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Constructing and Consuming 'Displays'
in Online Environments

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'Display'

In this chapter I explore how people construct and consume multimodal displays of their selves in online social networking environments. Specifically, I will be considering how the different 'equipment' available for producing and consuming displays affects the kinds of *relationships* that are possible between users of these sites and the kinds of *social actions* that these displays allow them to take.

I define 'display' as the act of making oneself (usually in the form of one's body) available to the perception of others. As Ruesch and Bateson (1951) argue, all communication begins with mutual perception, the process of making a display of ourselves available to the perception of others and perceiving the displays others make available to us. The way communication progresses and what kinds of outcomes it has depends crucially on how these displays are managed and negotiated.

Display, however, involves more than just communicating one's presence. It also involves communicating something about who we are, what we are doing, and our relationship to those for whom the display is produced. In other words, part of producing a display is not just presenting the self for inspection but also making particular claims about the self. Goffman (1979) defines 'display' as a

kind of 'social portraiture' with which we present iconic expressions of what we take to be appropriate social identities and appropriate alignments towards the situations in which we find ourselves, thus producing and reproducing certain kinds of social identities and interaction orders. 'Displays,' he says, 'offer evidence of the actor's alignment in a gathering, the position he seems prepared to take up in what is about to happen in the social situation' (p. 1).

Finally, insofar as displays involve the communication and negotiation of social identities and social relationships, all displays are necessarily *strategic*. In other words, they always involve social actors in decisions not just about whether or not to make the self available for display, but also when, where, and how much of it to make available. Interaction always involves an 'information game' (Goffman 1970) in which actors negotiate which aspects of their display to make available to various audiences. In other words, displays are always, in some way, *partial*, involving concealing as much as revealing.

Many 'displays' take place in the context of a form of interaction which Scollon (1998) calls 'a watch', which he defines as 'any person or group of people who are perceived to have attention to some spectacle as the central focus of their (social) activity. The spectacle together with its watchers constitutes the watch' (283). Examples of 'watches' include photo taking as well as various kinds of 'platform events' such as public speeches, dramatic performances, and strip shows (Goffman 1983, S. Scollon 2003). In a 'watch', the roles of the participants are relatively fixed, with one person or group acting as the audience directing their attention towards another group or person who take/s the role of the spectacle. What characterizes this kind of display, therefore, is that it is *asymmetrical*, that is, one side, the audience, is able to claim certain rights of

observation such as the right to direct a sustained gaze towards and to comment upon the display by, for instance, applauding or booing, that the spectacle cannot claim, and the spectacle is also able to claim certain rights to, for example, determine how much of the display is made available, when, and to whom, which the audience may not have control over.

The 'watch', however, is not the only form of social interaction involving display. Display is also an important part of the interaction unit that Goffman (1963) calls 'a with' – a group of people perceived to be together. In this kind of interaction unit, however, the roles of audience and spectacle are not fixed, but rather traded back and forth between parties, both of whom are involved in displaying the self to the other and watching the displays the other is making available. This kind of display is characterized by a greater degree of *symmetry*, with both parties either claiming equal rights to observation and display, or at least being in more of a position to negotiate those rights. In fact, many of the interactional rituals associated with being a 'with' are designed to maintain and enforce the symmetry and reciprocity of the mutual display. For example, when one businessperson offers his or her business card to another, the other is expected to respond in kind in order to maintain the tacit 'code of reciprocity' (Jones 2005) that governs most 'withs'.

In one sense, however, the 'watch' and the 'with' are abstractions, two extremes that rarely occur in their pure forms. Nearly all interactions contain elements of the 'with' and elements of the 'watch', and much of what social actors do when they interact involves negotiating the degree of symmetry or asymmetry in the displays which they make available to each other.

As Scollon (1998) points out, for example, friends taking pictures together often alternate in positioning themselves as 'withs' or 'watches', and even in the context of the polarization of the 'watch', spectacles often violate its asymmetry by commenting upon the photographer, where s/he is standing, how s/he is holding the camera and so forth. Even in platform events, performers might, violate the asymmetry of the 'watch' by gazing at and directing comments towards one or more members of the audience, as stand up comedians do when they single out a member of the audience for ridicule, effectively transforming that person from audience to spectacle.

