

Digital Photography and Picture Sharing: Redefining the Public/Private Divide

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Abstract Digital photography is contributing to the renegotiation of the public and private divide and to the transformation of privacy and intimacy, especially with the convergence of digital cameras, mobile phones, and web sites. This convergence contributes to the redefinition of public and private and to the transformation of their boundaries, which have always been subject to historical and geographical change. Taking pictures or filming videos of strangers in public places and showing them in webs like Flickr or YouTube, or making self-portraits available to strangers in instant messenger, social network sites, or photo blogs are becoming a current practice for a growing number of Internet users. Both are examples of the intertwining of online and offline practices, experiences, and meanings that challenge the traditional concepts of the public and the private. Uses of digital images play a role in the way people perform being a stranger and in the way they relate to strangers, online and offline. The mere claims about the privatization of the public space or the public disclosure of intimacy do

not account for all these practices, situations, and attitudes, as they are not a simple translation of behaviors and codes from one realm to the other.

Keywords Digital images · Self-portraits · Public places · Privacy

Introduction

Contemporary social practices related to digital photography are taking part in the constitution of subjectivities and new sociability practices, especially, but not only, with the convergence of digital cameras and mobile phones (cf. Okabe and Ito 2006; Koskinen 2004, 2007; Nightingale 2007; Rivière 2005; Lasén 2005; Hjorth 2006). The pervasiveness of images producing devices and the sharing of digital images and personal pictures in different platforms on the Web (blogs, social networks, sharing sites, etc.) raise questions about how the everyday photographic practices, uses, and meanings are changing. With the raise of digital technology, photography seems to have changed, from a way to support memories of public and personal events, to a performance of the everyday life, for “common banality” (Petersen 2009) and “vernacular creativity” (Burgess 2007, see also Cohen (2005) on photo bloggers). In words of Okabe (2003, n.p): “The mundane is elevated to a photographic object; the everyday is now the site of potential news and visual archiving”. Playfulness and experimentation become

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common features in the use of camera phones and digital cameras. These changes have happened due to the possibility of controlling the process of “development” of the images, along with the cost zero of producing them once the equipment is acquired. Taking and deleting digital pictures is costless and easy.

One of the changes regarding everyday photographic practices concerns the practice, uses, and meanings of the self-portrait, which was traditionally reserved for artistic photography. Self-portraits are a typical feature of camera phone pictures since the beginning(s) of their commercialization and use (Lasén 2005, p. 65). Nowadays, they are narrowly linked to the growing use of pictures as a way of self-presentation in the Web. Thanks to digital photography the gesture of pointing the camera or the phone at oneself is becoming common, and the presence of such pictures in the Web is growing. Therefore, self-portraits seem to be taking part in embodiment processes and in the shaping and knowing of the self, regarding the perception, conception, and relation to our own body. Being at the same time the photographer and the photographed, displaying such images on the Web or on the mobile phone, exchanging such pictures with other people, making and receiving comments and evaluations about them, as well as the ongoing learning about how to do it are all aspects involved in how self-portraits are participating in the shaping of the bodies and subjectivities.

Such photographic practices are contributing to the renegotiation of the public and private divide. Privacy issues related to digital photography have attracted media attention, caused controversies and moral panic, for instance about sexually oriented photos taken in public places and uploaded to internet sites, or about the use of self-portrait photos by many young users (and not that young) in platforms like photoblogs and social networks sites, which also open new questions about intimacy and privacy.¹ Taking pictures or filming videos of strangers in public places and showing them in webs like Flickr or YouTube, or making self-portraits available to strangers, are becoming current practices for a growing number of Internet users. These practices raise also questions about the private/public character of these platforms and exchanges (Adams et al. 2007).

¹ A recent European Union survey about Internet uses and young people (15–25) in five different European countries reveals that half of the participants share pictures in webs and social network sites (Lusoli and Miltgen 2009).

The notion of “subject” and, more specifically, the modern concept of an individual subject are narrowly related to the notion of privacy. This is linked to the liberal conception of individuals as economic subjects, as private property becomes the ultimate basis for privacy. Practices and discourses associated to digital images nowadays are revealing transformations in both realms: the shaping of the self and one’s privacy.

