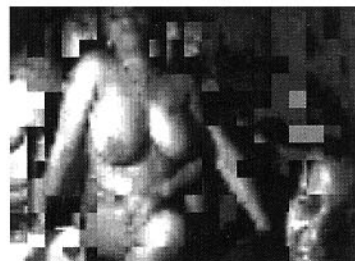


WebAffairs

Joanne Cachapero finds some substance in the pixels



The artist's online name is Show-n-tell and in her new book, *WebAffairs*, pictures are drawn in pixelated mosaics; not with brushes or pigments, but with bytes of information relayed at high speed down channels of broadband.

In the soft focus world of low-resolution, each image is a peek into rooms distant but familiar, lit with an electronic blue glow; snapshots of mundane reality displayed on the virtual walls of a chat room.

The portraits are fragmented. Faces gaze into the two-way mirror of a computer screen, rarely confronting the spectators. Instead, the subjects focus on watching and being watched. Body parts distorted to the edge of abstraction float in cyberspace, put into perspective by their juxtaposition to a keyboard or newspaper. Some nudes strike pornographic poses, trading a fig leaf for a laptop to shield their nakedness. These are life studies from the Information Age.

"The images alone could look very titillating," says Show-n-tell, in a phone interview. "But the images in relationship to the text reveal how we have become as a community."

By combining screen-captured graphics with text of chat room dialogue, the artwork explores the cultural implications of how technology has impacted sexuality and the dichotomy between relationships conducted in the real and virtual worlds.

In almost every instance, the level of intimacy achieved in these online conversations is more compelling than any degree of nudity displayed here. Whereas the parade of genitalia becomes somewhat redundant after awhile, it is shocking to see what other parts of themselves people are willing to reveal, under the guise of virtual anonymity.

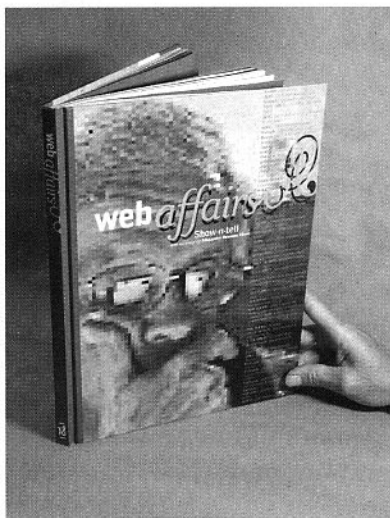
The text comes in short, staccato bursts, one or two sentences at most, in online shorthand with conversations overlapping; a collage of everyday banter, erotic wordplay and personal catharsis, like stilted, interactive poetry. In one exchange, Show-n-tell chats with Romic:

Show-n-tell: you said you learned about other people here i wanted to know what you've learned so far

Romic: yes
about mind?
sex?

Show-n-tell: about everything

Romic: people are very alone
frustrating



all are we
mind and feelings make us suffer
on here we go searching our freedom
and it is all around sex
ok?

And yet, as Show-n-tell formed relationships in the adult chat rooms, she discovered the contrary to be true. The virtual environment, which might seem sterile to some or illusionary at best, became a fertile source of contact and transformation for the community of participants.

"There is something so seductive about virtual life," she says. "If you think about the people who were there having affairs, the people who were really filling in some gaps in their real life, then this becomes more satisfying than the real life. So, that's the deceptive and sad part of it."

"But," Show-n-tell adds, "it's also a celebration of connecting to anyone around the world. People you would not normally meet... It wasn't all about sex, but it was really about connection."

WebAffairs also documents the artist's four and a half year journey from voyeur to performer, pushing beyond personal boundaries and testing the limits between online involvements and real-time relationships.

"As an artist, that was important to me, that there's a performance aspect to this project," she says. "One of the reasons that I published the book under a pseudonym is because I feel 'Show-n-tell' is not completely me. I was acting and talking, and it allowed me to be a different person. There are things that you do in your real life, and then there are things that you're able to do when you're completely anonymous."

The internet has morphed into an expanding universe that parallels our reality, mirrors it, and finally, reinvents it, while we struggle to navigate the vastness of cyberspace and the spaces in between. The duality there cannot be denied; pornographic and intimate, exposed and anonymous, isolated and connected, real and virtual.

In *WebAffairs*, it's the message and the medium. It's information as art, which seems especially relevant when technology threatens to overwhelm us with limitless access and availability of information. On many levels, the Web also offers infinite possibilities for exploring what is fundamentally human; sexuality, community and the boundaries of existence. □