In other words, all interaction involves negotiating the degree to which the interaction can be considered a 'with' and the degree to which it can be considered a 'watch'. This negotiation takes place in what I have called 'sites of display' (Jones 2009a), different sites of display facilitating different configurations of symmetry and asymmetry based on the kinds of 'equipment' they make available to actors to gain access to the displays of others or to control the access others have to their displays.

The focus of this chapter is less on the semiotics of display—what displays 'mean'—and more on how people 'do' displays and what they do with them using the 'equipment' different sites make available to them. It explores how this equipment affects participants' abilities to negotiate their roles as spectacles and audiences and the status of the interaction itself as either a 'with' or a 'watch'.

I explore these questions through the analysis of the 'display equipment' available on a number of Internet websites for gay men seeking sexual partners, sites like Gaydar (gaydar.co.uk), Fridae (www.fridae.com) and Fuckrace

(www.fuckrace.com). I have chosen to focus on such sties first because they provide a way to explore how so called new media is affecting how people produce and consume displays. When the Internet was really a 'new medium', there were those who predicted that it would in some way 'free' us from our physical bodies and the 'pitfalls' (e.g. racism, sexism) that accompany display in face-to-face interaction (Haraway 1991, Turkel 1995). As the medium has matured, however, and especially with the development of Web 2.0 technology and personal webcams, these predictions have proven dead wrong. Not only have we not been freed from our bodies, but the display of bodily images has become one of the most central components of on-line interaction. Thus it has become more and more important to understand how these bodily displays are produced, consumed, negotiated and policed.

The second reason I have chosen to explore the notion of display through an examination of these sites is because the interactions that take place on them so clearly illustrate the negotiation of spectacle and audience roles that participants in all social interaction engage in and the ways 'display equipment' helps to determine the terms of these negotiations. In fact, one might argue that the whole point of these websites is to facilitate the transformation of what starts out as a 'watch' (the viewing of a member's picture and profile) into a 'with' (online contact, the further exchange of information and eventual physical contact).

Finally, the displays on these websites also provide an opportunity to explore how people strategically deploy different semiotic modes in constructing displays. Nearly all bodily displays are multimodal. Face-to-face displays, for example usually involve various embodied modes such as gesture, gaze, posture,

and spoken language, as well as disembodied modes like spatial layouts and built environments of various kinds. On-line interaction also involves multiple modes, including pictures or videos that depict the body as well as different kinds of texts, and the ways these modes work together and they way they are deployed at different times and for different people are key elements in the strategic nature of displays.

'Display' and 'Bodies without Organs'

Perhaps the most important tool that people use to produce displays is the medium through which the display is performed—the material manifestation of the display. Some bodily displays are transmitted through the flesh and blood body in real time. Such displays, of course, require that both the spectacle and the audience be co-present, that they occupy the same physical space at the same time. We can call these *embodied* displays. Other displays involve not the display of the actual body, but rather some kind of representation of the body, a 'virtual' body.

Elsewhere (Jones 2009b) I have, borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), referred to these virtual bodies as 'bodies without organs', which I define as any representation of the self which we deploy as a tool to take social actions. These include such tools as passports and ID cards, mug shots, portraits, medical records, and avatars, any representation of ourselves which we make use of for the purposes of 'display'. Deleuze and Guattari's use of the term is, in many ways, different from mine, including the notion of the 'body without organs' as a field of potentials, torn from the limitations of space and time, exemplified for them by the bodies of masochists, drug addicts and schizophrenics. At the same time, there are some similarities between our definitions, my simpler formulation of

'bodies without organs' as any representation separated from the actual body that can be used to take social action retaining in a very practical way the sense of transcendence of space and time as well as the multiplication of possibilities suggested by Deleuze and Guattari (Jones 2009b). Bodies without organs make possible all sorts of displays and all sorts of social interactions that are not possible with the flesh and blood body.