Two aspects related to the above-mentioned issues are explored in this paper. Firstly, how the growing presence and use of digital cameras and camera phones in public places, in convergence with the uploading and sharing of these images in different web sites, are changing people’s perceptions and expectations about public places, behaviors, and practices. After closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras, the growing presence of personal cameras and potential photographers in public places could be contributing to the normalization of the possibility of being filmed when being in public, an opinion that we have already found in a discussion in a Spanish Flickr forum that will be described below. Secondly, we discuss some aspects of the practice and use of self-portraits, especially those involving intimate contexts, nudity, or sexuality, and their public exposure in different websites, instant messenger (IM), and mobile phones. These practices challenge the modern view of sexuality and the body as the ultimate private domains and give clues about an ongoing transformation of the concept of intimacy.

We present a speculative exploration on how the public and the private realms are being reconfigured by the productions, uses, and presence of digital images, drawing on our ethnographic experience regarding mobile telephony (especially regarding the implications of mobile phone uses in urban public places—Lasén 2005, 2006), digital photography, and social network sites. This reflection is supported by empirical examples from our ongoing research². But we have to clarify that

² Edgar Gómez is currently finishing his Ph.D. project, an ethnography of digital photography practices in Barcelona. Dr. Amparo Lasén has been doing research about mobile phone uses since 2001 (Lasén 2005, 2006, 2008), and it is also relevant for this paper her ethnography consisting of participant observation in Spanish online dating sites and online and offline informal interviews with subscribers of those webs, carried out from November 2007 to February 2008 and from July to October 2008.

we are not presenting conclusive results of a finished research work. Our main aim is to call attention to the implications of such ongoing changes, which ask for more research to be done, and to highlight the fluid and changing nature characteristic of the public and the private. A relevant topic in the light of some of the last debates on the private/public distinction and the image are, for example, so-called sexting³.

Renegotiating Public and Private in the Contemporary Media City

Pink Hair: a Tale of a Flickr Controversy

The departure point for this discussion comes from the ethnographic fieldwork of Edgar Gómez in Flickr.com. In the group “Madrid”, which is a geographically based group of the city of Madrid in flickr.com, one of the participants opens a forum conversation with two photos of a woman with the title: “Someone knows her?”⁴ The girl is skinny, tall, has pink hair, and wears theatrical clothes. She is always walking a greyhound, which wears theatrical clothes sometimes as well. Many participants of the group have seen her before in the center of Madrid, and thus, they feel a sense of intimacy with the girl. The conversations and discussions that ensue follow an assumption of familiarity with answers like “you should tell her that you like her”. Some of the replies take the form of photos of the same girl walking her dog, taken by other active members of the group.

One day, one of the female members sees the girl at a cinema’s queue and tells her about the group and about the lively discussion about her. The woman with the pink hair, who does not know about Flickr and does not seem very familiar with Internet uses and applications, gets upset and starts to tell the girl that they should not be talking about her and even less photographing her and putting those pictures on the Internet. The member

posts the story to the Flickr group forum and from that point, what started almost as a joke becomes a lively and passionate discussion on privacy, photography, laws, and ethics, with more than 50 people involved.

One member says: “poor woman, she’s absent in these speculations about her everyday life and the passions she arouses”, while another one states: “if she has pink hair and walks the city centre, with all the cameras that tourists and locals have, she can’t expect not to be photographed”. Not all the participants expressed a position—for many it was their first time to think, discuss, and engage in such issues. Those that did express their opinions formed two very separate groups. On the one side were the people who considered that “public space” entailed “public exposition of oneself”; this translated to the idea that anyone who is in a public space must expect to be photographed eventually. On the other side of the debate were those that believed photographers should ask for permission to the photographed people—even if they are in public spaces.

The key question in understanding this lively discussion concerns the changing nature of the digital image in an age of Web 2.0: How are the public and private realms being reconfigured by the “culture of the digital image”? One of the posts in the discussion argues: “if you can see something in public places, from public places, you can take the photo and publish it”, while another draws on legal frameworks regarding using pictures taken in public (interestingly, a British law and not the Spanish one). Unsurprisingly, the discussion ends without any final consensus.

