Wink ; )

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Wink ; )

by

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in Imaging Arts

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: But there’s no need for introductions

Family. Familial. Familiar. People often assume that others are quite familiar with their family members. We think we know what families are; what they look like, how they work, because we all have one. The word family itself is a familiar word for most people on this planet. Realizing how little you actually know about your own sister or father can be the catalyst for understanding or destruction of family ties. Those ties are rather unique from home to home, although again, we assume we are all similar. We assume that if our families are different and others find out that we are different, it may be the end of the world. At least that’s what my family thinks.

Every family has structure, politics, rules and traditions. These can be very loosely defined or rather rigid and stifling at times. I’m from a big Italian family, the kind that gathers around food for just about any occasion. Family members play out a very traditional set of roles; females cook and clean while men run businesses and wait for dinner to be served. We all talk all the time yet don’t say too much at all. Like most families we’ve had our share of births, laughter, tears of joy and pain, marriage, disappointment, yelling, accomplishments, fainting, nervous breakdowns, anxiety, divorce, annulments, emergency surgery and death. And, like most families what appears to be true from an outside perspective may not be the truth after all.

My big Italian family came with certain expectations: finish high school and marry a nice Italian boy from a good family. Furthering my education was not a priority in the family, although I was supported in this pursuit when I pushed for it. The greater curiosity and most frequently asked question was, “have you met anybody?” I certainly met lots of people, dated a few but due to the chink in the chain, my dating had to be discrete, and by chink in the chain I mean Wink ; )
my sexual preference. Knowing this, I always felt like I had to hide, both physically and emo-
tionally.

I became really good at hiding my romantic life, my emotions and just about anything they might not be thrilled about. If I had a spreadsheet of all the conversation topics I’ve had with my family up until recently, the most frequently discussed topic would be the weather. You would think we were part of a weather research team if one ever overheard the conversations. It is sad to think that those light, pleasant and polite conversation tactics I employed with my family, the people who were supposed to know me best inside and out.

I had to be discreet when dating. Even if I was on a date 350 miles away from my par-
ents, I would be constantly looking over my shoulder. Paranoia quickly became the most con-
suming feeling in my life as a young adult. When I moved back to my parent’s home after col-
lege, I had to work very hard at keeping my life completely secret. Quiet conversations with my long distance girlfriend, who was growing impatient with the whole idea and novelty of “absence making the heart grow fonder,” were conducted behind the closed doors of my bedroom. Even-
tually this distance, along with a few other factors, severed that relationship.

I retreated, putting all of my efforts into work and tried to figure out how I could ever meet people with all of these limitations. The Internet was the only place I found some connec-
tion with a safety net. I could be somewhat anonymous. I could sneak the entire on-line commu-
nity into my bedroom and all that could be heard was the sound of typing. If I wanted to leave the house I would have had to explain my whereabouts, and then, explain what I did and with whom. From my computer I could create my own world parallel to that of my parents. Our
paths, our friends, and our social lives would not intersect. From my computer, I could interact with others without having to discuss, explain, create suspicion, or induce guilt.

I moved away from my parent’s home. It had to be done. Now, I continued to live in my online world but was now free to transfer that activity to the physical world. I saw this movement, from internet and internal to the tangible and external more vividly than someone who has never been confined to the virtual. It was as if a cartoon character walked out of the television screen and now occupied real space in the world. But expanding my world was still best done by connecting with others online, then perhaps adding them as a “real life” connection as well, so I didn’t at all leave the internet behind.

Consumed by both love and fear of my family, wanting to know them but them not to know me completely, directed my feelings, thought, and actions in life for many years. It has dictated my employment, my living situations, and my relationships both within the family and without. Not that many would know it. I am driven to understand this largely to escape the pattern. I enter an emotional and psychological maze that must be brought into the physical world in order to make sense of myself and my future.

CHAPTER 2: That’s What It’s All About

Let’s enter the exhibit, shall we?

