating services emerged in the mid-1970s, taking the camcorder revolution in a distinct direction. And the rise of networked personal computing birthed new arrangements in the collective gaming environments of the earliest MUDs (multiuser dungeons) that proliferated in the eighties, the socially oriented MOOs (object-oriented MUDs) and text-based BBSes (bulletin board systems) of the nineties, and the dedicated online dating services that began to emerge by the middle of that decade with the widespread use of the Internet.

The most obvious reason for turning to the matter of online dating in a volume on transience is to chart new patterns of flow and to follow personal images as they are sent along yet another pathway. But there is also the matter of psychological depth; my goal throughout this volume has been to find transience objectified, but also to define it as a more deeply entrenched phenomenon that is attached to the human psyche. That these pathways exist is fairly obvious; the number of dedicated online dating sites exploded in the first few years of the twenty-first century, introducing genres and subgenres of online engagement. More than an industrial push, however, the proliferation of these spaces seemed to suggest a psychic need, perhaps as a response to a perceived absence of opportunities for interaction off-line. And, despite the attempts of an industry to isolate desire, to channel it within particular fixed commercial venues and house it in specific Internet architectures (an effort formalized with the introduction of subscription-based online dating sites in the mid-1990s), other forums soon took center stage. As early as 2004, online social networks began to erode any fixed sense of where dating might and should occur, and Internet porn sites began to reconfigure their own architectures, adding file-sharing components that could connect users to each other. These new, less hierarchical arrangements allowed participants to connect with each other in more dynamic (and oftentimes free) ways, and redefined long-standing commercial sites that had been designed to bring individuals together through rather fixed patterns of interaction.

Desire became a messy affair. But the responsiveness, the malleability of online Internet architectures reflects the very nature of our needs (and here I purposefully refrain from speaking of need as simple consumerism). Unlike earlier print-based models that invoked both spatiality and temporality (one sent letters across a fixed geography), Internet dating is characterized by a seamless movement between reading descriptions, writing responses, and exchanging messages that invokes proximity and immediacy and binds together rather distinct forms of information handling.<sup>3</sup> The online exchange clearly collapses regionality, as distinct locations (cities, states, and countries) come together under one domain name; and the lag of this new communicative relay remains anxiously open-ended, perpetually teasing our imaginations.

In such open terrain, looking is a privileged and powerful affair; we can survey (and be surveyed by) multiple others with a single glance. This is not a pure optical relay; faced with the uncertainty of how we might be read, we take measures to manage our impressions as we move online, following some of the same tactics we use in managing our off-line social lives. But we also deploy a number of unique cues that form part of the ever-expanding tool set of online communication. Profiles, personality and compatibility testing, digital photographs, digital voice recordings, Web cameras, real-time chat capabilities, e-mail, and Instant Messaging are teamed up in an effort to help overcome the so-called restricted cues of online information gathering.<sup>4</sup> Taken together, these tools reduce the hyperpersonal nature of online dating.<sup>5</sup> Each artifact serves as a corrective measure; though these distinct elements combine to create a more detailed portrait, they also provide a series of checks and balances. At the same time, as we peruse these additional fields, we also begin to prolong our engagement; perhaps these tools promote more authentic forms of communication, slowing down the fleeting glance.

Reminding us that "it's okay to look," Match.com began running advertisements with the provocative tagline at the end of December 2006, rebranding its print and television ads and its online banners.<sup>6</sup> Earlier in the month, Jim Safka, the company's former CEO, gave readers an opportunity to look behind the scenes of the campaign's Los Angeles-based production. He posted photos on his ongoing MatchCEO Blogspot page, and invited readers to engage in a dialogue about the new ads. Not everyone was pleased with the effort. In the months that followed, people weighed in with their responses, some of which were decidedly negative. In May 2007, one reader commented:

Will you please end this campaign? IT'S DESTROYING OUR GENERATION! It's NOT okay to look! You're advertising that it is okay for husbands and wives to take their eyes off one another and view their "possibilities." You're advertising that it is okay for young teenagers

(females especially) to log on, make an account, and look for a partner (someone who could be twice her age). You're advertising that promiscuity is okay! You're advertising adultery! Why? Why must you kill our generation and condemn us for death? Why? We will stand up, stand up against the impure, stand up for the One who gives us Eternal life, we will stand up against anything and everything that does not honor our Lord! So please, will you stop this advertising campaign? It's DESTROYING OUR GENERATION!<sup>7</sup>

The following month, another reader posted a similar derogatory remark:

My husband and I don't like the ad campaign. My husband and I saw it for the first time a few weeks ago and then again earlier this week. He and I both agreed that the phrase "it's okay to look" seems to target married people. I mean, if you're not married, then it being "okay to look" on what should be a dating site for singles is obvious, isn't it?<sup>8</sup>

Looking is apparently a multivalent act; while Match.com encourages the activity, not everyone seems to agree. That we need to be told it's okay does, in fact, suggest that we are being invited to indulge in a certain guilty fixation, and the fixation is not simply about viewing other people but also about going online to do so, activating the mirrored forces of exhibitionism and voyeurism.

Match.com's redesigned banner showcases a number of abbreviated portraits, framing each of its subjects with an iris effect—a simulated peephole; the sitter's username is written in script, imprinted as a personal signature that nevertheless reveals neither name nor surname. One such ad features a young man in a casual pin-striped suit, seated on a vintage Schwinn bicycle; these signs of stylish geekiness are matched by his username (BeamMeDown2) and his introductory tagline ("I'm willing to give Earth girls a shot."). These tidy, professionally produced black-and-white tableaux, devoid of location markers and populated only by the occasional planned and determined prop, read as carefully constructed and publicly secure points of investment. They are like and not like the profile photos on the general site; they are beautiful approximations of direct communication. Taken together, they function as a whimsical narrative shorthand (replete with personal quips) for the site itself.

Vision cannot be reduced to a single mode of perception; though an ocular process, it invokes a power relation that calls out the role of the singular observer in an entire history of looking.<sup>9</sup> While online dating presents us with a new way of looking (partly invoked by a new interface—that of the data-



In its December 2006 advertising campaign, Match.com tells singles that "it's okay to look." (<http://www.match.com>)

base), a new place to look, and a new category of images, it is difficult to let go of the old ways of seeing and the ideological investments attached to such modes of perception. Kevin Robins suggests: "Rather than privileging 'new' against 'old' images, we might think about them all—all those that are still active, at least—in their contemporaneity."<sup>10</sup> This is what I suggested in my reading of photographs of missing children as I drew out the persistence of a particular disciplinary method and the persistent return of particular narratives that authorize containment (mechanisms of fear production). While we are presented with new imaging technologies, we are also offered new ways of organizing the visual field. But such new patterns, structures, and forms of organization may find opposition in the cultures and traditions (the social contexts) that ground them. The digital age, as with any significant evolutionary period, necessitates looking forward and backward; it warrants a dual attention, an understanding of both continuities and discontinuities. Safka's regular blog posts intend to help current and prospective members negotiate this divide between past and present; the conversation is designed to help people become more comfortable with the service, and the dialogue fosters a sense of engagement and camaraderie. Safka establishes a participatory relationship with his consumers, talking to them about ad campaigns and interface revisions and listening to their replies, sometimes acting on their feedback in

an effort to win their consent and to position Match.com as an empathetic partner that might enable them to secure a similarly healthy investment in a life partner.

