

Artist, author, and educator
Wendy Richmond '75
shares her views on the
transformation of personal
boundaries in public spaces,
the creative process, and the
importance of not knowing.

BY SUSAN HODARA

Is Wendy Richmond '75 making a call
or taking a picture on this street near
Columbus Circle in New York? Any of us
could be entering a photo frame unawares
in any public space.

THE WATCHERS

BILL BURKHART

One afternoon late last year, unbeknownst to museum guests, Wendy Richmond '75 stood in the darkened gallery at the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego that contained her recent exhibition, *Public Privacy: Wendy Richmond's Surreptitious Cellphone*. Ostensibly a fellow art viewer, she was in fact observing the visitors who were peering at her work.

Sixteen eight-inch digital video monitors glowed from the walls; on each, tiny silent movies juxtaposed in visual grids looped continuously. These 15-second videos, which Richmond had shot with her cellphone, captured unsuspecting subjects in public settings ranging from airports to cafés to the subways and streets of New York. You could watch these people sipping coffee or staring into space, or you could refocus on the ever-changing interplay of gesture, movement, and composition.

A couple stood before a monitor displaying gallery-goers like themselves. "This is terrible," the woman declared to her companion. "It's an invasion of privacy!"

Richmond, a petite woman with unruly dark hair, turned toward them. Then she looked at the ceiling above, where a museum surveillance camera was aimed in their direction, and grinned.

Richmond is an observer. She inspects the way we behave. She watches herself.

She is a thinker, intent on digesting all that she sees.

The output of that thinking—the work she does in her three-pronged career as author, educator, and artist—urges us to understand ourselves more deeply than we did before we looked.

Whether Richmond is addressing readers in her "Design Culture" column in *Communication Arts* magazine, which she has written since 1983; working with students in the classes she has taught at institutions including Harvard, Northeastern University, and the International Center for Photography; or creating artwork that ranges from photographs to etchings to, recently, cellphone videos, the results require us to reconsider what is most familiar: the way we live, the things we do every day, and the culture that surrounds us.

Richmond enrolled at Wesleyan to pursue art and dance, and before graduating, spent two years at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where she studied graphic design. "I gravitated to design because it was both problem-solving and aesthetic," Richmond recalls. "I ex-

perimented like mad. It was the first time people said, "What the hell is she doing?"

But it was not the last. From Wesleyan she returned to her hometown of Boston, where she established a reputation as a pioneer in the integration of interactive technology and graphic design. She studied with Muriel Cooper and Nicholas Negroponte at MIT's Media Lab, collaborating with programmers on early interactive books. In the 1980s she joined several cutting-edge startup companies developing computer-based graphics tools. In 1990, after the publication of her first book, *Design & Technology: Erasing the Boundaries*, she co-founded the Design Lab with Paul Souza at WGBH in Boston, pursuing new design principles for screen-based media.

But Richmond was becoming uneasy, concerned about the power the computer was wielding. "I saw us succumbing to these little gray boxes that could do everything we needed without our moving more than three inches in any direction," Richmond says. "How could I champion something that was limiting us so severely in our physicality—in both our bodies and our spaces? Our creativity was being sucked off the walls and into the box."

So in 1993, in a move that baffled her colleagues as it wrenched her from the platform of her success, Richmond took a sabbatical to study dance and soon was teaching and making art again. Technology, however, never stopped infiltrating her work. "I wanted to bring it to a better place," she says. She continued to write her *Communication Arts* column, then titled "Design Technology." At Harvard's Graduate School of Education, and a subsequent Rockefeller Foundation residency in Bellagio, Italy, she and her co-instructor, Cesar McDowell, developed courses in new media. The artwork she made involved collaborations with dancers as well as software programmers, in media stretching from 15th-century etching to 21st-century video.

This path, though seemingly unconventional, has been both rooted in and driven by method. Richmond is perpetually engaged in a layered progression of absorbing, assimilating, and producing. She calls it "The Creative Process Loop."

"It starts with observation," Richmond explains. We are seated next to the window in a Chelsea café, a place Richmond chose for its intimate ambiance and its first-rate cappuccino. She speaks thoughtfully, articulating every syllable in a voice that mixes gravel with girliness.



Richmond uses the cellphone to create art from the everyday scenes of urban life.

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“Next comes a period of reflection on what I’ve observed,” she continues. “After that is articulation—the making of something in a form that somebody else can understand. The process is a loop.”

This methodology was integral to Richmond’s immersion in the shifting world of public privacy. In 2004 she was completing a series of large-scale photographs, living and working bi-coastally in Boston, New York, and San Diego. Her earliest cellphone videos were spawned by a confluence of conditions.

