

Introduction

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The computer as confessional, storytelling machine.

This issue of PUBLIC explores the nature of the “personal,” broadly defined, as a contemporary cultural form in relation to technologically mediated practices. We see this issue as a response to the multiple and varied new storytelling practices that have emerged through the use of new digital media by both avant-garde artists and ordinary people. Here, the personal takes many forms—memory, memoir, story, auto/biography, memento, character identification and confession, blog, even the arguably de-personalized practices of story aggregation and database.

The digital mediation of contemporary practices has been accompanied by the emergence of increasingly confessional texts and objects, often autobiographical. Likewise, many new media experiences, such as hypertext and digital games, are formally defined by the centrality of a “first-person” point of view.¹ And this proliferation of “personal” expression and autobiographical practices in the context of widespread technologization, apparent to both new media theorists and everyday users—witness the overwhelming numbers and variety of personal websites, hypertexts, weblogs, and other internet-based memoirs—is perhaps not so surprising. The turn to confession may be a necessary strategy in order to bridge the divide between media and materiality. Katherine Hayles² identifies the impulse to assert the details of a material, subjective, and lived life as an antidote to media that constitute a largely ephemeral, visual digital culture. What Hayles describes can be seen in populist, community-based media practices like digital storytelling, which aims to “re-storify” a culture dominated by consumer media. Some of the pieces you’ll find here—by Camille Turner, Jennifer LaFontaine and the women of The Story Project in downtown Toronto—have been inspired by the digital storytelling movement pioneered by Joe Lambert and the Center for Digital Storytelling in California. They share its aesthetics and politic, but represent, too, a new chapter in a long, rich history of do-it-yourself storytelling with any new tools that become widely and cheaply available—think Super 8—as well as being suggestive of new distribution strategies now possible for these kinds of works that were unthinkable even five years ago—think YouTube and Revver.

Other pieces presented in this issue also concretize this autobiographical turn outward into digital spaces, a small part of a huge movement of people learning to tell intimate, private stories and sharing them with the world online—Rebecca Rouse’s reimagining and digital circulation of a life told through thrift store ephemera; the early email message written by Michael Current about the/his body in relation to email text that is circulated online every year to mark his untimely passing; Caitlin Fisher’s meditation on the poetics of writing an early, classic confessional hypertext and her new interactive Korsakow film, *360°*, at once confessional story and database.

At the same time, technology is allowing for the increasing proliferation of stories that are decidedly de-personal, even anti-personal—viral archives, algorithmic narrative generators, the practice of plundering of the flickrverse in order

to make larger social stories and images. Teng & Shen's "Your Memory, Connected" weaves together personal photos, tagged folksonomically to produce a composite image. Jason Salavon's "Class of ..." photo series layers individual photos in Photoshop to produce a palimpsest representing two generations of graduating high school seniors—his mother's cohort and his own—in a single social portrait. This kind of work is as much about the collective story, the aggregate, as the individual. But so, too, might be the work of the blogger, confessional or otherwise: Ben Hoh's essay speaks to the immediacy and power of blogging the personal in the context of a wider, social, trauma. Both the depersonalization of exceedingly personal artifacts and the personal narrativization of global crisis succeed in bringing a highly subjective, idiosyncratic life to us through the machine, at the same time pointing toward a renewed tension between private and public in the context of digital technologies.

This tension is heightened in the aggressive compliance art of Hasan Elahi, whose story is told through an ever-expanding online archive that details, via GPS, his every movement through space. Elahi exploits the co-constitutive nature of database and narrative in this emerging area of contemporary practice—think bio-blogs and Lifelogs—and points toward a technological time in which auto-biography itself, that fallible, self-reflective practice, is challenged by the possibility, mostly now realized, of a digitized archive of our lives consisting of absolutely everything recordable, a black box available (to anyone?) with 24/7 playback, a pinnacle of both surveillance and the confessional.

In the end, we selected work that both theorizes and performs varied practices of the personal as they emerge through digital technologies. We chose pieces that ask us to both step back from and step into these stories and digital intimacies. Chloë Brushwood-Rose writes about biographic meta-theory—the stories people tell about their relationships with their machines, and Joyce Goggin writes on biographic meta-fiction—the life story of an online game character. We chose pieces suggestive of stories at the interior—a magical storytelling dress by Xiao Li Tan that allows the wearer to inhabit the storyspace and which shares small, autobiographical video tales of the creator's childhood memories of China, and MASTABA, a digital family shrine, an inhabitable and singularly beautiful physical space as well as a provocative digital archiving machine that serves as a catalyst for oral-history-telling among a family's multiple generations. In another movement outward, Helen Papagiannis' augmented reality handhelds make the viewer feel like she is cupping a world in her palm, charged with the responsibility of cradling another person's memory, making the ephemeral tangible.

Like much of the work shown here, Sascha Pohflepp's "Buttons: A Blind Camera" urges us to ask where personal memories really reside. In a technological context that enables the rapid and mostly accurate transmission of visual data, "Buttons" poetically links us to another person, another beating heart, even as we press the button on a camera to preserve our own intimate moment. Where do we

end and where does the other begin? What counts as personal, as a story? Digital technologies challenge us to think about these questions in new ways.

Finally, we hope you are left wondering, as we are, about what's on your own hard drive. Photos of first steps and ancestors, half-finished novels, amateur web-cam striptease, poems, travelogues. The life you want but do not have. The life you have and never knew you wanted. Your Sims characters. Second Life. Interactive cinema. A database story of everything you've ever bought at the grocery store. Hypertexted love letters to pass to your children—better yet, wiki love letters that can be added to by successive generations. With a push of a button you could be sharing with a million people. You probably already are. But why? More shoring up against the ruins. Aggressive compliance in a surveillance culture. Anti-commercial antidote. Loneliness. Beauty. Because we're terrified and won't be silenced. Because we love stories. Because we are sick of stories and want to leave so many digital traces so as to become unintelligible. Hide in plain sight. All about us. Because it's not about us anymore—as we aggregate, concretize, build viral, collective myths. Just the irresistible pull of audience. Watching. Or maybe just writing themselves. Poetry, noise. Stop, listen. Read these pieces and watch the DVD. Go naked—hit that publish button.

NOTES

- 1 Wardrip-Fruin, N. & P. Harrigan, *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004.
- 2 Hayles, K., *Writing Machines*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002.