The self-described vision of Match.com's parent company, IAC/InterActiveCorp, "is to harness the power of interactivity to make daily life easier and more productive for people all over the world."<sup>11</sup> There seem to be two oppositional trajectories or impulses embedded in this business model. The push to converge is represented by those IAC ventures that bring people together (including Match.com, Ticketmaster, Evite, and Expedia) and the company's investment in the consolidating enterprise of interactive commerce, while its opposite, the push to diversify, is found in the outward flow of global capital, where technological convergence is being deployed toward a globalizing end.

But the convergence narrative I want to consider here is not about technology but about identity. Do dating sites articulate a generalized push toward a singular pole of identity? As I turn to consider the contemporary architectures that frame personal advertisement photography on the Internet, my aim is to examine the popular, critical, and institutional discourses that attempt to position personal advertisement sites as contemporary manifestations of community; these readings commonly suggest that online personal ads signal the death of community, but they occasionally celebrate the birth of new forms of community. How can these sites be understood as both dystopic and utopic formations? Perhaps what these sites expose are more fundamental questions and indices of community and its evolving parameters. My goal, in part, is to address the physical—in this case, technological—mechanisms that have caused anxieties around notions of community; the blog roll cited earlier indicates a fear that the call to unite online may have a destabilizing effect, impacting already-existing social relations. However, I want to avoid a model of technological determinism that suggests that new technologies themselves have changed our communities; what they have done is modify our "sense" of community. The question here is how we perceive what the technology is "doing." Linda Singer writes of community as a culturally overdetermined term, an elastic referent.<sup>12</sup> It is the term's very elasticity that makes it extremely powerful; the term is an authorizing signifier, ready to be differentially deployed (attached to an agenda), yet always linked to an economy of discourse that simultaneously invokes inclusion and exclusion. Likewise, photography itself is a discursive construct. As Allan Sekula notes: "The discourse that surrounds photography speaks paradoxically of discipline and freedom, of rigorous truths and unleashed pleasures."<sup>13</sup> There is clearly a paradox at work here, and my goal is to explore its politics. What are the particular forces that try to move the pendulum to one side or the other, toward

truth or pleasure?<sup>14</sup> As we send images of ourselves into cyberspace, asking them to take on a specific function, they can be readily pulled back out and asked to work in the service of a decidedly different narrative. Like the child's photo that serves as a lingering signifier of fear (through abduction) or the relative's photo that serves as a lingering signifier of terrorism (through catastrophe), our own images, willfully or not, can be asked to serve as lingering signifiers of community.

### Reading the Body

Internet dating is constructed around the presentation of biographical narratives that provide individuals with an avenue through which they can reflect on and create a discourse about who they are and what they want from a relationship or a partner. Self-descriptions provide an important starting point from which others decide whether to enter into communication; and despite the amount of reflection that goes into their production, the claim is always one of authenticity (and immediacy). The claim operates in two ways—in the manner that the profile embodies its subject and the way it objectifies the subject's desire. The question of a profile's authenticity often hinges on how honestly it portrays its subject; but the question might also be answered by considering the quality of the response. Do the respondents match the subject's desire? This more significant question reveals to what degree desire can be approximated in a text-bound system. While photographs are an instrumental component of personal advertisement sites, they are not the only component. The question is how to privilege them. How much power should be given to photographic evidence? Where does the photograph fit in the signifying relay of any personal ad? At some level, the image seems the most important cue in online dating sites, perhaps because we place so much value on the visual register in our everyday lives—making assessments about people, reading them through their visages and their physical bodies. But the ad space takes away part of the physical body; it removes demeanor, presence, and comportment, and leaves only a static entity. And the ad space offers individuals as thumbnails or thumbnail collages. The image is easily scanned; as part of a hypertext that we might quickly scroll through, images seem well aligned with the speed of our glance, the rapid trailblazing of Internet surfing where there is so much to see. And when the search result offers up hundreds of similar individuals (and tells us exactly how many are to be found and exactly how far we have moved through our reading list), time seems to be of the essence; we need to economize, and images help us to do so.

But images are not entirely open signifiers, despite our desire to fixate on them. They do not exhibit true semiotic freedom. They are contained by the

structuring tendencies of photographic practice, formal conventions that are historically and culturally situated. And at the same time, we should not overlook that as readers we too are contained and situated. The practices of representation may be ideologically inflected, giving symbolic weight to material practice; but as subjects, we are also historically and culturally situated. As we foreground the forces that are exerted on photography, shaping it as a discursive practice, we should not lose sight of the forces that are exerted on our very subjectivity. On the one hand, as Sekula notes, we need to understand that representational practices give form to other discursive constructions; they can be central to ideologies of family, nature, sexuality, history, and governance.<sup>15</sup> Visibility is a powerful tool that is often used to define these terms, to offer up evidence. On the other hand, we need to understand that these same ideologies structure our attitude toward photography. This seems to be an inescapable loop that ultimately naturalizes our practices of seeing and secures us as bourgeois subjects. New media forms may enable these traditional ideologies, practices, and subject positions, but only with a certain renegotiation that involves both new technologies (digital imaging in an interactive, scripted interface) and new forms of textuality (that nevertheless still invoke traditional forms of composition—for instance, understanding how to conjoin text and image). Yet this negotiation does not always work. Beyond simply exploring new ontologies (distinctions between, for instance, analog and digital photography), we might ask more meaningful questions. How do we reconcile the bourgeois subject in the face of the desire for community? What tension is evoked in the desire to know, as we approach a dating profile from a place of certainty? To what extent do personal advertisement sites present an affront to subjectivity? While many profile markers are individually authored (for example, the relatively open character space of the free-form narrative), others are selected from a menu of offerings; in all, these work as a form of *de facto* autobiography, the goal being self-description.