'Bodies without organs' are the result of the process of 'virtualization' (Levy 1998) through which the body is separated from itself and turned into a text. There are a number of ways this can be done– the body can be drawn, painted, photographed or described in words. The chief effect of virtualization is that it allows the practice of display to go beyond the limitations of space and time: no longer do the spectacle and audience need to be co-present. This *deterritorialzation* and *desynchronization* of display, of course, has a profound effect on how spectacles and audiences can use displays for social action. At the same time, however, it does not make the original 'space-bound' and 'time-bound' body irrelevant. In fact, in order to serve the purpose for which it was designed, many 'bodies without organs' (such as passport photos) depend crucially on their referential relationship to the temporally and spatially situated human body that deploys them.

Over the years, as our technologies have advanced, virtual displays have become more and more 'accurate' representations of our actual bodies. The most important development, of course, came with the invention of photography, which allowed for representations of the body that were so lifelike that they began to be regularly used to verify the 'identity' of the actual body. Perhaps an equally important development, however, came about when photographic

equipment became widely and cheaply available so that people could produce their own virtual displays. Finally, the rise of computers and the internet further increased individuals' potential to create and control their own bodily displays, to reproduce them, alter them, to combine them with other modes, to make them more immediate and interactive, and to disseminate them at an unprecedented speed to an unprecedented number of people.

At the same time, digital photography, and the attendant technologies of cheap and easily mastered computer editing, have changed the way we regard photographs in terms of their truth value (Mitchell 1992). The paradox of digital displays is that they are simultaneously potentially more accurate and potentially less reliable, and this has had an important effect on the practice of display and the kinds of interactions that develop around it, with audiences often seeking opportunities to cross reference photographic displays with other evidence in order to test their veracity.

This necessity to 'cross reference' displays, however, is not unique to the digital age. In fact, it is a central aspect of many social practices which involve virtual bodies. One common characteristic of 'bodies without organs' is that they (like the physical body they represent) are often multimodal, that is, the body is represented not in a single mode, but rather in a combination of modes. A good example of this is passports which represent their holders not simply through a photograph, but through a 'semiotic aggregate' (Scollon and Scollon 2003) which includes written text conveying information like the holder's name and date of birth, as well as, increasingly, an embedded silicon chip containing still more information in digital form. When using this display to verify the holder's identity, immigration officers can cross reference these various modes with one

another, as well as with the physical body as they glance up at the face and then back down at the passport.

Staging Equipment

All displays, whether physical or virtual, depend on the availability of *staging equipment* with which spectacles can mount their displays, and *viewing equipment* through which audiences can gain access to them.

Staging equipment generally consists of a series of channels for and barriers to perception which allow the spectacle to control when and how much and by whom the display is visible. The most basic function of staging equipment is to divide an environment into what Goffman (1959) calls 'regions', which he defines as any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception. All displays take place in the context of regions, which both conceal the display from unwanted audiences and reveal the display in some desirable way for wanted audiences. Different sites of display make available different kinds of staging equipment, and different kinds of staging equipment alter the ways in which displays are deployed. A full circle, arena style stage, for example, makes very different kinds of demands on actors in terms of how they use their bodies than the traditional proscenium arch stage.

Staging equipment has three functions. It allows the spectacle to *frame* the display, to control who has *access* to it, when, and how much they have access to, and it provides the means to attract the *attention* of potential watchers and to direct that attention in specific ways.

Framing is what creates the context for the display. On the most fundamental level it delineates the display like the frame around a picture, settings it off from what is not part of the display. But framing, as Goffman

(1974) has pointed out, also makes an important contribution to the meaning of the display, communicating what the spectacle is doing with the display and what he expects the watcher to do with it. Framing provides the ground within which the display is placed. Of course digital media have increased our ability to quickly and easily reframe our displays in strategic ways.

In the context of the gay 'dating' websites I am concerned with, the websites themselves provide the primary framework for the display, communicating on a very basic level what the purpose of the display is. Figure 1 shows an example of such a display from the website *Fridae*. The website, like most sites of this kind, allow users to embed displays of their bodies within the context of other displays such as a textual display of the same body that appears next to it, the display of the user's online status that appears above it, and the display of their attitude towards safe sex and whether or not they are paying members of the site (an important piece of information regarding the kinds of staging equipment and viewing equipment users have access to) which appears next to yet another textual display, the user's screen name, which in many cases also provides information about the user's physical appearance such as race, age, and body type.