This online debate is a good example of how digital photography users—that is, people who take pictures in urban public places and share them online—can reflect upon the implications of such practices from reacting to the objections made by other city dwellers and claiming what they deem is “right behavior” to pondering the adequacies of current measures in place to control such practices. In the girl with pink hair example, we can see that these questions not only relate to institutionalized surveillance and the widespread use of digital technologies and image dissemination avenues but also the conflicts and controversies that surround these uses. The ongoing reconfiguration of privacy and public is clearly spearheaded in the conflicting views surrounding the pink hair discussion. While, on the one hand, the woman in question reacted fervently against her repurposed images on the Web, on the other hand, this situation is a product of the amount of people doing self-portraits and

³ To cite one of these debates: the “sexting” (contraction of sex and texting). In some states of the USA (Virginia, Pennsylvania, Wyoming), some teenagers have been accused of child pornography because they exchanged nude self-portraits with each other. Controversies following these charges reveal that the boundaries are not legally clear and definitely not at the social level.

⁴ <http://www.flickr.com/groups/49503016789@N01/discuss/72157600082355441/#comment72157602203711401>

associated disclosing facilitated by Web 2.0, a practice that often involves the sharing and thus potential acontextualization of images and content with complete strangers.

The use and presence of technological devices can change the perception of public places, the practices carried out in such places, and the interactions among strangers. In order to rightly understand and assess these changes, we should not forget that usual behaviors in public places, what is considered to be intrusive and the negotiation of boundaries between the public and the private, are not the same everywhere. The content and meaning of the public and private divide vary at different times and places, even in different contexts and situations. The notion of privacy is embedded in larger trends of political and social changes (cf. the five volumes *History of the private life* edited by Ariès and Duby 1987–1991). The diverse forms of considering the public/private divide share two fundamental kinds of opposing imagery: firstly, hidden, withdrawn, secret vs. open, revealed, accessible, visible; secondly, personal vs. collective (Weintraub 1997). For the Flickr uses the visibility and accessibility to the picture of the pink haired girl (even if she is not aware of it) means that they are allowed to publicize and make a collective use of these images, whereas for this woman, her images in public are still personal and should not be shared and discussed. The fact that this woman is not an Internet user is relevant in understanding the level of her hostility toward the presence of her images on the web. If we take into consideration the fact that not more than 57% of the Spanish population are Internet users, we can see that many have been left out of the conversation around renegotiations of the public and private within the emerging digital cultures of Web 2.0.

Technologies present and used in urban settings take and have taken part in modes of public behavior—such as how city dwellers perform civil inattention (Lasén 2006; Hirschauer 2005). This concept coined by Goffman (1963) refers to the ways in which individuals show their awareness of other people's presence, without making them the object of particular attention: a way of displaying lack of interest without disregard, a competence to refuse relations without creating nonpersons (Hirschauer 2005, p. 41). For example, a mutual “eye catching” exchange—through which a person admits seeing another—is swiftly followed by the withdrawing of attention “so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or

design” (Goffman 1963, p. 84). This is also a practice of strangeness, a social nonrelation requiring a disciplined body: the performance of doing being a trustworthy, indifferent, and nonthreatening stranger (Hirschauer 2005).

The use of digital cameras is becoming a typical feature expected in almost any kind of urban gathering (cf. sports and music events, political rallies and demonstrations, clubbing and nights out), entailing the potential break and reformulation of the civic inattention rule, when the strangers become the subject pictured, on purpose or accidentally. Sometimes these presences and practices are being subsumed in civic inattention performances, when the photographers and those around them act as if these were not being pictured, but in some occasions, they are used to foster face-to-face sociality with strangers who are asked to pose for the pictures. A third possibility is the one discussed in our above example, when amateur urban photographers find in the theater of the streets topics and characters for their pictures, which will be afterward shared and discussed with other strangers online. They pay attention then to their fellow pedestrians taking their pictures, without being noticed. The kind of device used to take pictures, camera phone or different kind of digital cameras, seem to play a role as well in these performances. This was noted by one of the participants in the discussion of the Flickr group quoted above. He explains that taking pictures with a camera phone is less intrusive and find less negative reactions from city dwellers or shop owners than using a “professional” device such as Reflex, which makes people suspect that you are a professional photographer who could profit from the pictures.