In its current iteration, the Match.com profile interface includes menu-based responses to a long list of self-identifying attributes. Filling in the general category “about me,” participants are asked to complete multiple-choice fields for a number of personal markers, among them: relationships, have kids, want kids, ethnicity, body type, height, religion, smoke, drink, hair, eyes, sports and exercise, exercise habits, interests, education, occupation, income, languages, politics, sign, pets I have, and pets I like. In turn, responding to the header “about my date,” the site asks participants to specify the responses they seek in a match (allowing the Match.com search engine to rate results in terms of a percentage of equivalence). Responding to recent trends in folksonomic tagging and allowing participants to refine how they may be known in a term-based search, Match.com also endorses the inclusion of Match-

words, which reference the subject and the subject's varied interests (professional, personal, political, social, and cultural) and commodity fetishes; these terms also allow respondents to collate profiles that feature similar key terms as they seek out individuals with common interests and sensibilities. Here, the guiding principles of word selection function as yet another layer of individuation, providing a more nuanced trace of the respondent's psychology (one that might be understood by sympathetic others). Beyond these abbreviated term-based signposts, Match.com also allows its participants to narrate themselves more elaborately under the profile heading “in my own words,” and, of course, follows through with the promise to flesh out each of its members by featuring a profile photo album.

The desire to know, in the context of online dating sites, is manifest as an attempt to ground disembodied subjects; there is a strong push toward embodiment, a process that in modern society has been achieved through a range of techniques that include visual classification (photographic portraiture and fingerprinting), and other tactics such as genetic mapping (which still has a visual register) and the assignment of unique identification numbers.<sup>16</sup> However, as Celia Lury points out: “Having a (recognisable) body has historically not been sufficient to define an individual. Continuity of *consciousness* and *memory* are also necessary for a person to claim separate status as an individual.”<sup>17</sup> Consciousness and memory are not produced by an accumulation of signifiers; rather, they are the products of narrative. As we approach the personal ad, we may add up the formal cues and the site's specific forms of data, but we do so in order to construct a different type of portrait. Beyond the literal image found on the page, we create a projection by narrativizing the subject, or pulling the subject out of its immediate context and repurposing it.<sup>18</sup> We do this despite the fact that the image is already once removed from its original context; it is simply a photographic projection of its author (this is what Lury refers to as “outcontextualization,” a process discussed in Chapter 1).<sup>19</sup> Differentiation, drawing distinctions between subjects in our list of results, is accomplished only by indifferentiation, by taking their assets and subjecting them to an algorithm. The aspects of self that are socially determined are mapped alongside aspects of self that are biologically determined, and these variables are leveled, taken out of context, and fed into the database.<sup>20</sup> The subject is truly objectified—even subjective markers become objective factors. Individuals are rewritten as units of analysis that site designers can manipulate and users can analyze.<sup>21</sup> Aware of these processes, we try to work within these guidelines; we take pictures of ourselves knowing the paths they will take on their way to being inscribed in the site, or we repurpose (and edit) pictures taken for other occasions and carefully attempt to reinscribe them, as we try to massage the data to mirror what we perceive to

be our likeness. Perhaps as an attempt at self-narration, many online daters include multiple images, showing themselves in varied contexts (at work, at play, with family, and with pets) and from varied perspectives, as a storyboard of sorts, creating a bare-bones plotline that also yields a greater assurance of authentic communication (more representations suggest a more detailed inflection). These images produce a virtual slide show and a closer approximation of movement, giving the body greater contour. It is indeed a frustrating process for many online daters, as they attempt to actively rewrite themselves as units to be analyzed, and try to hold steadfastly on to some trait of personality in the process. The goal is to delimit possibilities, to develop as close an approximation of ourselves as possible, to present our unique selves even as we unmoor our photos and send them on their way into the collective space of the gallery. To our dismay, the process is never precise.

### Toward a Science of the Subject

On reflection, we may see that even the most scientific of processes yields a degree of imprecision. Working at the end of the nineteenth century, the French criminologist and anthropologist Alphonse Bertillon developed an anthropometric system that was adopted by the Paris police force. The system identified individuals by a series of measurements, recording the contours and shape formations of the head and body, as well as individual markings such as tattoos and scars, and arriving at a formula that made this data refer to a unique individual. The data was then recorded on a file card, conjoined to front and profile photos of the subject, and filed away for later retrieval after being rigorously cross-indexed. Though not a perfect system, as it was labor-intensive and the measurement process itself prone to error, the goal was to develop a "speaking portrait," and to this end, the methodical analysis was written in a common vernacular.<sup>22</sup> Extending these investigative tactics, which were measures of individuals, Edmond Bayle, then head of the Department of Judicial Identity in Paris, employed the departments of physics, chemistry, and biology to aid in criminal detecting. Under Bayle's guidance, the Paris police began examining crime scenes with equally intense scrutiny and attaching the suspect to location. Without tracing the entire historical trajectory of scientific practices, it should suffice to say that there are contradictory impulses at work in the varied deployments of photography throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—both in honorific practices and in those attached to Enlightenment rhetoric (getting to know the body). What the history reveals is that the techniques for reading the body consistently yielded both egalitarian and authoritarian results—knowing the body and controlling the body.<sup>23</sup> What we see in this history is both threat and prom-

ise. But which result is which? Before turning to discuss Bertillon, I was commenting on the lack of precision in inscription, considering what does not translate as we put our square selves into the round holes of script. Following through with this metaphor, I want to explore the bits of subjectivity that do not fit and position the individual in relation to the community. My aim is to connect theory to praxis. Reflecting on both Bertillon's foundational methods and his own nascent procedures, Edmond Bayle proposes: "Truth lies always between theory which moves too fast, and routine which moves too slowly."<sup>24</sup>

### Desire in the Database

Most online dating sites follow a conventional operating scheme; the photographic image is part of a standardized template, an image box placed alongside textual data that is inherently more quantifiable (that is to say, it can be categorized) than the photograph it elucidates. While many advertisers take snapshots of themselves specifically with the intent to attach these to their profiles (this is quite explicitly the role of Web cameras as they are linked to computercentric space), personal advertisement sites are also populated with a wide array of photographic artifacts, including family and vacation photos and occasional portraits (such as event photos). Most advertisers attempt to mask or crop secondary subjects such as partners, friends, or children, often producing phantom limbs that protrude from the borders of the frame. As occasional portraits and group photographs find new life in this particular cyber venture, they cannot shrug their profilmic residues; as advertisers frame or reframe themselves for public display, they often provide clues to their habits, tastes, leisure-time pursuits, and familial leanings. The images in any one album may be produced by a range of authors and, in every case other than a self-portrait, they implicitly document previous relationships between photographer and subject.