(Insert Figure 1 here)

One unique and important feature of such sites is that they allow users to frame their displays in the context of the displays of other users. Underneath the profile picture on this particular website, for example, appear the pictures of other users who have accepted 'friend requests' from the owner of this display. This feature is important because it helps to define the spectacle not purely as a

spectacle but also as a potential audience, a matter on which I will further elaborate below.

As much as these tools provide opportunities for users to frame their displays in particular ways, they also limit the possibilities of framing by setting up the relevant categories through which this framing can be accomplished, categories which, taken together, form what Blommaert (2006), calls 'orders of indexicality'. Users, for example, are forced to fit their textual displays into a predetermined framework which reflects the kinds of features which are seen as relevant or valuable within this community and within the activity for which the website is designed. Users, for example are asked to give information about things like ethnicity and the size of their genitals rather than, for example, information about their educational qualifications.

This raises a very important point about displays and the social contexts in which they take place: the most basic framework which constrains the way displays are performed and interpreted is formed by a particular society or community's fundamental expectations about the body and what it means. As Douglas (1970:65) points out, 'The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived … (and the) physical experience of the body, always modified through the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society.' Thus, displays are never just displays of particular bodies to particular audiences, but always to some degree reflections of the values and expectations about the kinds of bodies that ought to be displayed in particular situations to particular audiences in a particular society.

Perhaps the most important function of framing is that it allows users to modulate how much of the display they would like to give away at any particular

moment in the interaction. Goffman (1959) compares social interaction to a theatrical performance and suggests that, as performers we both knowingly 'give' and unwittingly 'give off' information about ourselves. The staging equipment made available on Internet websites such as these gives users much more control over what is 'given off' than in many other kinds of interaction. One way this control is exercised is through exploiting the frame of the photograph itself, which spectacles can use to limit which part of the body they wish to make available to the audience. Interestingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, a large number of these profile pages contain *incomplete* bodily displays, decapitated bodies, for example, which serve the dual function of calling attention to certain physical attributes and obscuring others, in this case the face, the emblem of identity. Thus, users are able to give away enough information about the body to communicate its desirability without giving off information that might make them identifiable. Such framings also serve to frame the activity as a particular sort of activity, one in which certain aspects of the display are seen as more relevant than others.

Such images often focus on particular body parts which are seen as important to whatever interaction might ensue in the event that the 'watch' becomes a 'with' (those identifying themselves as 'bottoms', for example, often choosing the display their buttocks). What is interesting about these sites of display when compared to face-to-face sites of display of a similar nature such as gay bars, is that users display parts of their bodies which, in face to face interaction are typically reserved for much later stages of the interaction right at the outset, whereas the part of the body which is typically the first to be

displayed in face-to-face encounters, the face, is in these contexts usually left for much later in the interaction.

This does not mean that users are not willing to display their faces. They are just not willing to show their faces to everybody, and this is where the concept of *access* comes in. Nearly all websites like this provide tools with which users can control access to different parts of the display.

In the case of the site pictured in figure 1, the main access tool is what is called the 'photo vault'. Watchers who wish to gain access to a more complete display can click the key icon underneath the display picture to request access to an area on the site where they will inevitably find more revealing displays of a given spectacle.

Such tools facilitate what Goffman (1959) calls 'audience segregation', the ability for a spectacle to make certain parts of the display available to some watchers but not to others. Such tools are very popular on all sorts of social networking websites. Facebook, for example, allows users to set permissions so that parts of their profile are only available to certain people or groups of people, allowing them, for example, to make some parts of their displays available to their friends, other parts available to their colleagues, and other parts available to their family members. The main difference between social networking sites like Facebook and the sites I am considering is that in more conventional social networking sites, access usually does not have to be negotiated with each user. Rather, people are granted certain access rights based on already established relationships (friends, relatives, colleagues). In other words, access rights are used to ratify relationship status rather than as tools for establishing new relationships.

