John Menick

Three Questions for Shelly Silver

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© Shelly Silver. *in complete world,* 2008. Video still. Courtesy Shelly Silver

John Menick: Rather than begin with photo or video, I wanted to bring up the third medium _What I'm Looking For_ deals with: the Internet. More specifically, the video uses social networking sites in order to produce its narrative. Could you describe how online personal ads came to occupy such a crucial place in the work?

Shelly Silver: I'm reminded of a quote from Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, "I'm really only here to meet people." How do we, in contemporary life, brush up against, have 'access' to, or just plain meet people, especially those outside the circumference of our daily lives? The Internet sets up, within limits, a structure to make connections with people that would be impossible, or at least highly unlikely in three-dimensional space.

I first came across Internet dating sites while doing research for a script for _SUICIDE_, a feature-length fiction about a crazed filmmaker who projects her desires onto everything and anything around her. I was fascinated by the level of openness and easy intimacy in interactions on the Web, as well as the generosity with personal detail and the specificity of articulated desires. After finishing *SUICIDE* in the spring of 2003, I started a residency with the LMCC with a project to photograph moments of intimacy in public spaces in lower Manhattan. I went about this in two different ways, the first being traditional street photography. With the second I wanted to find a way to reverse the direction of desire and projection, which typically moves from the photographer to his/her subject.

To do this, I became a 'parasite' on an established Internet dating site. My byline read, "I'm looking for people who want to be photographed in public space revealing something of themselves...."

I chose a dating site for several reasons. The site already dealt in the circulation of desire and projection; it already utilized photography — each person 'advertising' themselves with a photo or photos, and it was set up to facilitate the movement from virtual to actual space. In many ways the site's basic premise was the same as mine, even if the final aim was different.

My rules were to only contact people who contacted me first, and to meet and photograph anyone, unless I thought they were dangerous. I tried to have the film's protagonist mirror this non-judgmental, non-eliminatory process with her seemingly straightforward narration. With her cool, rhythmic voice, I think of her character as a sensual 'straight man' with a slightly passive-aggressive bent.

Much of my work functions as a motor for contact between people who are randomly or loosely selected. My initial work is to set up a structure where meetings can take place, as well as fixing a question or subject around which to make contact and exchange.

I think of your project as a reworking of the methodologies used for feature film productions, but unlike scripted narratives, the respondents are given an opportunity to star in a role they devise. They write their own parts, choose their own settings, even frame their own shots. Meanwhile, an invisible, paradoxically passive director anthologizes them into a kind of loose, episodic narrative. What are your thoughts on the roles people chose to play for the camera? Is there anything you could add that was not included in the voice-over? Were there any participants that didn't make the cut? And yourself? What would you have done, if asked?

I wish I'd been able to be as passive as I wanted to be. There was a lot of back and forth, a lot of coaxing necessary. People traditionally expect the director or photographer to 'tell' them what to do. In some cases language wasn't used — as in the refusal of 'the man with the beautiful neck' to tell me how he wanted to be photographed. I was thus left to photograph the part of his body that he had left exposed, his fragile neck on that frigid day. A language-heavy interaction was necessary for the 'man from London' (let's call him Frank) who was the only participant who photographed himself. Each photo session was prefaced by a nightly IM discussion:

"What should I do for you tonight?"
"What do you want to do?"
"What do you want to see?"
"What do you want me to see?"

In the end, he'd speak enough clues (the pleasures of shaving, an unusually warm winter evening, a newly purchased shiny blue dildo....) to allow me to 'direct' him without truly directing him.

Everyone I photographed was included, but not all of their photographs were included. Many stories were left out. These details may or may not have included the story of the former drug addict-turned-hacker-turned-IT security expert, the self-exposing high powered public official, and the married ex-minister whose professed desire was to photograph naked or semi-dressed women. There were over a hundred people who initially contacted me who dropped out of the project. One reason given was unhappiness at my statement:

"No other relationship will take place outside of being photographed."

Another common reason:

"I've been arrested too many times for exposing myself in public."

I broke contact with anyone whom I thought was crazy. Few women contacted me. All who did dropped out or stood me up.

What would I have done, if asked to reveal myself? I was, and did. I photographed myself for Frank, my 'man from London.' It was at his request and done as a good-will gesture. The photographs I sent were based on his perceived desire rather than how I would have otherwise wanted to portray myself (confession), I will not say how or what I photographed (no confession).

There were numerous exhaustions and pleasures involved in the doing/making of the piece. A few stand out for me now as being most notable.

• The feeling that all of downtown Manhattan, a place where I've lived and circulated for many decades, was offering itself up to me in a new, unknown way, becoming an intimate, a lover, whereas previously it had just been a casual, if regular friend.

• The surprise and the rush when going from a virtual to actual relationship; the click when projection is complicated by actuality.

• The generosity on the part of both the photographed and the photographer, both of us making completely non-parallel offerings.

There is a magic in brushing up against someone you wouldn't normally, akin to the magic of travel. With this piece I got to stay home.

You recently were kind enough to show me a rough cut of your latest video, _in complete world_, a work that is comprised of interviews with strangers on the street. The interviews are mostly about our contemporary political moment. These two works — _What I'm Looking For_ and your latest — seem to be created out the same landscape and moment, but facing in different directions. Can you talk a little bit about you latest project and how, if at all, it relates to _What I'm Looking For_?

