

GORDON BRENT INGRAM

The importance of public sex in an age of digital appliances

Not so long ago, sex was a way to make friends and even to find détente with enemies, to take a furtive communion in the midst of hostility, and to get the lay of the land naked in some obscure location that could barely be argued to be “in public.”

Once upon a time, there was a neo-tribal kind of linear progression: a simple arc starting with desire, then investigation, the creation of a map, eventual contact, sex (singular or countless), pleasure, a bit of satisfaction, inevitable exhaustion, and then dispersal. A few marriages resulted but they were incidental. And for a few moments, the city, the town, and even the forest were transformed, especially for sexual minorities, from battlefields to playgrounds.

But this formula was always a bit naïve like those early 20th-century books written by anthropologists

who went into remote villages, had sex with a few eager young people, and then went on to attain academic stardom on the strength of their self-delusions. Throbbing phalluses were never quite the antennae reconnecting planetary forces (though I swear it felt that way). And rather than temples to nature, the “open” spaces in which we found refuge were more often trashed and neglected rather than ecosystems comparably rich as our desires and capabilities.

In these modern times of social media, public sex is just as important as it was before Craigslist and Facebook. In many parts of the world, aside from those urban parks of yesteryear that too often today have video surveillance, there is more, not less public sex. After many legal battles, with many losses and some victories, much more of the world’s cities harbor some zones where public sex can be had with minimal risk of violence and arrest. However, social media is inverting and diffusing the flows in these new forms of neural nets such that actual sex

is more often the foreplay and the money shot is that nanosecond of initial digital contact and fantasy.

Today our lives are littered with cheap, electronic appliances that do not make up for bisphenol A (BPA), declining sperm counts, lack of exercise, overwork and stress, and cancers. Public space and public sex are being regulated through poorly functioning appliances. The gorilla glass will eventually shatter. The viruses cause grief and the batteries will eventually poison drinking water. Does it feel any better to maneuver through a toxic waste dump rather than an “enchanted” forest? Not really. But occasionally we still have fun, make friends, learn something new, and push a little harder on the cages that so constrain who we are, what we can be, and who and how we enjoy and sometimes love.

JILL H. CASID

Excerpt from an email exchange with Joshua Lubin-Levy (August 4, 2011):

...Please forgive the delay in responding to your gracious and quite fascinating email. It must be deeply nerve-racking to be working so close to your deadline. The project is very exciting and I very much hope to see the book. I have a series of Polaroids I’ve been doing for years called “Kissing in Public,” which is an homage to the queer history of the SX-70 Polaroid camera that, in its condensation of the taking and making of the photograph and thus its ability to bypass the eyes of the local photo developer, became, from its release in the 1970s, a vital accessory to intimate encounters. And, thus, I’ve been thinking in various ways about how public sex matters in the sense of value but also in the sense of the material conditions and conduits of that mattering. But I understand you’re soliciting written reflections and

reactions and I’m overburdened at the moment with a small mountain of writing deadlines...

...It feels not just spare but also bare to have something so breathlessly brief and unedited appear in print, but perhaps that’s in the spirit of public sex and the messy quickness that is both pulsing and almost skinless in its exposure...

...If there were time for some more back and forth, I’d want to respond to your mention of the legal conditions regulating display of bodies and faces and discuss the fact, for example, that photographers usually need a “model release” even if those represented aren’t recognizable. I’d want to talk, too, about the material differences between original drawings and photographic multiples but also the ways that the small Polaroids (hand-sized, tucked into pockets and drawers) defy some of those differences in the material facts of their being singular (reproducible only if digitally scanned) and also somewhat writerly—notorious actually for the volatility of their

emulsion and the curious way one can push the emulsion around before the picture develops and hardens, creating strange trails of viscous fluid in and across the image that come closer to effects like those of Andy Warhol’s piss paintings than anything one usually attributes to photography. That last point leads to the precarious and volatile remains of public sex, to what defies preservation even when photographed, when made to matter and made material...

...So then, I guess, yes, go ahead and use what you think helps make the points you want to press. Warmly—Jill