In contrast, *access* in sites like those I am considering here is rarely granted for free. It is almost always negotiated. As in most theatrical displays, there is a kind of 'admission fee'. The price is usually the willingness of the watcher to also provide a similar level of display, by, for instance, making available the key to his own 'photo vault'. This difference in the social function of access is often reflected in the 'unmarked' or default settings of the software itself in these different environments (see Djonov and van Leeuwen this volume): the default settings for nearly all content (such as 'profile pictures', 'albums' and 'wall postings') in most conventional social networking sites like Facebook are those which allow maximum access to other users, whereas in online dating sites like the ones I am considering here, the default settings in many of the content areas are those which provide the maximum amount of privacy.

And so these access tools and the way they are altered over time for certain users serve the function of helping to set into motion the dynamics by which the watcher is transformed into a spectacle, the spectacle is transformed into a watcher, and what starts off as a 'watch' can eventually turn into a 'with'. Displays on these websites and in other online venues in which people look for sexual partners (see for example Jones 2005) tend to be *incremental*, and this incrementality facilitates a kind of code of reciprocity, which helps to transform asymmetrical interactions to symmetrical ones.

In some ways, these incremental bodily displays resemble striptease, performances in which the body is progressively revealed. This may not be a very apt comparison, however, since audiences at strip shows are usually not required to produce reciprocal displays for the performer (they produce their

payment in other ways, in the form of, for example, applause or ten dollar bills stuffed into the performer's garter), and so such displays are rarely transformed from a 'watch' into a 'with' (with the possible exception of host or hostess bars in which performers also provide other services). Perhaps a more accurate analogy might be strip poker in which all participants are both displayers and audience and the display progresses in the framework of a competitive game, the object of which is to gain access to certain parts of the other person's display before they gain access to that part of your display.

Finally, staging equipment provides spectacles with various ways of attracting the *attention* of potential audiences. On most of these sites the best way to attract attention is by being online, since most users check the profiles of online users first. In fact, many of the users I interviewed told me that they typically log onto the site in the morning and stay logged on all day and sometimes even after they have gone to sleep at night in the hopes of capturing the attention of more potential partners.

Another way these sites provide spectacles with tools for attracting attention is by giving them the opportunity to be 'featured' on the homepage of the site. There are a number of ways to get oneself featured. One way is to be one of the most recently logged on users, and so users sometimes exploit this feature by 'pinging' their presence, periodically logging off and then logging on again so they can appear in this list. Another way is to add something extra to one's display like a video. Perhaps the best way to attract attention, however, is by having successfully attracted attention in the past, and so earning a place in the list of 'most tracked profiles'.

In fact, one of the unique things about these sites of display is that the degree of attention the display attracts itself becomes part of the display. All of the profiles in Fuckrace, for example, feature a series of statistics indicating how many people have viewed the photos and videos spectacles make available and how many thought the display was 'hot', along with a graph showing the user's progress over time. Similarly, Fridae profiles contain information about how many people have viewed the profile as well as the number of 'hearts' that have been sent to the profile owner.

It has become fashionable of late in discussions of new media to point out that it has given rise to a new kind of economy, an economy in which the real currency is attention (Lanham 1994), and that is definitely true in the context of sites like these. There is however, a kind of 'promiscuity' involved in all of this trading of attention. One's 'friends' on Fridae, for example, are not really friends in any conventional sense, and only of very small number will actually pursue further contact. Rather, they are people that users have invited as 'friends' in order to recruit them into their displays to prove that certain kinds of people are interested in them. Similarly, sending someone a 'heart' is not necessarily an expression of interest. In fact, many people send 'hearts' to users in which they are not particularly interested simply in the hopes that – true to the code of reciprocity characteristic of such sites– the recipient will send a 'heart' in return, thus allowing them to display more 'hearts' on their profile, and when people receive 'hearts' they often make use of a function that allows them to send 'hearts' back to all of those who have sent them 'hearts' with little or no regard to who they are. Often then users get into relationships with other users in which they are trading attention on a daily basis with absolutely no intention at all of

taking the interaction further, simply in order to enhance their own displays. This practice is further evidence of the ambiguous distinction between spectacles and watchers in these contexts. Sending someone a 'heart', for example, might be interpreted by an outsider as the behavior of a watcher, whereas, from the users' point of view it might have more to do with being a spectacle and trying to make one's display more spectacular.