Upon entering the gallery space during the exhibition of Wink ; ), you were faced with a walkable maze. At its entrance, you were greeted by an instructional plaque on a post, with answer sheets and small branded pencils (short, “golf” size, white pencils imprinted with a red Wink ; )
Wink ; ) logo) held in a lucite container also attached to the post. Participants were instructed to take a pencil and a survey sheet on their journey through the maze.

The maze was formed by 3 foot tall, black station posts strung with CAT 3 data cable that had been stripped to reveal its many hand-twisted colorful strands. This swagging cable, representing the lines of communication both literally online and figuratively between people trying to connect, directed the participant through straightaways and turns occasionally bringing them to intersections in the course. As the participant came to these “forks in the road,” they were asked to pick between two visual options and record their preferences on the survey sheet. The options were presented in photographic form all uniformly shot and displayed on tall black wooden stands that had two photographs hanging from opposite sides of its horizontal bar. Each photograph was a 15” x 15” metallic print of an item in front of white background. There were no labels or titles so that viewers truly made a choice based on a visual representation with no text. Under each image was a black arrow pointing them to continue in one of two directions.
For instance, one set of options were books or television. As the participant made their decision they marked down their choice on the provided survey sheet and moved forward to the next set of visual options. After making their way through the maze, the participants exited out of one of the four paths that their choices led them through. Based on their choices, the maze filtered out participants, leading those that matched my preferences more closely, to exit near my profile hanging on the wall. Those that had less in common with my profile exited closer to the end of the overall exhibit, near the exit of the gallery. Two exits in between were for those that had mixtures of choices that would align with my own.

The best “matches” used exit one, at the far left of the exhibit, which had on display my printed out profile from Match.com, giving those participants a “full” view of “me.” Exit two, just a few steps to the right of exit one, guided the participant about half way through my profile, providing them a limited view of “me.” Just beyond that point were two transparent boxes that were designated as “yes” or “no” with a small sign instructing participants to deposit their survey sheet into the appropriate box in response to the question “Are you interested in me?” Exit three, a larger step to the right of exit two, fed the participant to the gridded display of cherry stems. A wall of 1,000 tongue-tied cherry stems neatly displayed in two inch transparent cubes that were affixed to each other on panels that were arranged in 10” x 10” grids. A sign provided the information that for every visitor I had to my online profile on Match.com, I tongued-tied a cherry stem. Exit four, the furthest exit in the maze, guided the participant closer to the exit providing them with an even more limited view of “me.” At this point in the exhibit, I had two floating shelves affixed to the gallery wall with coffee cups sitting on display atop them. These
cups represented every date I actually went on as a result of having my profile online with Match.com.

Also, as the participant passed this point, they were counted by an infrared beam, for they too would have a cherry stem tongue tied in recognition of completing the maze. I felt it necessary to bring this virtual experience into the gallery. After all, what starts out on Match.com is meant to evolve into something in the physical world. The symbols that presented themselves throughout this interesting journey would determine the form and flow of this piece entirely. Symbols such as the wink, the knot, a maze and a simple cup of coffee would create an experience most could somehow relate to despite age, gender and ethnicity.

CHAPTER 3: From Match.com to Mazes

Utilizing a social networking site called Match.com, I was allowed to be the artist of my very own online profile. I carefully crafted a defined view of myself for online viewers. The profile photograph itself seemed most important to me. My picture appears as the website suggested in black and white - Match.com said a black and white photo looks more “artistic.” Is a color photo just too ordinary? Does knowing how to turn a photo black and white take special artistic skill? This aspect of profiles is part of what motivated me to meet people in person after connecting with them online. Were the images people chose accurate representations of their personalities? Would someone feel that I was “artistic” in real life, especially after expecting me to be so?