First, as a kind of talisman, I'd like to bring in a few words from my last answer: _magic_, _brushing up against_, _home_. I could also throw in the words _desire_, _democracy_, _revelation_, _disclosure_.

Why did I randomly go up to/accost several hundred complete strangers on the streets of New York in the hope of having them answer 25 or so personal, political and existential questions?

I started shooting _in complete world_ in 2007, because I was angry and disillusioned with the US, and more importantly, NYC, where I was born and have put in a good deal of quality time. This city, 'my' city, was (is) increasingly white, rich and homogenized, and I was feeling alienated and pushed out economically and culturally. In the interest of full disclosure I'll add that I was also frustrated with my own inactivity and powerlessness in the face of the disastrous direction this country has moved in for the last eight-plus years. Rather than leave New York and the US, or, perhaps, in preparation to do so, I decided to take my camera and find out who these people were that I was sharing a city with, by asking them the very same questions I was asking myself.

I can see how you'd think that _What I'm Looking For_ points toward the 'personal' and _in compete world_ toward the 'public.' I'd say that both projects, taking advantage of the random and not-so-random connections possible in public space, build bridges between these coexisting realms. _What I'm Looking For_ achieves this through the exchange of images, _in compete world_ through the exchange of words. Both works search out that intersection between I and we — that acknowledgement, sometimes begrudging, sometimes joyful or even disgusting, that all of us are a part of it. How do we say "we"?

My largest influences making _in complete world_ were not the ubiquitous street interviews of television news, nor was I, despite my obvious interest in the Internet, channeling YouTube. My predecessors here were filmmakers such as Pasolini, Marker and Rouch, who, in the 60's, thanks to changes in portable film-and-sound technology, were able to record street interviews for the first time. These innovators brought a freshness and sense of adventure to their forays outdoors, as well as a desire to delve deeply into the tumultuous post-war changes happening in their countries. I still find both excitement and usefulness in this model. Where I'd begin to distance myself is in terms of the position they create for themselves in relationship to their subjects.

What does it mean to be a viewer watching Pasolini's _Comizi d'Amore_ (1965), where interviewees are scrutinized, at times ridiculed, by Pasolini—and at intervals discussed with disdain by a panel of experts, including the writer Alberto Moravia and the psychoanalyst Cesare Musatti? I'd venture that, as a result, the typical viewer identifies more with the filmmaker than with his subjects. In Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch's masterpiece, _Chronicle of a Summer_ (1961), the filmmakers leave a more active central place for their subjects, even allowing their criticisms of the film to have (almost) the last word. But, in the end, the filmmakers—who read as father figures—are the guiding presences. I've made an ambivalent truce with father figures, and experts certainly have their place; I write this not to criticize these films or filmmakers, but to separate my film from theirs in two crucial interconnected ways, one having to do with structure, the other having to do with voice.

in complete world has no overarching commentary, direct authorial presence, narrative or argument. Its structure is cumulative. One answer builds on the next, one question builds to the next, giving the effect of a growing jigsaw, where issues are complicated. I, as editor, shape and counterpoint these myriad answers, and it is rhythm, pacing and the pleasure in the slow reveal of characters that eliminates the need for a more traditional structure such as plot or story. It is the viewer who comes to occupy the position of commentator, gradually making sense of the film while watching it. I think this form also encourages the viewer to enter vicariously into the position of interviewee, asking himself or herself what a personal answer would be for each question posed.

At the center of the film, in a direct, but also in a theoretical sense, is the issue of voice. Before starting, I was scared that street interviews would no longer function, because public space functions less and less in a socially collective way. I worried that my specific questions, which engage people as individuals and as citizens of a larger whole, would not reverberate, that they would be met with apathy, cynicism or indifference. Instead, what I found were articulate people, who were thinking precisely about these issues; and who wanted and needed to speak and be listened to.

And so my job as filmmaker was to build a platform from which this chorus of voices could be heard. I use this word 'chorus' specifically, because there is something so musical in the interaction of these voices. I'm also thinking of Greek chorus—an invention of democratic Athens—the collective unit whose dramatic task is to comment on the actions of the political protagonists. Looking back over the last decade, I feel that this voice—our voice, the individual and collective voice of people living in this city and country—has been lost, and must, at all costs, be regained. In light of the very recent election, I see that what I was capturing was the first wave of what I hope turns out to be a new era in the United States of a more realized participatory democracy.

I worked for years as an editor on documentaries, many of which would be considered political, and one of my frustrations was that these films would only reach a 'self-selected' audience that already believed in and was knowledgeable about the subject matter or cause. During a lively Q&A at a recent screening a university student asked me why I didn't speak to any experts. I replied, "Who would the experts be, if not these people themselves?" We all struggle to balance our personal lives with our more public ones, we all feel the weight of individual and collective responsibility, and it is here that I think that this question of 'preaching to the choir' gets interesting/complicated. In this case, all Americans are part of 'the choir,' regardless of their political leanings. _in complete world_ does not supply answers; I don't think there are right and wrong answers to how to individually navigate a society. What it does point to is the pleasure in and necessity for all of us to acknowledge how truly interconnected we are; to recognize the necessity for individual and collective dialogue, response, and action, whether this manifests itself in public debate, demonstrations, organizing, the simple act of voting. I think of the final comment by the man who identifies himself as Felix: "I appreciate you coming to interview me and exchanging ideas and showing that democracy could exist between the people themselves."

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