The twin axes of surveillance and spectacle that guided the reconstruction of urban space in modern western countries since the nineteenth century (McQuire 2008) permeate city dwellers public practices and interactions, not only face to face but also online. The number of Flickr groups dedicated to cities, as the one in our example—where amateur photographers gather, share pictures, exchange comments, and even eventually organize meeting ups to go out and take pictures of the city together—illustrates how the city can be defined as a “territory of images”. This conception, which has its birth in the rise of the nineteenth century with the first urban photographic surveys and the invention of postcards (McQuire 2008, Chapter 2), is

continued nowadays with a different kind of inscription and technical translation by the convergence of digital photography and Internet.

The control of people's behavior according to what is considered appropriate in public places is collectively achieved by the interactional control of situations where people meet in public spaces (cf. Goffman 1963; Hirschauer 2005). People and technologies take part in this form of control, which is not only sustained by institutions but also forms of institutionalized authority reinforced by the law. However, there is a substantial difference between surveillance and mutual control. The former—as in the example of CCTV (Müller 2004)—is a one-way process, where people watched and recorded are very often unaware.

In the rise of digital photography as part of everyday life, two different aspects of people taking pictures in public urban places can be found. First, as part of the public places interactions among strangers, city dwellers have the possibility to maintain a certain amount of control, both self-control and over others, about what is being photographed and how. They can make an objection, explicitly or implicitly, to be taken in a picture, *if they are aware*. But once the picture has been taken and is downloaded and shared in the Web, it is impossible to control what is going to be done with it and who is going to have access to it, as we will illustrate in our example. However, the debate between Flickr users—as well as the different choices and strategies when displaying and sharing self-images in the Web—described below are examples of this mutual and interactional control, not devoid of conflicts, related to public and privacy.

Indeed, the practices linked to the use and presence of cameras in public places reveal a further dimension of how these places are becoming networked localities (Ito 1999) whose characteristics are also being defined by the convergence between face-to-face and online interaction. These practices are an example of how urban spaces become relational spaces in the contemporary media cities (McQuire 2008, pp. 20–26), a new mode of social experience where the horizons of social relationships have become radically open and where this openness facilitates the orientation toward the otherness. This form of space is created by the contemporary imperative to actively establish social relations “on the fly” across heterogeneous dimensions in which online and offline, distance and face to face, are inextricably intertwined.

Public Display of Self-Images

There is a growing presence of self-portraits in the Web: from photo blogs to social network sites, or dating online sites, including the growing practice, especially among young people of exchanging self-portraits in IM, email, or MMS as a contemporary chatting up and flirting strategy. In February 2006, an article in *The New York Times* deemed self-portrait the folk art of the digital age (Williams 2006). The unprecedented popular success of this practice in the history of the snapshot was illustrated by comparing the number of these pictures one can find just visiting a few pages in any social network site with surveys such as Guy Stricherz's “Americans in Kodachrome, 1945–65” (2002) (which includes snapshots from 500 American families, where more than 100,000 pictures were reviewed over 17 years in compiling the book, but only fewer than 100 self-portraits were found).

Reasons given by those who practice self-portraying, besides those regarding seduction and erotic games, vary from “it's just experimentation” to “because I'm the only model available at all time”. One of our interviewees aged 19 points out that she takes more than 60 photos in order to choose one to upload. Another one counts more than 2,000 photos of her in less than a year. These findings are congruent to those of other researchers (Coopersmith 2000). This “presentation of the self”, very playful and complex, blurs the distinction between public and private in various ways. Many of the photos are taken in bathrooms or bedrooms but uploaded to publicly accessed webs and network sites.

Very often, these are images of a sexual nature, or portraying nudity, with web sites dedicated exclusively to them (cf. *adultfriendfinder.com*, *beautifulogony.com*, *seemyorgasm.com*⁵). One of the effects of the increase in privacy⁶ afforded by the elimination of the developing process in digital photography is that digital cameras first and camera phones now can be used in sexual encounters and erotic play. These

⁵ These web sites are quite different regarding their aim, design, the kind of people's participation, and the users' generated content displayed. Some of them are sexually explicit online dating sites whereas other just display the images provided by the users. But in spite of their differences, all of them are examples of the public disclosure of intimate images and therefore of the current transformation of intimacy afforded by the convergence between digital images and the web.