First was the desire to extricate her work from what she describes as “the preciousness of the photograph. I was so sick of having to be careful, having to be perfect.” Then there was the hassle of carrying her camera, lenses, and tripod, taking them through airport security each time she traveled. Add to that the abundance of waiting time inherent in transit, and Richmond was soon viewing her surroundings via the tiny screen on her phone.

“Shooting with the cellphone is like looking through a periscope. It allowed me to do what I wanted to do: stare at people, to see them in their own personal bubbles,” Richmond says. “They were thinking the most private of thoughts in the most public of places.”

In her *Communication Arts* column she wrote about that state: “That inward gaze was a self-contained contradic-

tion: it was a way of being alone together. It was a kind of communal separateness, a community of individuals respecting one another’s private space.”

Intrigued by those spaces, Richmond shot what would eventually become 1,600 videos. As she did, she became increasingly tuned in to the implications of the breaching of boundaries and the pervasive invasiveness embedded within contemporary culture. “The scary thing is how we so easily accommodate and then contribute to a society that is basically schizophrenic about privacy,” she says. “We mindlessly reveal personal information and simultaneously freak out about our privacy being invaded. We find ourselves adopting the very practices we previously criticized or feared—from rude cellphone behavior in a supermarket line to a Google search for an old roommate that turns into an obsessive and addictive treasure hunt.”

Early on in the process of filming, Richmond realized that one of the women she’d shot in her neighborhood lived in her building. “Later, when I saw her on the street, I instinctively smiled at her, but of course she had no idea who I was.” It was at that moment, feeling a combination of discomfort and thrill, that Richmond realized: “I had become a voyeur.”

More recently, workmen repairing the façade of her

building set up shop on the balcony directly below her sixth-floor Manhattan apartment. For weeks she lived with her blinds drawn, until one day, she decided to record the workers. “It was an amazing image,” she says, “their feet against my window, their blue tarp flapping in the wind. They knew I was shooting them. Whose privacy was it that was being invaded? That window became the scene of our mutual embarrassment.”

Embarrassment, yes. Curiosity, certainly. Titillation, maybe. But she never felt guilt: “People are taking pictures all the time. Surveillance cameras are everywhere. I’m just doing what everyone else is doing.”

Hardly. In addition to creating a visual fugue of urban choreography with her video loops, she is using her art to show us ourselves. While she denies being an expert in the field of privacy, she says, “I am an expert in observing the impact of personal technology—and now, specifically, how personal technology affects the way individuals occupy public space.”

In her writings, Richmond wound back to 1979, when Sony introduced its revolutionary Walkman, forefather to today’s iPod. She described the Walkman as a “polite” cousin of the boom boxes that broadcasted their music over loudspeakers, because the Walkman restricted its sounds to its user’s ears. But she also described the Walkman as “exclusionary ... It spoke for its wearer, saying, ‘This is my personal space; Keep Out.’” The Walkman, like the iPod, “directs the inward gaze to a distant, solitary space,” she wrote.

Following this logic, the cellphone redirects the inward gaze “outward, toward a distant *shared* space,” she continued. “On a cellphone call, we retreat from the current environment by removing ourselves from those within physical proximity and joining others elsewhere.” Conversing aloud to someone somewhere else “is both intrusive and exclusionary” in a public space.

Because of this, Richmond says, “Cellphones place issues of privacy upfront and center. We all know they are no longer simply telephones. They are convergence devices using voice, text, and image. They are cameras. They are to-do lists and appointment books. They are GPS systems, music libraries, Internet browsers, and places to check stock prices.

“The important point,” she continues, “is not that they have all these features. It’s that they are hungry for our personal information, and we eagerly feed them all that

they ask for. Our cellphones have become repositories for tremendous amounts of private data that can be construed into a picture of who we are. A record of our calls, tracking of where we’ve been, a calendar of who we’ve seen—all are things we mindlessly do that add up to a particular kind of portrait that we may not want to reveal and that we are probably not aware of.”

In the aftermath of her “Public Privacy” exhibition, Richmond is chipping away at that lack of awareness—in both her audiences and herself. In March, her video grids from *Public Privacy: Wendy Richmond’s Surreptitious Cellphone* were featured at the IAPP Privacy Summit 2008, hosted by the International Association of Privacy Professionals in Washington, D.C. “This conference had nothing to do with art. It was very appealing to me to present my work there,” she says.

“The deeper I get into the realm of contemporary surveillance,” she says, “the more I see how much I don’t know and how much I want to know. And that not knowing is compounded by how much the field changes on a daily basis, with the government, the media, the personal technology industry, or the blogosphere continually releasing new and astonishing pieces of related information.” She refers to the National Security Agency’s access to telephone logs of citizens’ communication, new uses of wiretapping and surveillance, workplace concerns, and added cellphone features that make our personal data easier and easier to provide and find.