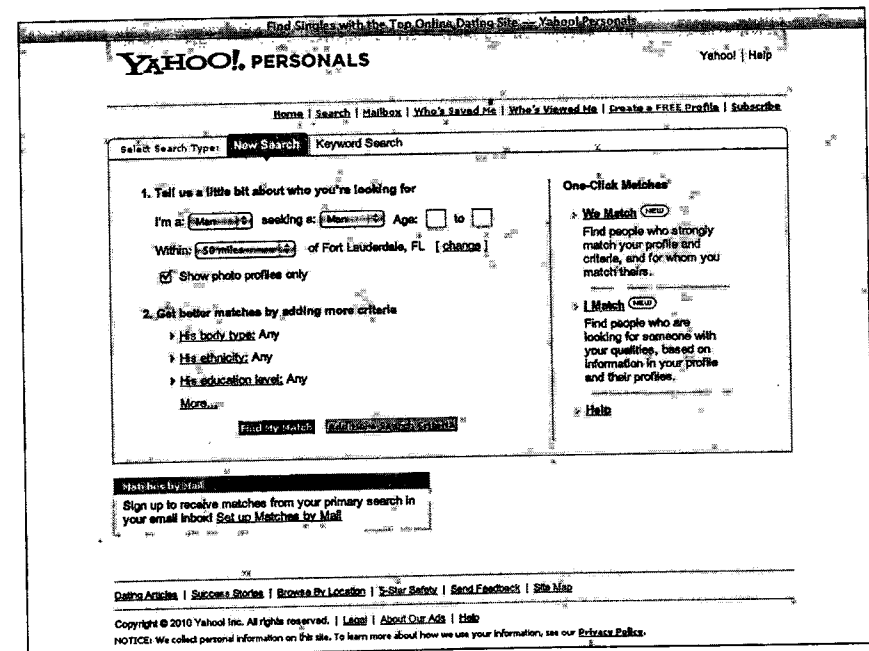
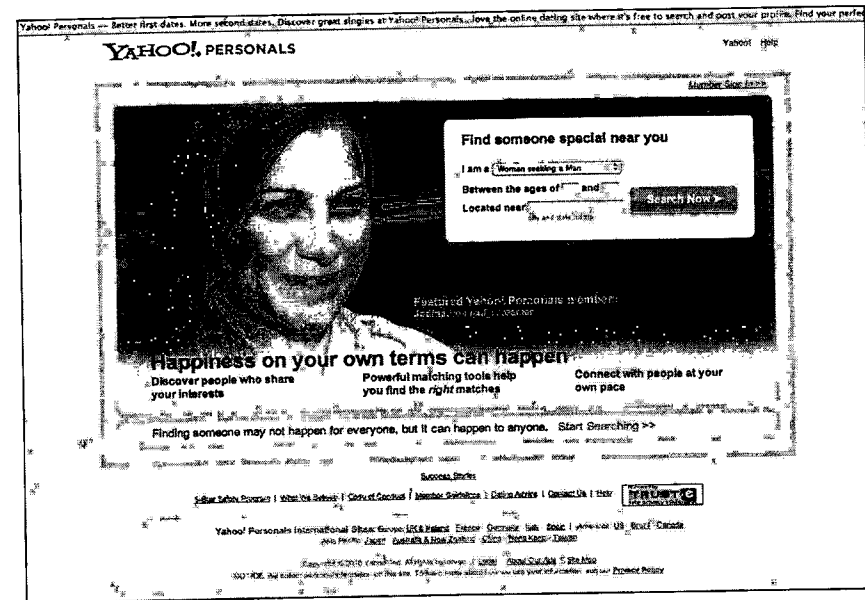
In the case of both the unique and appropriated photos, the image is made public for private consideration. And in both cases, image selection, cropping, retouching, and/or manufacture are performed for an assumed audience. The most readily consumed advertisements contain particular details that are at once unique and personal and at the same time familiar and somewhat universal (marketing according to type). Here is a form of self-regulation, an act of self-surveillance that is performed with the hope of emitting a localizable sign, a referent familiar and easily categorized yet still imbued with the cult of personality, registering simultaneous sameness and difference. While the primary goal of personal advertisement photography is to reveal physiognomy, circulated images may contain contextual markers that implicate the sitter. At the same time, these photographs are part of a multimedia text that situates



them alongside a number of textual and iconic markers that work as interpretive mechanisms, pushing the reading of the photograph in nuanced directions.

Yet menus rather than images often mark the reader's first encounter with an online dating site. One of the most common and practical features of online dating sites is their deployment of search engines. While members can browse through posted advertisements, the search engine provides a productive narrowing of their focus. Most sites allow a laundry list of search criteria. Beyond simple physiognomic markers such as age, height, and eye color, Yahoo! Personals lists personality type, love style, body, have kids, want kids, education, employment, profession, smokes, income, drinks, living, social, TV, speaks, religion, services, political, humor, interests, and sign among a range of attributes. "Body" itself is a loaded term, and although the choices are somewhat expansive in the interest of precision, they are not scientific: slim, slender, average, athletic, fit, thick, a few extra pounds, large, and voluptuous. Felt, but not determined (we may interpret the physical contours of our bodies in a manner that belies somatic experience), members apply body type in a rather subjective manner, but one that is nevertheless culturally overdetermined and therefore understood as a rigid signifier (to the extent that profilers often call each other out on their incorrect use of terms). To ascribe "personality type" involves a similar negotiation: explorer, idealist, leader, traditionalist, individualist, rebel, giver, creator, champion, protector, equalizer, and observer. These self-assigned choices ultimately invoke too much of the self, once again producing an overdetermined subject that, despite the number of labels, still reads like an unknown quantity. After all, self-evaluation can only play a limited role in mutual attraction.

Yet, as Yahoo! formulates degrees of attraction, it shapes the most elusive of markers into a known quantity, collapsing biological and cultural referents (including television). As members move through their respective checklists and set the search engine in motion, the results come back as quantified affinities. Those profiles with the highest overall fit are listed first, and their value is signaled through the site's unique iconography—a rating system of hearts, with five hearts indicating the highest degree of likeness. Of course, privileging likeness seems to be a productive gesture, but it is also self-affirming, eliminating certain degrees of not knowing and not wanting. It produces a grouping structured around likeness. While site users are actively working through their desire, activity (as opposed to passivity) does not necessarily suggest a progressive movement beyond ideology, nor does it inherently yield a critique of the very bourgeois subject position that is being acted out and drawn out by the interface.



Yahoo! Personals follows the menu-based structure of most online dating portals, and channels desire through a search engine. The site was rebranded and redesigned in May 2010, when the company began outsourcing its dating service to IAC's Match.com. (<http://personals.yahoo.com>, accessed January 20, 2010; site now discontinued)

As Miriam Hansen notes, the process is found more generally in the theorizations and articulations of the culture industry: "Horkheimer and Adorno ascribe the effectivity of mass-cultural scripts of identity not simply to the viewers' manipulation as passive consumers, but rather to their very solicitation as experts, as active readers. The identification *with* the stereotype is advanced by the appeal to a particular type of knowledge or skill predicated on repetition: the identification of a familiar face, gesture or narrative convention takes the place of genuine cognition."<sup>25</sup> Hansen suggests that the ideological effect of what Adorno and Horkheimer refer to as "mass-cultural hieroglyphics" (the visual images of the culture industry) is one that prevents human beings from changing. While the suggestion is more purposefully about not differentiating between true acts of self and those called out from above, I argue that this quandary is also apparent in the field of online dating, where the call to sameness is supported (and, in fact, promoted) by site architecture.<sup>26</sup> The repetition is about seeing oneself in others, a quest made all the more powerful in the realm of explicit desire.