⁶ As our developed pictures are not seen by the photography laboratories staff anymore

practices also entail changes in the relations between privacy and intimacy, revealing a lesser need for protecting the last. These are forms of “shared intimacy”, like in traditional and nonwestern forms of interpersonal relationships, an example of how intimacy moves from the “passion for privacy” of nineteenth century bourgeois (Gay 1984) to the “empowering exhibitionism” (Koskela 2004) of many Internet users nowadays.

For instance, thanks to the convergence of Internet connection (webs with cams, IM, etc.) and digital images solitary pleasures become collective and shared. Moreover, such practices do not always fit the category of spectacle, as traditional porn. They could entail the abolition of the spectacular through a collapse of strict difference between the subject and object, which also characterizes the practice of the self-portrait and of the divide between passivity and activity: firstly, because many of those who watch these images are also exchanging and sharing their own images, and secondly, because people connected are not just watching, but experiencing a kind of hallucinatory being there, while knowing that one is not there and that in fact is not “there” there, just mediation (Patterson 2004). This is a “situation in contemporary culture in which people displace their enjoyment onto others that what they enjoy seeing in pornography is not necessarily the impulse toward masturbation but precisely the experience of seeing and having someone else enjoying in their place” (Patterson 2004, p. 119). These practices around the sharing and display of self-portraits that can approach those of amateur porn also reveal the ambivalence of the private and public regarding the home, the technological uncanny when porn and domesticity are mixed, when the gender boundaries between pornography, home videos, and personal self-portraits is blurred (Williams 2004; more on the implications of netporn Jacobs et al. 2007).

Self-portrait is a very common practice in social networks like *Flickr* as well as in photo blogs⁷. Therry Senft, in her study of *Camgirls*, discusses how

⁷ In Flickr for example, a search for the word “autorretrato” (self-portrait in Spanish) leads to a 31,729 photos and the search for the words “self-portrait” to a 1,198,530 images. Also, there are 12,228 groups that includes the words self and portrait, such as: “Arm’s length self portrait experience”, “Identity and self portrait”, “Self-Portraits!!!” (search performed on 14 April 2009).

the public exposition of the women leads to a political statement in many ways:

Rather than performing as passive objects for the consumption of others, we demand recognition as living subjects. Our demand to be recognized as a subject takes the form of words, images, and gestures that will in turn be circulated as representational objects among audiences (Senft 2008, pp. 4–5).

This demand for recognition, which is present in most interpersonal relationships, is one of the modes of subjection and dependency characteristics of the shaping of the self. As Foucault (1982) reminds us, the word “subject” has a double meaning: *subject* to other by control and dependency and *subject* as constraint to the own identity, to the conscience, and to the own self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and constitutes the subject. Digital photography plays a role in both aspects: self-identity, conscience, and self-knowledge and control and dependency, as well as it is related to different strategies to deal with these. This subjection can be found in the relationship between people and devices and regarding the interpersonal relationships mediated by these technologies.

In this context, the recognition and the subjection are related to a public audience of strangers, to whom the webcam of the photographic performance is addressed, as one woman, interviewed in a former study, argues: “if you’re not in the picture, you don’t exist” (Gómez et al. 2007). There seems to be a reinforcement of these practices (cf. Cohen 2005) because these photos and profiles lead to the development of micro-audiences related to this use of personal self-portraits. One of our informants was very clear about the ramifications: “What I hate is that people stop visiting my site if they don’t see photos of me. Since I began to upload another kind of photos, visit statistics decrease, I got 100 people every day and now I only get 15”. In Chile, for instance, this phenomenon has been “captured” by traditional media and TV beauty contests like *Mss. Fotolog* or *Mss. Facebook* are very common. This also concerns websites where the subscribers are connected through their cams and post self-made videos, where the counting of visits gives trace of these micro-audiences, highly valued by the subscribers. In some cases, users are directly asked to note or mark the

different pictures, in online dating sites providing this application, such as Badoo.com, where the main profile picture is the most rated by the other users and not the one chosen by the person, or the Spanish web votamicuerpo.com (equivalent to the site rate-mybody.com). These pictures—especially the women’s ones—are also used for commercial outcomes by webs’ owners to advertise their spaces and attract more subscribers.