Wink ; )
Why is that first visual impression so important? When asked, most people would say that they make judgements based on character rather than looks, but let’s be honest with ourselves. Besides, when you are given the freedom to write your own profile, you are essentially drawing a picture of yourself as you see it. You can post a photo of yourself from 8 years ago, when you were in better shape, had less wrinkles and have your super smart friend write up a stellar profile to go along with it. How honest is this process to begin with, when the participants pad their own profiles and secretly sit in judgement scrolling through thumbnail photos making split decisions based on looks? People build profiles. They are crafted carefully; especially on a site designed the way Match.com was circa 2005. They intentionally include or exclude information because they know and expect it to be viewed. In online dating, the usual goal of the profile is to generate interest so that a date in the real world is possible. Savvy Match.com members easily manipulate profiles, in the way that padded bras and false eyelashes might to reach that goal.
Your profile picture is the carrot on the stick to get them to open up the full profile. Now that you have them interested, let’s see what happens once they read about your hobbies, likes and dislikes, taste in music, and the title of the last book you read.

When I began using Match.com, I set out certain ground rules. I kept my profile accurate. I would go out on any date if asked. A profile photograph was not mandatory for me to accept a date and I would be open to any experience as long as it wasn’t dangerous. Now just to clarify, I always arranged the dates in public places and kept them structured around a cup of coffee, long enough to get a good read on someone and have a decent comparison to their on-line profile. Did their on-line profile match their real world self? At the end of every date I always asked if I was what they expected based on my profile. I wanted to know if my perception of myself matched what I was putting out in the world. Most did agree that it suited my face-to-face persona.

In the physical world, a wink is a signal we have come to interpret as a few different things like “hey, I’m interested in you,” or “pay attention, something else is going on here.” On Match.com the “wink” is usually the first interaction you may have with someone if you are interested in his or her profile. You send a virtual textual wink and if they wink back then you know they are interested as well. This can lead to e-mail or even a coffee date. But what else is a wink? It’s also a limited view. It’s not the whole picture. How many of us even consider that?

Other artists who are indeed conscious of limited views have displayed alternate profiles of themselves just like me. For instance, let’s take a look at French artist Sophie Calle’s pre-internet piece entitled The Shadow 1981.

Calle wanted someone to gather information on her activities and habits. She had her mother hire a private detective to follow her. She used photographs and notations from the detective alongside her own journal and photographs of her life at concurring times to create an exhibit that was really two versions of a profile. Her work compared the persona an outside viewer sees and the intimate self-portrait she painted.

Portrait of Sophie Calle
As Calle crafted dueling limited views of her life and herself, I, too, was beginning an examination of myself in a similar way. Wondering about how others see me made me think more about how I see myself. Because it is a big part of my life, I realized that in years past my other work has also been about disclosure. For instance, in *Secrets 2004*, I placed an ad in CITY Newspaper in Rochester, NY and asked the public to send me their personal secrets. I took these anonymous secrets and created a video. I took very private information and disclosed it in a very public way. The secrets were revealed in a video published on the internet but without any attachment to their original sources. In essence, it was another limited view. But this was a glimpse of others not of myself.

Why the maze? My initial inspiration came from questioning how to take the world I grew up in and how it was shaped by my parents and grandparents and tie it to my modern day virtual way of connecting. The Italian piazza, or town center was the first form to which I compared my online dating world. The function of the piazza was and still is based on communication, socialization and mercantile. It reminded me of the fundamental uses of the internet. Initially the internet was used for information exchange, which then developed into communities where like-minded people could socialize, and, of course, shop. All of our movements on the web, as anonymous as they seem, are entirely traceable. We leave “fingerprints” via ISP numbers at the places we visit and we gather residue from those places via cookies and other bits that we pick up along the way. Similarly, the piazza is monitored by the townsfolk. And like e-mail, gos-
sip can move pretty fast. You would most likely walk through the piazza, in public view, on a prescribed path dictated by your preferences regarding your destination.