The effect is much the same on most dating sites. Match.com allows searches by city as well as by keyword. The basic search on Match.com specifies zip code, age, and gender (with sexuality collapsed under the correlative gendering of searcher and subject); detailed searches allow greater specificity and include a number of variables within such general categories as appearance, background/values, and lifestyle. The last term is not used here as a marker of sexual orientation, but rather refers to such facets as diet and exercise, employment and income, and living situation and family status. In the domain of Match.com, a checklist of turn-ons—which run the gamut from body piercing to meteorological fantasies—approximates desire, but any overt reference to sexual play is avoided. Searches may be framed by a geographic radius, and the search process climaxes with the mapping of photographic evidence onto the database.

While some personal advertisement sites position dating as their central purpose, many have a more ambiguous design. However, the latter are still containers for particular outpourings of identity, and their subdivisions are still driven by both the architecture of site engines and those desiring engines attached to particular formations of identity; subcultures still have labels. But at the same time, the classifications used on sites designed to meet the needs of more-focused interest groups often escape generalized cultural decoding. These sites often engage in productive semiotic complexity, and their unique signs and gestures cannot be universally accessed. In line with the work of the subculture, we may find users experimenting with language and rejecting certain existing linguistic practices. Though site architectures provide structure, they are not unilaterally prescriptive.

The organizing schema of sites that are more focused (those designed for subdivisions of the general dating pool—or, for lack of a better term, "special-interest groups") is often reflected in their domain names; yet, in these sites, the central organizing principle may leave a space for more subtly inflected uses and audiences. To counter any assumption about the uniformity of gay male desire, we need only to look at the enormous diversity among sites that cater to gay men. Sites such as BigMuscle.com foreground muscularity as a privileged attribute of the male body.<sup>27</sup> Within this domain, the homosocial and the homosexual intermingle, with the site populated largely by gay men, but inclusive of a voyeurism and exchange that willfully embraces straight men or simply assumes erotic and sexual play without needing to address sexual orientation. Moreover, the desires that are expressed range from mutual admiration to those of a more explicitly sexual nature. The site architecture is very responsive to the community's needs. At BigMuscle.com, a "free online community for adult males who enjoy fitness," profilers may develop buddy links (displaying thumbnails of profilers who are friends, admirers, workout partners, sex buddies, or relationship partners) and they also may list site profiles that they have viewed and like for one reason or another. Within this domain, profilers and end users may be looking for any number of connection types, including one-time sexual encounters, extended sexual encounters without commitment, sexual encounters outside of already-established committed (and perhaps open) relationships, long-term relationships, friendships, activity partners, and chat buddies, or they may simply be voyeurs or "pic collectors" (browsing sites and collecting pictures to add to their database of fantasy photos).

Manhunt.net; though deemed largely a network for casual sex, encourages its users to "love, lust, chat," and its unique profile markers give members a heads-up as to "when" ("Right Now!" or "Ask Me") and "where" ("Anywhere," "In Public," "At Your Place," or "At My Place").<sup>28</sup> As a site that openly embraces cruising, "status" (in this domain, understood as HIV status) is a profile attribute and users can see who is currently online (a common feature on social-networking sites that takes on added significance in the hunt for a quick hookup). Set to a techno beat, the site's Flash introduction asks: "What are you looking for?" and pushes the fantasy further by prompting: "College jocks, Latin papis, Hairy daddies, Muscle men, Bi-curious, Young and hung, Black guys, Boy next door, Total tops, Hungry bottoms, Thugs." Evoking early text-based bulletin board systems, the introduction's stylized DOS-prompt conjures up a long history of Net-assisted encounters.

In the spaces of Manhunt.net, profile descriptions are succinct, speaking rather directly to each member's specific sexual interests and using a vocabulary not found on more generic sites. One member writes: "love men to men



*BigMuscle.com features search terms that match the interests of its membership.* (<http://www.bigmuscle.com>)

*Manhunt.net playfully draws in its clientele with a rather overt come-on, and playing to the uniqueness (and abundance) of desire suggests there is "someone for everyone."* (<http://www.manhunt.net>)

hot sex. if want to chat open priv pic. if i don't reply, we r not comparable, dont take it personal. we r here to have fun, and lots of it. very vers. if we click . . . love to fuck and get fucked, also have my cock serviced. Depending on the chemistry sometimes more. Not into queens or barbies. Some hair is ok, shaved head and goatee football build manly bodies A+. glory holes are fun too. Cannot host. sorry, no pics, no reply." The shorthand is quite purposeful and lends itself to a quick read, a gesture that seems to reflect the urgency and speed of anonymous encounters.

On Gay.com, profiles sit alongside more traditional tabloid fare; in fact, the site reads like a community magazine and is positioned as a general-purpose informational portal for its readership. Gay.com hosts personal ads as well as conventional featured sections that cover news, health, business, entertainment, travel, style, and other related fare. Though not a literary magazine per se, it promotes a different type of informed readership because it locates desire and knowledge side by side. Dating is simply one of many channels on the site. And cities are not coded simply as lists of men profiled within them, but also as lists of local attractions and events (found in the site's various city guides).<sup>29</sup>

Among these sites, there are clearly multiple forms of desire at work, and the participants themselves may be operating with desire in a constant state of flux; it is counterproductive to quantify and fix these mechanisms. Therefore, I use the term "dating" rather loosely in this chapter, for individuals produce, read, and respond to personal advertisement sites for a wide range of reasons; for instance, some participants are looking for relationships, others are looking for casual sexual encounters, and still others are simply browsing sites as voyeurs without the intent to respond to a profile. Most sites allow advertisers to specify their goals and motives.

The status of personal advertisement sites has been complicated by the emergence of social networks, which not only provide new arenas for meeting but also redefine the expected outcomes of online social engagement in what are much more open-ended arenas; these postindustrial architectures can cater to the varying needs of the membership. Some members use Facebook and MySpace to connect with friends and family, others to hook up, to date, to file share; the use-value is seemingly limitless. In response, even more-focused sites find themselves receptive to multitasking. XTube, an Internet porn site launched in 2006, is an adult video-hosting service that allows users to share adult content (trading on the YouTube moniker of personal broadcasting), to consume commercial content, share photos, post profiles, and send Instant Messages. Beyond the rather open admission that XTube can be used by its gay clientele to "find a hot stud to fuck in your city," the site welcomes other uses.

