

NAVIGATING THE BUBBLE, WENDY RICHMOND

By Susan Hodara



photo courtesy of the Museum of Art Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI.

Before me, an enormous young woman with creamy skin and short dark hair presses her hands to her cheeks. Her head filling the wall, she moves a bit closer, then peers downward.

Another head fills the adjacent wall: a man adjusting his glasses before lifting his face to gaze upward. Opposite him, a woman stares intently, then slowly starts to smile.

I am seated in the center of “Wendy Richmond: Navigating the Personal Bubble,” the current installation at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art’s Spalter New Media Gallery. A visual artist, author and educator, Richmond has long been investigating the evolving social experience of being alone in densely populated urban environments. “Navigating the Personal Bubble” is her newest exploration, documenting and exposing how portable digital technology creates mobile zones of privacy in public spaces. She calls these zones “personal bubbles.”

The three-wall video compilation I am watching is one of two works in the show: “Alone in Public” is a 15-minute, three-channel, looping collection of black-and-white video portraits, each lasting several minutes, of 18 of Richmond’s friends and acquaintances working on their laptops in public settings. The footage was captured by the subjects themselves using their computers’ built-in cameras, its soundtrack an array of background noises: clicking keyboards, strains of music, intrusive espresso machines, hushed echoes in a cavernous library.

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I find myself turning from one wall to another as a different action — someone sips his coffee, someone shakes her head, someone else blows her nose — draws my attention. And I am compelled to look behind me. There, on the gallery's fourth wall, is the show's other piece, "Gestures," 56 actions written with vinyl lettering and listed alphabetically in three-columns. "Gestures" records the activities Richmond observed as she assembled "Alone in Public" — and that I am observing now.

Visitors wander into the dimly lit gallery and watch as the videos play. One woman tells me that being there makes her feel calm; another begins to speculate on what each subject might be doing. "She looks like she's waiting for some important bit of news," she says of the creamy-skinned woman.

From the walls, the men and women look toward us, maybe past us, but never at us. Sometimes they seem about to connect with each other, but they never do. They concentrate, they ponder; sometimes they bob their heads to a beat from their headphones that only they can hear. We sit and study them, over and over again. They are cocooned strangers, their thoughts unknown, but deep in their personal bubbles, they are also all of us.

I recently had the opportunity to sit down with Richmond and ask her about her show. Here are highlights from our conversation.

SH: Describe the state that you capture in these videos.

WR: Every day, millions of urbanites venture out, each one of us occupying a tiny piece of our city's space. We are simultaneously inhabiting a non-physical space: a "personal bubble," a private, mental zone that surrounds each of us when we are alone in public.

One of the most vivid examples of the personal bubble is people working alone on laptops in public places. I do it almost every morning in different cafés near where I live in Brooklyn. In fact, it's something people have done for decades — some people create best when they are in the midst of cacophony and vibrancy and distraction.

But now our bubbles are more intense. They are denser, less porous. Using our computers, we are in our technological tunnels. It's a sort of intimate dialogue with oneself. Not a monologue, because the computer is the partner, the vehicle through which a person can have a conversation with herself. The conversation is with the mind's eye — a sort of inward gaze — and also with environments and sources and resources separate from where we are. It's what a friend of mine calls her "expanded brain."

SH: Can you put this show in context of your other work?

WR: I've been thinking and writing about public privacy for awhile. My last body of work was "Overheard," an installation relating to overheard cell phone conversations based on work I developed between 2008 and 2010.

I first noticed the personal bubble phenomenon in 2004, when I was doing a lot of commuting between coasts and spending a lot of time waiting in airports. That was when I began to observe the way people carved out personal zones by talking on cell phones, working on laptops, listening to iPods, playing video games. We were all engaged in our own internal worlds, temporarily oblivious to what was going on around us.

Before long, I started secretly shooting people in these states with my cell phone, and that resulted in a series of exhibitions from 2007 through 2009 titled "Public Privacy: Wendy Richmond's Surreptitious Cellphone."

I recently realized that the construct I established to create "Navigating the Personal Bubble" was similar to the one I used to shoot those cell phone videos. Back then I just held the camera and waited for life to happen in front of it. For this body of work it was essentially the same: it was whatever occurred in front of the laptop camera. It's a let's-see-what-happens construct. I was the editor, not the filmmaker.

SH: How did "Gestures" emerge?

WR: The idea for video portraits came from an assignment that I gave my students during a RISD Wintersession class: to shoot a video of themselves working alone in a public place, ignoring the camera. As I watched the videos, I noticed that the students were making similar gestures, like leaning forward and back, resting their chins on their hands — and there was a surprising number of furrowed brows and looks of consternation. Later, as I gathered more and more video portraits, the similarities continued. I recognized myself; the gestures felt familiar to me, and I realized I was watching a sort of intimate inner dialogue, with the gestures as its visible manifestation.

"Gestures" references Richard Serra's list of verbs ("Verb List Compilation: Actions to Relate to Oneself," 1967-1968). In my work, I often think in terms of what actions are taking place. My background in dance and my collaborations with dancers make me want to observe all sorts of choreography, especially the most mundane — in this case, the smallest

movements of the face. I thought a lot about Serra's verbs as I watched the videos. And so I wanted to list them, these shared choreographies.

SH: What is your intention for gallerygoers?

WR: On an experiential level, I want them to be constantly rotating. I hope they look continually from one to another screen, and to the "Gestures" wall, so they will be engaged in noticing the commonalities that occur.

And I hope the show makes people think more about how we create personal spaces when we are alone in public, particularly when we use our personal technologies. How we knowingly and unknowingly create bubbles in which we are engaging with our technology. The installation reveals not only how intense these inward conversations are, but also how paradoxical it is that we can be in such public places and still have them. For me, it is an awareness of how we share, and do not share, public urban space.

I am an observer: my intention is often to articulate for others what they already know. In this show, my subjects are mirrors. They are doing what we all do, except we never get to see ourselves doing it.

If you are curious to see yourself in your personal bubble, you can be a part of "Navigating the Personal Bubble." Richmond is inviting the public to make videos for her ongoing collection of "Alone in Public" portraits. Using Photo Booth on your Mac, record yourself working on your laptop for about three minutes in a public place. For questions and instructions, email video@wendyrichmond.com.

"Wendy Richmond: Navigating the Personal Bubble" runs through November 4, 2012, in the Anne, Michael and Amelia Spalter New Media Gallery at the RISD Museum of Art, 224 Benefit Street, Providence, RI. For more information: 401-454-6500 or <http://www.risdmuseum.org>.

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