“You might think it does not affect you,” she says, “but it’s in the air.”

While continuing to write and teach, Richmond is embarking on the initial steps toward her next undertaking, a performance-based, multidisciplinary collaboration with the choreographer, Martha Mason, with whom she has worked previously, and the playwright Joy Tomasko. The project continues to explore the public-private interplay.

Her attraction to choreography, Richmond says, is the desire to move her work beyond the museum into “a more audience-involved space.” Working with theater presents a way for her to “take voyeurism a step further but possibly to do so with a fictional narrative.

“Joy talks about ‘the characters,’” she says. “Until now, my subjects were anonymous, captured in a spontaneous, random way. I purposely avoided lingering on any single person, and if I got close, I stopped shooting. Now I’ve begun to be haunted by their humanity.”

Richmond is also working with Michael Chladil, her intern from New York University’s Interactive Telecommunications Program, developing tools to stimulate experimentation with creative ideas.

“When I have an abundance of material and ideas, I have a tendency to want to decide right away what the final series is about,” she says. “But I know in my marrow that the only way to discover the big idea is to work on a lot of smaller ideas.”

She is exploring these smaller ideas in a series of “mini-projects” that she describes as “rapid prototyping, a way to give those ideas their due. They are not precious; they are not expensive. They let me move quickly, make something tangible, feel productive when I don’t have a lot of answers about what my next body of work will be.”

Lately, she says, “My studio has become an installation.” Everywhere there are video screens: two televisions, a laptop, a portable DVD player. Digital monitors displaying her work hang on the wall; others are positioned throughout the room on vertical stands. Of course, there is her cellphone. The most recent addition is a pair of surveillance cameras perched on tiny tripods, one aimed at the door, the other at Richmond’s desk, frequently capturing a side view of her head.

Twelve years ago, Richmond wrote in her *Communication Arts* column, “Your Video Self”: “... it’s eye-opening to see how you, personally, are represented by video... when you are *in it* yourself, you come one step closer to feeling its power to portray a given version of the truth.” Shooting strangers for years, she could not help but wonder, “What do I look like?” She installed the surveillance cameras, she says, “so I could think more about that on a daily basis.”

Another contraption she developed with Chladil randomly combines images and sound. Richmond calls it The Juxtaposition Tool. She is using it to experiment with combinations of sound, visuals, and text, fascinated by how the brain cannot resist making connections. Where it will lead is unclear. “It’s a piece of a puzzle,” says Richmond, “but I don’t know yet what the puzzle is.”

What she does know, with growing conviction, is the importance of not knowing. “It’s an urge I’m trusting more

and more,” she says, “to put myself in a place where I don’t know what’s next, to keep myself open. It’s too early to cut off ideas. The answers will come when they are ready.”

Richmond’s kitchen window looks out at the window-lined side of a hospital down the block. She spends a lot of time peering at the view. “It resembles my work—a grid of different activities—so I am attracted to it visually,” she says. “But I also study the people. I see them standing at the windows looking out. Many of them are talking on their cellphones, but instead of thinking about the government or technology, I’m thinking about their stories: who they are, who they are talking to, what they are saying.

“Then I wonder if they can see me, and I realize that I’ve been in their situation; I’ve been in hospitals talking to people on my cellphone. We are all in multiple roles, whether we are aware of it or not. We are information gatherers and information givers; we are voyeur and ‘voyeee.’”

In a recent column, Richmond wrote about the 21st-century ease of finding information about strangers and the competitive compulsion to find as much as we can. “The intersection of personal curiosity and the ease and omnipresence of technology equals the seduction of pursuing more (and more and more).” She asked, “What defines the line between harmless and threatening? It is when the anonymous becomes specific, when the accidental becomes intentional.”

“We cross lines without realizing it,” she says.

The dichotomy between an act and the unknown ramifications of that act tantalizes Richmond. The deliberate presence of that dichotomy in her work mirrors its presence in 21st-century society. And the more she searches for understanding, the more she finds she cannot know.

“I thrive on this challenge and friction,” she says. “I strive to put myself in the places where I’m nervous and inspired at the same time.”

Is it dangerous? Should we worry? Richmond bristles at prediction and refuses to judge. “I’ve always had a problem when people ask me, ‘What’s your stand?’” she says. “I take a stand on *not* making a value judgment. I want to raise our awareness of how we are conducting ourselves in our public space, whether it’s physical space, cyberspace, or some new kind of space we have yet to share.”

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