Likewise, Dudesnude.com, which launched in 2002, features streaming amateur and professional video clips, as well as profiles; while largely a free portal for content sharing, the site also includes an adult video store with pay-per-minute, streaming, and downloadable movies. Dudesnude.com does not advertise itself as a dating site, but a more-detailed profile search can locate men looking for relationships in a particular city; yet such a focused search offers up members' photos as a general list of thumbnails and keeps their motives buried in their narratives. In this way, the site seems to foreground casual browsing rather than more purposeful connecting.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the site's search engine, which privileges "physical type" and "content type" is designed as an inventory for the site's images rather than a filter for aspects of sociability.<sup>31</sup>

### Desire and Community

As sites of social interaction, these arenas are commonly interpreted as new forms of community, and are consequently attached to particular anxieties in popular discourse that simultaneously decry these new places of engagement as the death of purer forms of the term. Internet engagements are often understood as new social relations built on the ruins of community itself. "Community" is, in fact, a catchphrase deployed by these sites.

Match.com refers to itself as a "diverse, global community" and suggests: "We're a real community—an overused, but accurate term—of men and women who respect each other and are looking for relationships. We're as diverse as America itself, even though our members tend to be college-educated professionals."<sup>32</sup> Posting Polaroid snapshots of its various service teams, the site binds its workers to its customers, formally bridging the gap between corporation and consumer. Match.com provides several predefined subcommunities within its system: [gay.match.com](#), [lesbian.match.com](#), and [senior.match.com](#). In this manner, Match.com caters to a wide range of individuals, but can be used to outline subcommunities of subscribers/participants through preestablished affinity groups or by deploying a search engine in a way that engages such groups.

Despite its open invitation, Match.com defines success (as evidenced in its posted success stories) primarily in terms of long-term monogamous heterosexual coupling, with marriage as the ultimate goal. Searching beyond the top menu story categories of marriage, engagement, and relationship by adding the keyword "gay" brings me to five testimonials, two of which use the term not in reference to the matched couple, but as an offhand contextual remark. One heterosexual woman comments, "I figured all the good ones had to be taken or were gay or something," while another recounts the moment her last boyfriend came out to her. The lesbian success stories on Match.com

are even fewer; on my last visit, I found only one. These gay and lesbian success stories are not readily visible on the site; they are difficult to discern, to locate, and to group together. One has to actively search deeper into the site's hierarchy to find them.

On the most broad-reaching gay dating sites, the need to differentiate a form of queer identity is balanced by the need to find a shared vocabulary to express that identity, to locate a subcommunity of a shared sensibility; in the best-case scenario, the imagined community manifests itself as an actual viewing community, and readily definable production techniques (that are not invisible but can be easily read by a viewer) promote a bond between producer and viewer. The impulse to describe a bounded community—to locate, for example, queer culture—is not simply an imposed ideal. It seems responsive to general challenges in the cultural field, where gay men often look for community, and physical signs play an important role in visibility as objective markers of a more felt quality of acceptance, belonging, and pride. Yet the reverse impulse to deterritorialize or defy categorical distinctions (to question body boundaries, body types, and other forms of communal attachment—even moving outside of the gay ghetto or not identifying as part of the "club scene") does not signify so clearly online. It is hard to deterritorialize neat categorical distinctions when the interface demands a choice between a limited number of categories of being, and when sexual orientation (among other culturally-charged variables) is foregrounded as a primary and distinct asset in menu-driven interaction. Complex identity formations are undone at each level of a forked file structure (where each file system object is governed by metadata), both in the primary organization of raw data and in the secondary delivery of raw data through the graphical user interface.

The cyberdating sites discussed here may not be communities per se, but only signifiers of that potential, perhaps activated, perhaps not. It is tempting to label these sites as community because their members often can be literally displayed as a group and, at the very least, there is an understanding that other advertisements exist, even if only one at a time can be displayed. Match.com displays the reader's selected advertisement alongside a list of other similarly matched ones, and quantifies the current display as one out of a finite number of pages of matches, a list that is the product of a search that may generate too large or too small a result, and can be accordingly refined. The inhabitants of the searcher's particular subdivision of this online arena of advertisements can grow quickly or diminish. It may be tempting to refer to the searcher's results as a personalized community or to his or her resultant circle of communicants as a community, but the participants themselves do not necessarily constitute such an arrangement. Community is not found *in* them but *among* them. In *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy suggests

that community is not a place but a passage, and commonality does not inherently lead to any significant act of sharing; in fact, the work of capital is antithetical to community, for it can only privilege the general characteristics of its products (which define its institutional identity) and can only dwell in inauthentic forms of community.<sup>33</sup>

The dating sites considered here might be pathways to community, but the larger institutional narrative is an obstacle to such an arrangement; not only does the narrative shape the discourse within but it also repurposes the actions of its users. The search engines quantify, sort, and display textual data, while the images are quantified and sorted by the searcher, positioned as acceptable or unacceptable, saved or discarded, printed, downloaded, deleted and/or simply skipped over. The user's internal search engine is driven by typology and by an assumed potential for sharing. This engine is fueled by desire, driven by the brain's capacity to categorize and concretize. The drive to type involves categorizing others but also categorizing oneself, as well as positioning oneself in relation to others.

These sites themselves are not communities. As the product of work and works in progress, they are evidence of *potential* communities, the remains of once-active communities, or the intercepted broadcasts of communications taking place elsewhere and between others. These are transmissions that have been sent, are being sent, or are simultaneously in limbo in an inert state. In some cases, they are transmissions that are never received, or are received and never returned, remaining one-way, unrealized communicative pathways. By their very nature, these sites impede a reading of the existence of community; their use-value remains hidden. How and to what end people consume the profiles they view is unobservable.

Advertisers have varied motivations for posting to personal advertisement sites and end users have equally varied motivations; moreover, each participant's motivation may be in flux, shifting over time and with each encounter. To complicate any effort to perform a singular read, sites are consumed and interacted with in ways that may exceed their official purpose. The profile guidelines for Match.com place specific restrictions on advertising for multiple sexual partners or additional sexual partners, while the site's statement of purpose welcomes "all single adults seeking one-to-one relationships ranging from companionship to friendship, romance to marriage."<sup>34</sup> Soliciting for a relationship that is primarily sexual in nature is not allowed, and sexual innuendo or discussion is regulated by the site's profile guidelines; however, outside of performing a close read of explicit solicitations with unregulated language, it is unlikely that Match.com has been able to unilaterally prevent censurable relations.

Discourses about the demise of community are grounded in a reading of specific objects, which ultimately concludes that there is no residue of

community to be found in them; therefore, community must have been lost. Discourses about the perversity of particular forms of desire are grounded in a reading of specific objects as well, in which generalized bodies are attached to specific practices. But desire exceeds a practice-status in the same way that community exceeds an object-status.