This search for recognition can, in some cases, also be a way of reconciliation with one’s own body. As one Spanish female Flickr users noted, the other’s gaze can be more flattering than our own when concerning our bodies. This young woman from Madrid has included a nude self-portrait—with her head unseen—in her Flickr account. In an online interview, she stated that during the summer of 2005, when she stayed at home on her own “working and waiting”, she started feeling anxious and not very well. These feelings reminded her of the time when she had suffered eating disorders. Then, she took and uploaded that picture to be reassured, as the comments left by other users, complimenting her photographic skills and her body as well, helped her to be reconciled with her body (www.flickr.com/photos/calitoe/42980896/).

In other cases, the playfulness and the teasing aspect of the display are highlighted. This is evident in “sexting” practices—when people take pictures of their bodies and send them to other by MMS or Bluetooth. In an ethnographic study of women’s use of camera phones in Korea, Dong-Hoo Lee notes that:

The interviewees have had the pleasure of being objectified for their own cameras and they have learned by experience the principles of constructing images as well as those of being viewed as an object. They have recognised that photo images don't reflect their real appearance as it is, but the gaze as the viewer constructs them. They have realised that the relationship between real appearance and image is constructed. Controlling angle and luminosity, and retouching images with photo editing software like Photoshop, they learn how to display themselves in a favourable manner—how to get the images that satisfy themselves (Lee 2005, p. 5).

In those examples, we can see how self-images exposed publicly, thanks to the web, are playing a part

in the constitution of these women subjectivities as well as the public, even in the political sense of the word, is being build through the sharing of intimacy. In a different approach, the surveillance studies have a similar reflection. Koskela (2004) states that webcams are “the surveillance turned into spectacle” and can be a form of resistance (Koskela 2004, p. 208)—a view shared by other scholars (Knight 2000; Frosh 2001). Koskela has an interesting reflection on the relation between surveillance systems and public intimate exposition:

... by revealing their intimate lives, people are liberated from shame and the ‘need’ to hide, which leads to something called ‘*empowering exhibitionism*’. These deliberately produced images contest many of the conventional ways of thinking how visibility and transparency connote with power and control (Koskela 2004, p. 208).

This liberating aspect of the disclosure of intimate matters can be found in some of the accounts of the informants.⁸ Julie Levin Russo (2005) proposes that this “cyber-exhibitionism” is the stage where subjectivity is performed and is not necessarily about a form of control. Other authors—like Virilio (2002) and Frohne (2002)—do not share such optimistic views and see the exhibition of private images as the last stage of capitalist control. Here, a complex articulation of autonomy and heteronomy is found in such practices and performances, while being empowering, they also entail forms of dependency and subjection toward the audience, toward those from whom recognition is searched, toward the personal involvement with the practice itself, and toward the requirements established by the commercial interests of the web owners.

According to our observations, privacy in these practices relates to Livingstone’s definition, “a definition of privacy not tied to the disclosure of certain types of information, rather a definition centred on

⁸ As well as in some initiatives found in the Web, such as the Facebook group promoted by Spanish women and called “I would like to be a mysterious and aloof woman (but Facebook doesn’t let me)” whose presentation reads: “To all the women who end up telling our life in the ‘status’ and lose our magic and mystery... But how much fun we get when we read ‘I’ll have my bikini wax’ or ‘just got my period’. Hurray the lack of privacy!”

having control over who knows what about you” (2008, p. 404). Thus, people develop some strategies of “control” of their images, in the way the images are taken and staged, in the choice of which ones to display, and in the posing and the use of lights, shadows, and Photoshop effects. Control is also exerted by displaying the pictures without letting the other to download them or by only allowing this download to those who share similar pictures with us. This request for reciprocity in flirting and sexual practices is one of the motivations to start making self-portraits, as it was acknowledged by some of the participants in our research. Further control is provided by the spread in the network of some kind of “etiquette” to protect anonymity (like never show in the same picture genitals and faces) and by the expectations about the right behaviors of people visiting the webs where the images are showed. For example, a young woman, interviewed in our research about photo blogs, told that she got really mad when someone that did not know her personally put a comment on her photos, “This is a personal and private page” she said, meaning that whereas strangers could access it, they were not supposed to make their presence explicit. Her anger reveals that this is etiquette in the making and that not everyone shares the same rules.

