webAffairs, **artist's statement** (page 1)

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Since February 2001, I have been visiting an adult video web community and have collected images and dialogues which make up *"webAffairs"*. This book is my visual documentary of the activities, people and events within this space.

With the availability of cheaper computers, faster web access and small video cameras, virtual communities have come to include people of all ages, economic and educational backgrounds, and from all different parts of the world. These virtual rooms are where singles, couples, straights, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transvestites, crossdressers, fetishists... everyone, come to play. As a friend I met online said to me *"it's safe sex,"* and during these times when sexually transmitted diseases are a major anxiety, it's a safe way to flirt and have a sexual encounter. To some degree this virtual space has become the equivalent of going out to the neighborhood bar.

There are quite a lot of women who log into the adult rooms, but the majority of the community is male. In the straight rooms, I usually found myself to be the only woman in a room full of men, all watching me. I was also fascinated that everything and anything could happen here. A few people could be chatting about computers, while some others would be making sexual banter, and still others might be masturbating at the sight of a woman in the room. The first section of my book is a series of visuals and some dialogues captured in the rooms which introduces the reader to this community.

Once in the room I began noticing how some men acted very aggressively, constantly asking a woman to perform for them. This made me want to change the power structure. When a man asked me to perform for the camera, I asked him instead to do something for me: "Show me your room". It not only changed the dynamic of the relationship, but also allowed me to take a peek into his life. I got to see furniture and the pictures hanging on the walls. Suddenly I was a guest in hundreds of homes and offices around the world. I began collecting images of these rooms. Sometimes, in exchange, I would show them my studio, as well. But other times they would demand to see more of me, my entire face, parts of my body, my breasts... Ironically, I began to exchange images of my body in order to collect more and more images of rooms to be able to include in my book.

As time went by I became a regular within the community. I made friends and I learned about the everyday things that they do. I wondered why my friends were online so often. One person told me he was working very hard and had to be at the office until the early hours of the morning, and these rooms kept him company. I was surprised to learn that many were creative people who use the computer professionally. After spending all day on the computer for their work, it seemed natural for most of them to stay there for their social life, as well. Their professions demanded so much time out of their lives that the only window to the outside world was again the computer screen. Ironically, this virtual space replaces their social life. In my own life as a graphic designer, teacher and artist I too sit in front of the computer for most of the day.

I met a woman who was a factory worker and deaf. For her, typing was an easier way of connecting than being in a room full of real people. A prematurely retired man feeling lonely at home told me, *"The wife works from 7am to 5pm, comes home, watches TV and falls asleep, sex once a week on Saturday mornings (used to be)... now I play on the computer, a great mind gone to waste! I lost 20lbs since June when I finally stopped drinking, but now I am addicted to these rooms."* These personal confessions are at the heart of my book. It is the contrast between being naked and vulnerable, and to allow strangers to enter into your life. Friends often shared their personal crisis in the same rooms where they also escaped for virtual sex. As I surfed through these virtual rooms and met new friends I catalogued them. Every friend had a folder with images and dialogues. My experiences became electronic files and when I began designing this book the folders on my desktop contained the information that determined each page. Not only the aesthetics of the book derives from electronic technology but my process of creation derives from an electronic sensibility as well.

The main story in the book, however, is my participation as an artist and observer, while becoming a member of this virtual community. I went through a transformation which is revealed throughout the book in my own voice. This allows the reader to share my experiences. Despite my shyness I found myself talking to strangers. At first I would only chat with men who were fully dressed, but eventually I had long conversations with a window on my screen where only genitals were visible. I broke my own rules and decided not to have any. I watched how my limits expanded on a daily basis. I found myself being one of the community, sharing with friends my own experiences, showing old photos, exchanging our real names and web addresses all intermingled with sex chat. After a while I had my own room, and my own sex show. I was having virtual sexual experiences with several men at the same time. Another body of text in the book reflects dialogues I've had with my husband. As a married woman I negotiated the limits of my explorations within this virtual space with my real life partner.

I struggled with the question of privacy. How much of what goes on in the rooms can be considered private? How do I protect my friends' privacy and still be able to talk about some of the events that I experienced? How can I document a space which is public but thought of as private? I thought that collecting screen shots and saving the text files was similar to street photography. But unlike street photography my subjects are unaware. In fact, I am not even the photographer. Each one of my models choose their own way of presenting themselves with their own webcams. The pictures in this book are collaboratively made. My models photograph themselves and I just grab from their broadcast.

The electronic images I get from the chatrooms are transformed as stills in my book. They capture one single moment, and sometimes because of the limits of the technology as the image is frozen it disintegrates into pixels. These pixels speak to a new sensibility in image making. Beyond the continuous tone photograph, today we make digital images out of color patches. The texts used in the book also speak about a contemporary phenomena. The members of virtual communities have transformed the English language by using acronyms that are incomprehensible to the outsider and yet it is because of these acronyms that even non-English speakers can fluently converse.

This book is a documentary. It's a documentation of what's happened to me, as I navigated through this virtual space eventually finding erotic encounters. The book has the actual dialogues and pictures that are artifacts of the moments I spent there. However, the material has been electronically edited and graphically redesigned to communicate the language of my story.