Yet the institutional discourse about (and the architectural rendering of) real bodies invokes their physicality in only limited ways, promoting only the most safely consumable desires. But the Internet is not simply about disembodiment, and Internet dating sites are not simply about a certain type of object choice. People are meeting online and having sex off-line. While Match.com suggests "it's okay to look," the missing part of this imperative—its negative complement—is "but it's not okay to touch." The double entendre has lost its double. The come-on is about tempting us to visit the site, but it does not take us to its foregone conclusion. The anger expressed in the feedback cited at the head of this chapter suggests that readers are filling in the blanks. Unfortunately, their attempts to regulate desire hide the more important negation found in Match.com's rhetoric. However, in the same way that we cannot find community online and must inevitably accept the site as a passage and look for community elsewhere, we should also consider that despite not seeing more playful (and sexual) engagements online, the more significant actions and perhaps ruptures are in those performative acts that are off-line, where, freed from the visible field, they can exceed our speculative (and linguistic) limits. I am not referring to online identity play; rather, my reference is to "real" sexual activity—points where the rubber hits the road, so to speak. It is here that we must look (despite how obscene that suggestion may be) to understand how limiting Match.com's play really is and, after all of this prescription, how willfully end users are acting out.

### Desire by Any Other Name

The shifting attachments in cyberspace suggest a far more active engagement with code and convention on the part of the end users of personal advertisement sites; the hegemonic push, however, is in the rapid manner that site designers themselves identify the permutations of identity and successfully reduce them to a series of menu options, replacing the specificity of identity with the specificity of the interface. Visible and nuanced subcultural codes are replaced by the invisible binaries of script; self-definition is performed by using a template and identity is articulated by recourse to a generating engine.

It is common to move from one personal advertisement domain to another and find many of the same participants; often, the names change but the faces remain the same. Members in any given site begin to recognize each other,

may observe each other's status without communicating, may watch each other's profiles evolve (and see them go off- and online as the individuals partner up and break up), and may at some point in this chronology decide to engage in a dialogue; some online exchanges only begin after a lengthy period of studied engagement. Watching the neighborhood evolve, members become aware when new individuals join the group. And policing the neighborhood themselves, members may exchange feedback with each other, either online or off-line, about each other's behaviors; it is common to encounter familiar faces from the database in off-line spaces, especially in more tightly knit or geographically bound communal environments. While it is easy to identify the rules of conduct that govern online dating sites, as most have rather extensive community guidelines on their policy pages, it is more difficult to locate those moments when end users are policing each other. Of course, most sites have a method for anonymously reporting policy violations, but the more meaningful injury occurs as end users talk to each other, weighing in on each other's social capital. In many cases of false advertising, users talk to each other about the wrongful appropriation of photos (posting misleading or altogether false pictures). Governance emanates from both the top and the bottom of these Internet architectures, and these arenas are more productively understood as communities in these periods of action. While policing is commonly understood as a negative act, it produces more obvious traces of the work of community as it visualizes context setting.

Multiplicity does not always suggest duplicity. Within the confines of a single domain, one may find participants that go by more than one name; of course, this form of multiplicity is also easily found outside of personal advertisement sites, as it is a mainstay of even the most traditional online ventures. America Online (AOL) allows subscribers to create multiple screen names, pitching the feature as a way to separate personal messages from work-related correspondence, to assign a name to each online activity or each online family member (with the ability to differentiate access privileges across the family). Yet in a localizable space, naming also imbues the body with meaning, calling out such defining features as geographic location, age, race, ethnicity, body type, sexual position, or fetish. The subculture becomes a community by developing, sharing, and participating in its own naming strategies, and the architectures of cyberspace interfere with community only as they begin to map sharing onto a fixed interface. Sites such as Match.com regulate naming conventions much more closely, restricting such obscenities; usernames speak less about desire and more about being, and are built around more commonplace pursuits (hobbies) and workaday interests (careers).

Clearly, the interface and terms of use may function normatively as a naturalized grammatical construct, in part by allowing and disallowing. And the

site itself as a database functions as a cultural form subject to an equally insidious hegemonic predisposition. The database as a general construct offers a particular model of the world and of human experience, and despite the variability of potential interfaces, the tendency toward branching-type interactivity (menu-based movement) that presents the user with finite choices, sending him or her along an ever-narrowing pathway, seems to overtly channel and delimit desire.

### Restoring the Frame

In his 1995 essay, "Domestic Photography and Digital Culture," Don Slater claims that: "Snapshot photography—images taken by ourselves of ourselves, the self-representation of everyday life—has barely any place at the new electronic hearth."<sup>35</sup> While his judgment is reserved, framed by an understanding that the digital domestic snapshot had perhaps not yet entered its heyday, that "private images" had "not yet entered the datastream of either telecommunications or convergence," Slater is not blind, of course, to the unrealized potential of a medium that had, at the moment of his writing, only reached a state of advanced hobbyism.<sup>36</sup> To this end, Slater expresses a sense of loss; what he fears most is not the technological transformation of photographic practice, but rather the continuing erosion of authentic personal experience. The history of photography speaks to the more general (and ongoing) domestication and commodification of everyday life. Private photography yielded first to family photography (a commercially-codified application of the apparatus), and is now yielding to self-conscious public performance. Centralized and convergent media practices have, in fact, recontoured photography, but they pose a greater threat to personal identity and agency.

Cyberdating has been discussed in popular discourse as yet another harbinger of the disappearance of community, sign and symptom of increased privatization, cause and effect of distancing and alienation, the doublespeak and double bind of Internet technology itself. Weaving a cautionary tale of cyber-romance, a February 2001 *Newsweek* story by Brad Stone is framed by the week's cover header, positioning the header for Stone's story below the header for its international-focus column on Osama bin Laden. In this manner, "Dating Online" is linked with "Global Terror." As one of many notable moments of dramatic intertextuality, this particular issue of *Newsweek* frames the cyberdating article with stories that weave a much grander cautionary tale. Taken together, the issue's discussion of AOL Time Warner's monopoly on domestic digital technologies, the testing of angiogenesis inhibitors on human subjects, the effect of hard soda advertising on teens, genetic mapping, and Internet privacy contributes to a general thread of paranoia writ large in

the magazine. Herein we are given a literal (or at least "literary") manifestation of an attack on subjectivity being staged on several fronts.