Contrasting with the modern bourgeois passion for privacy and their desire to defend themselves from their scrutinizing world, as well as the aim to relieve themselves from their self-imposed modulation, restraint, and control characteristic of modern public life (Gay 1984), these practices reveal a voluntary exposure to being scrutinized by a chosen audience of known and unknown viewers. They also reveal new ways of control, as people self-portrayed chose the images revealed and, to a certain degree and depending on the characteristics of the different applications, to whom they are displayed. But this is only a relative control, bearing in mind that once the images are shared, they do not control what happen to them. Internet users are quite aware of the limited control they hold about their personal data.

This disclosure of intimate aspects of their bodies and private life is not the complete opposite of playacting among strangers, performing, and wearing masks, as in Sennett’s conception of the divide between private and public. This shared intimacy with strangers is still a performance, a way of

experimenting with the possibilities of the presentation of the self afforded by these different technologies. They provide elements not only for the shaping of the self but also for the self-evaluation, thanks to the ability to test the other’s reactions to them. According to Sennett (1977), this playacting is a way of testing out the boundaries of social roles, which can take on political connotations when it entails a collective reassessment of habit, customs, and hegemonic representations. Uses of webcams, as those analyzed above by Lee and Senft, can operate this way. Digital imaging practices in convergence with online display and exchanges in different webs and forums have this public participatory and political potential. Webcams, photo blogs, and social networking services are not always, we argue, confessional media forms where one’s personality is disclosed.

The gaze is one of the most powerful mechanisms in modern subjectivation processes (Foucault 1975), that is, the process of relating to oneself and shaping the self through social practices, disciplines, exchanges, communication, interpersonal relationships, and power relations. The practices of making, displaying, and sharing self-portraits reveal a complex game of gaze, where people are at the same time the subject who takes pictures and the object pictured, sharing the double activity of the photographer and the model, achieving a kind of embodied vision, learning to perform and to see their own body in a new way, and putting themselves in the place of the potential viewers, introducing their preferences and evaluations in their practices. There is also a reversibility of the gaze, as they are in a reciprocal position to fellow online strangers displaying their pictures or their webcams. This is completely different to surveillance and voyeurism where the distance and separation of the observer and observed is maximal (Villota 2001). Thus, this complex gazing game consists in putting myself, my body, on display, to be scrutinized by a partially chosen and selected audience, carefully choosing how people see me, while trying to keep the audience interested, and therefore increasing the possibility of the encounter, online, offline, or both. This game is also an ongoing learning process taking part in contemporary forms of embodiment, self-knowledge, and identity, involving people (as photographers, models, and audiences) and devices. The three aspects—representation (of the body and the self), presentation and embodiment—

have to be considered together, part of the same dynamic. These pictures and photographic activities, involving different individuals and devices, are not just representing and presenting an entity already there but contributing to the configuration and transfiguration of bodies and selves.

Conclusion

The history of the boundaries between public and private has been marked by the coexistence of potential friction. Regarding ICT uses, these tensions are material and observable phenomena and constitute what McQuire calls “the technological uncanny” (McQuire 2008, p. 8), that is, as technological inscriptions and visions that bring to light that which ought to have remained hidden, revealing the disturbing aspects of domesticity. As McQuire highlights, thanks to the role played by media, the home has become an interactive node of online information flows, altering the dynamics between public and private. Moreover, we could add the home and what happens inside it becomes part of the content of these images, text, and sound flows. The same forces transform the public space as the growing influence of action-at-a-distance dislodges the social primacy of the embodied presence, and as in the first example described, images and traces of this public embodied presence become an element of online, at distance, interaction, which, in return, transform and raise controversies about public presence.

Media technologies generate spatial ambivalences, which are the sign of political contradictions. Some of these underlined the modern divide between public sphere (work, politics) and the privacy of the home, especially in relation to gender and to women’s discrimination, and have been questioned since New Social Movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The considerations of a privatization of the public space or about the publicity of intimacy do not account for all these practices, situations, experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. It is not a simple translation of behaviors and codes from one realm to the other. The reconfiguration of public and private is part of the “new ways of conceptualizing the space and time of social experience and agency in a context in which the older boundaries of both territory and media are in a flux” (McQuire 2008, p. 20).