Viewing Equipment

Just as sites of display provide equipment to the spectacle for staging the display, they also provide equipment to the audience for viewing the display, interpreting it, gaining access to different parts of it, evaluating it, and communicating attention and appreciation to the spectacle. As Jewitt (this volume) points out, viewing or 'reading' a display, particularly in the age of digital media, is always an active process of reception and remaking.

Interpretive tools are particularly important in virtual displays in which the relationship between the displayed body and the actual body cannot always be taken for granted. One of the functions of the displays on these websites is not just that they provide a richness of information but also that they provide viewers with the opportunity to cross reference one part of the display with another to, for example, judge whether or not the body pictured really is 'lean and toned' as the spectacle has described it. Often messaging and chat functions are used to negotiate certain forms of verification. One example from my data came from a viewer who had secured access to pictures of the spectacle's nude body, and also a picture of his face, but still could not be sure if this body really belonged to that face, and so issued a request for a photo which included both the body and the face together.

These sites also provide various ways of searching for the kinds of displays one would like to see, and these search capabilities reproduce the same 'orders of indexicality' and community values that are evident in the choices people have in constructing their profiles (see above). In many ways search functions make possible a different kind of encounter which precedes the 'watch' or the 'with', the kind of encounter Goffman (1982) calls 'people processing encounters' in which potential participants are sorted based on a set of socially relevant traits, a process which itself reproduces the social order.

Viewing equipment also provides viewers a way to gain access to different parts of the display. Some of these I have already mentioned, such as requesting a key to someone's vault, or offering one's own display as payment for the display of the other. Often with sites like these (as with so many other kinds of performances), the admission fee does not go directly to the spectacle, but rather to the operators of the site in the form of payment for 'membership' which grants purchasers rights to view much more of the site's displays or to interact with them in more sophisticated ways.

Finally, sites like these, as I have discussed before, provide various ways for viewers to communicate their attention to particular spectacles by, for example, sending them a message, requesting the key to their photo vault, asking them to become a friend, or sending them a 'heart'. Of course sending a message is the most direct way of expressing attention, which also allows the sender to carefully modulate the kind of attention they want to express, but this is not always to most preferable choice because it is risky, possibly resulting in an explicit rejection of this attention by the spectacle. Thus, in sites like these, intermediate forms of expressing attention like sending 'hearts' are very

important because they provide to viewers a way of expressing attention without risking too much. The worst thing that can happen is you do not receive a 'heart' in return, but, because of the strength of the code of reciprocity, this actually rarely happens.

Constructing Multimodal Displays

In this chapter I have discussed how the different equipment made available in different circumstances can affect the ways people construct and consume displays of their bodies by describing the ways gay men manage displays on Internet web sites which combine multiple semiotic modes. Just like the passport which I described at the beginning of this chapter, profiles on social networking websites like these crucially depend not just on the interaction between text and image, but also the interaction among different texts and different images, in order to make possible the kinds of social practices associated with these displays.

This aggregation of semiotic artifacts (profile pictures, private pictures, screen names, textual descriptions, and sometimes videos) deployed in strategic, incremental ways using the various *staging equipment* and *viewing equipment* made available by these sites, allows users a high degree of control over the information they 'give' and the information they 'give' off, facilitating practices of attention seeking and seduction while mitigating the risks of rejection, identification and deception.

Although in many ways the social practices associated with these sites are unique, the *processes* that go into constructing, consuming and negotiating displays – processes of framing, controlling and negotiating access, attracting and imparting attention, and sorting and selecting – are processes that are part

of the construction and consumption of all displays, including face-to-face displays. Of course, the ways these processes are carried out differs dramatically in different circumstances, depending on the equipment available to social actors to carry them out. Attention to the ways different kinds of staging and viewing equipment made available in different circumstances using different technologies affects how people construct and consume displays can help us to understand the dynamic, strategic nature of display in all interactions as well as informing the work of those involved in designing all kinds of 'sites of display' from classrooms to museum exhibits (see Rowe, this volume) to interactive on-line environments.

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Figure 1