In a June 1999 column on cyberspace and community published in *The Nation*, Andrew L. Shapiro echoes popular distaste for a particular aspect of computer-mediated communications, reading online experiences as less satisfying than real-world engagements, and less meaningful than even the most immediate technological antecedents—television and radio. He laments: "Ultimately, online associations tend to splinter into narrower and narrower factions. They also don't have the sticking power of physical communities."<sup>37</sup> Citing media critic David Shaw, Shapiro suggests that as television and radio draw us away from direct interaction, these particular media at least provide "a kind of social glue, a common cultural reference point in our polyglot, increasingly multicultural society," while "online experiences rarely provide this glue."<sup>38</sup> Shapiro's concern is the weakening of local community building by the increase in social networks that are both more distant (less geographically immediate) and perhaps less permanent.

It is worthwhile, of course, to concretize the importance of local community building, of focusing on the local as a key tool in democracy and social activism. We should not lose sight of the vitality of localism in political action, nor should we privilege the national or the global at the expense of the local. But certainly all forms of computer-mediated dialogue are not analogous, and in reaching out beyond local interests, we may in fact discover what is missing in our own neighborhood.

Perhaps this is a point of investment of cyberdating services that cast the net over a wider geographic and demographic nexus than ever may have been singularly possible. In addition, the variables deployed in the arena of cyberdating and the specificity of search engines seem to give form to Shapiro's insight about the splintering of online associations into narrower factions. But I suggest that we can put a positive spin on narrowcasting.

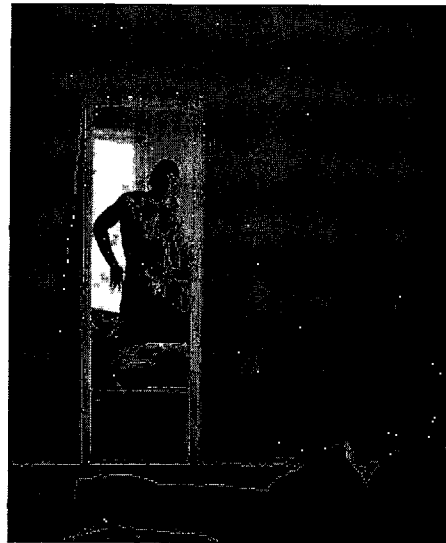
### The Self-Portrait and the Imag(in)ing of Desire

In her examination of emergent social meanings in computer-mediated communication, Nancy Baym privileges those moments in which users "creatively exploit the systems' features in order to play with new forms of expressive communication, to explore possible public identities, to create otherwise unlikely relationships, and to create behavioral norms."<sup>39</sup> She suggests: "When, and if, these emergent features develop into stable group-specific understandings, the group gains the potential to be imagined as a community."<sup>40</sup> A sense of (localized) community emerges from a set of stable social meanings.

As I have already stated, among the images that litter online dating sites are both occasional portraits (photos taken for a previous purpose, only to be posted later on the site) and photos more likely taken for the sole purpose of posting on the site. Of this latter group, the most explicit evidence of offering the image for a particular audience is the self-portrait of the sitter with a camera. A number of images posted on adult personals sites are of the sitter holding a digital camera up to his face, usually photographed in the act of recording the image, undoubtedly standing in front of a mirror to read position and framing. The sitter may be holding the camera in front of him to conceal his face or he may be doing so unconsciously, which is the naive habitual gesture one assumes when taking a photograph.

The self-portrait with camera, as one signpost among many in this particular landscape, provides evidence of work in both its content and form; such self-portraits can be found on most Internet dating sites. This particular form of portraiture shows production and embodies production; hence, it is the end result of the performance it displays. This is not a camcorder (or rather, digital camera) revolution. These image makers are not video vigilantes; nevertheless, this display of self, of technology, and of production (literally revealing the process and the apparatus) manages to take us beyond simply "being in common." The photographic presentation can take us beyond a reductive reading that sees the other as a collection of familiar physiognomic signifiers; in this respect, this form of self-portraiture may take us further than many other images of self, literally embodying a higher form of sharing. But this is simply a display of sharing, not sharing itself, despite the fact that these images display their authenticity (in that they capture the moment of actualization by embedding the technology within, and in that they evoke the real or imagined narrative of offering oneself for consumption). These images embody the performative mode of documentary practice articulated by Bill Nichols; these autobiographical artifacts embroil their subjects in history.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, this group of images reveals a collection and not necessarily a community of producers. The textual markers that surround these images perform a standard function of containment, providing a narrative that can be only partly scripted by the image's producer. It is otherwise conformed to a site-specific template. The impulse to share is reduced to the site's drive to quantify sameness and difference, to quantify the degree of being in common.

But communication and community are not undone by these sites, nor have they been destroyed by this limited index of a new cultural arrangement; rather, these sites provide needed terrain for the unworking that is the essence of community.<sup>42</sup> These domains yield evidence of the necessity for interfering with narrative. They point to the potential for the interruption of myth. Perhaps



*The self-portrait of the sitter with a camera is a common signpost in the landscape of personal advertisement photography, and suggests a keen awareness of being on display. (Photos by anonymous, <http://www.bigmuscle.com>)*

the anxiety in popular discourse is centered on the ill-conceived quest to locate something that by its very definition exists without a locus.

My exploration of the "sitter with camera" subgenre of self-portraiture is not without its limits, for the conventions of this photographic practice may vary across demographic categories. My samples are drawn from the postings of gay men (which is why I have used masculine pronouns); as such, my cursory study does not examine the variability, if any, across the lines of (for example) gender and sexuality with regard to gestures of self-representation. Access to technology and strategies for deploying technology also may vary across demographic groupings. As I locate the limits of my initial foray into

the architectures of these Internet sites, I also note that Nancy's theory of community has its limits, so a critique of an apparent poststructuralist synthesis needs to happen here as well. For it is posited that community in the concrete may be differentially accessible across such demographic indices as age, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality; differentially motivated; and called out for with differing urgency. My aim, however, has been to locate the restrictions that are often placed on the utterance of community. Regardless of the elasticity of the term, its ability to be appropriated and directed as an authorizing force for a particular interest group is compromised (for better or worse) as it is mediated. The author/producer of the utterance is often not the author/owner of the vehicle through which the utterance is passed. In the case of my analysis, the appeal to community must pass through a number of mediating architectures. The appeal encounters the Internet as a metamediating agency with distinct authored/owned subdivisions—the hardware and software of computer-mediated communications, as well as the addresses and territories of sites themselves. This is not a cautionary tale of the limits of community, but rather a shift in attention. We should not be concerned with the relative rise or fall of community, nor should we blame technology itself for community's present proximity to a presumed past state of grace. Rather, we should shift our attention to the authorizing institutional forces that satisfy our more significant yearning for communion by offering up a trademark of community. At the same time, we should be aware that community, even when divorced from explicit institutional mandates, can still act as an exclusionary appeal. Images can be subject to an array of institutional imperatives, but people too subject even the most personal images to their own ideologically inflected gazes, telling each other how and when it's okay to look.