As Sheller and Urry point out, current literature often ignores the existence of multiple publics—and “privates”—and is overly static and regional in the distinctions drawn between both terms. Objects such as “cars, information, communication systems, screens are all material worlds, hybrids of public and private life” (Sheller and Urry 2003, p. 113). Private and public evolve in relationship with the materiality of social life. Mobile phone uses the pervasiveness of digital photography, and the growing presence of pictures in the Web reveals how people move within and between the public and the private, at times being in both simultaneously. According to Sheller and Urry, we should be dispensed with the public and private divide, which seems to be not very useful to account for dynamics and mobilities of people, objects, information, and images constituted across any public–private divide. Some have even affirmed provocatively that contemporary technological affordances along with people’s and institution’s practices entail the disappearance of privacy (as the well-known and quoted statement of Scott McNealy, CEO of Sun Microsystems: “You already have zero privacy. Get over it.”⁹)

The pervasiveness of digital photography and the transformation of any mundane activity in a picture occasion turn the activity of taking pictures in a banal and expected public behavior of city dwellers. The convergence between digital photography, mobile telephony, and Internet and the growing practice of displaying and sharing pictures with other people increase the networked character of contemporary public spaces and the convergence between online public spheres and urban public places. The articulation between these practices and new forms of convergence raises tensions and conflicts about the right uses of such pictures and about the public interaction with cameras and photographers.

Modern bourgeois conception of privacy, mainly in its Anglo-Saxon and north European versions, considers it as the protection of a territory (the home, the body) as in the adage “my home, my castle”. But privacy can also be understood as the control about the information about ourselves, not a territory with clear boundaries but an ability to control the access to us and our information, as in the example of the impression management, or the different ways of

⁹ Quoted in Christian Parenti (2003)

controlling the interaction at encounters, online and offline (Müller 2004).

In the practices observed relating to the production, display, and sharing of digital images, we found ways of sustaining privacy that instead of preventing the contact or encounter with strangers, try to facilitate it, because of the multiple positive aspects of these encounters: sociability, affects, pleasures, exchange of ideas, etc., in spite of the potential risks of bad encounters and negative emotions generated by such practices and the exchanges they afford. We can also consider these practices as a way of opposing to the modern impersonality of public realm, bringing to it some of the expression and presence of personal features, where personal and private are not synonyms anymore. This access is facilitated but kept under a certain control: through the ways in which images are produced and chosen, helped by the different ways of control allowed by the different sites (explicit permission like in Facebook, reciprocity like in the self-made sexual content web sites, where the lurkers are kept away), or the collective setting of etiquette codes.

Paradoxically, the appeal of intimacy and private images to attract public attention, to generate micro-audiences, and to create encounters with strangers is largely the result of the modern constitution of privacy. Modern private realm is where intimacy is built and protected and where the bodily aspects of human existence happen, where the body is hidden, in contrast with forms of premodern sociality and practices (Elias 1969). The body and what can be called the “conditions of intimacy” become interesting because they are hidden (Villota 2001). This interest for hidden aspects regarding what is personal and intimate is developed since then under many different forms according to the institutions and the strategies involved from control and policing institutions charged to enforce security and social order to commercial marketing strategies; from art works focusing on the personal, intimate, and family life of the artists (cf. Sophie Calle, Tracey Emin, Nan Goldin, Richard Billingham) to media content, as the television reality programs picturing common people’s banality and everyday life, showing their homes, domesticity, and family conflicts.

Of course social sciences and, particularly, ethnography follow these interests, producing knowledge and methodologies to access these hidden aspects of people’s lives. The development of these interests also

inform themselves reciprocally marking the routinization and normalization of these ways of surveillance and collection of personal information (McQuire 2008, p. 189), as when video surveillance techniques and content become the model for art projects (Warhol, Dan Graham) or reality TV. To this list of policy, commercial, arts, media, and academic interest about what is intimate and outside the public realm, we have to add people’s interest in revealing aspects of their own intimacy and in knowing about other’s one. This exposure of intimate and private images acts as a way of obtaining attention and recognition in order to facilitate encounters with strangers and interpersonal relationships, online as well as face to face, with affective purposes (search for friendship, emotional support, love, and sexual relationships), as well as for other more traditionally public aims related to work, leisure activities and interests, or politics (McDonald 2006).

The visibility afforded by the display of self-images finds in the other’s gaze, which become an embodied form of recognition, the guarantee of the subject’s being. Being visible, being present, in front of a crowd of strangers is one of the aspects of being public which nowadays is performed at the junction of online and offline places.

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