![Image of active Internet pathways](image)

This circular shape with pathways leading to the center really interested me. Below is an image of active Internet pathways. Notice how the two floor plans are similar – condensed activity in the center which branches out to all points around it. Popular sites or topics would be flooded with activity and as you focused your research or interests to more obscure topics the activity wanes.
On one of my dates with someone from Match.com, we went to a walkable labyrinth in Rochester. While walking through it, I crossed paths with a little boy who said, “...am I going the right way?” and I said, “I don’t know if I’m going the right way, just go whatever way you want.” I considered what a labyrinth did and looked into how it compared to a maze. A labyrinth has one point of entry and one exit whereas a maze can have multiple entrances and exits. Mazes also can have intersections whereas labyrinths do not. The maze was the most logical form for my exhibition Wink ; ).

In 1977, Abramovic and Ulay’s performance piece *Imponderabilia*. asked guests to gain access to their exhibit through the doorway where the two artists stood naked.

The gap forced a person to walk in sideways, so you had to choose which way to face while walking through. When you walked between Abramovic and Ulay you were videotaped and it was broadcasted in the gallery. Your choices carried meaning and possibly consequence the same way they do in my exhibited maze.

*Wink ;)*
In my exhibition, I also made people think about their choices. After my nieces went through they came up and told me “we voted for you!” In fact, participants’ choices of whether or not they were interested in my profile, which they were able to mark down on small pieces of paper, were put on display in transparent boxes labeled ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ Participants were also constantly being viewed because of the open nature of the maze. While I thought of creating walls in order to create the path, it would have taken away the whole concept-come-to-life of the public arena.

Detail from Wink ; )
CHAPTER 4: You have been counted

With the basic maze decided, I was able to create the experience for the viewers. At the same time, I processed the creation of the other related parts of the exhibit, as well as the outcome, especially since my artwork allowed viewers to actively engage. Meanwhile, I still had my Match.com profile active and online. After all there were living, breathing human beings that had been a part of my art process without even knowing it at first! With every internal and online occurrence, I wanted to manifest something tangible and meaningful for the maze, the physical interpretation.

Match.com kept a tally of the number of visits my profile received. When someone viewed my profile I made an impression on them. I wanted to take this number and make a physical representation of it. Tongue-tying over a thousand stems after hand-picking them off of maraschino cherries left my hands and tongue stained. These are the seven steps to tie a cherry stem:

1. Pick a maraschino cherry with the longest stem you can find and remove the stem. (eat the cherry if you please)
2. Soften the stem in your mouth.
3. Push your tongue on the middle of the stem to bend it into a "U" shape long ways on your tongue. Bite down on it to make it cross into a loop.
4. Hold the stem in place with your teeth at this intersection of the loop.
5. Push on the end of the stem that is on the top of the cross downward from the tip of the stem while at the same time pushing the loop upward toward the stem with your bottom teeth.
6. Maneuver the knobby end of the stem through the loop and pull it through with your teeth.

Wink ; )
7. Tighten the knot by pulling the stem out of your mouth from one end while holding the other end in your teeth.

I used the knotted cherry stem to represent each impression I left on a viewer. The symbolism of tying a cherry stem in a knot in my mouth worked perfectly with my thesis. This parlor trick is often used in bars as something to impress others with their lingual dexterity. My profile was sitting on Match.com’s server waiting to be viewed by millions and impress those that were interested enough in my basic profile to read on.

Throughout the process my profile was viewed over 1000 times. Yes, I was very busy tying cherry stems. I became very efficient at the process. My fastest time, in case you wonder, is eight seconds. After tying the stems, I tied a short piece of clear jewelry-making thread around the knobby end of the stem. It was transparent like fishing line and had a little elastic give to it. I bought 2” x 2” x 2” inch transparent lucite boxes in the shape of cubes. I then pierced the lid of each with a large needle and threaded the elastic thread through the hole with a threader used for threading a sewing needle. Then the elastic was knotted atop the lid so it wouldn’t slide back through. The cherry stem was now suspended in the center of the transparent cube, and the ruddy, red threads would swing if the boxes were moved. The clear plastic cubes containing each was significantly chosen and built as well. Plastic being not cleanly transparent, nor impenetrable, not precious but indeed delicate. I attached the cubes to painted masonite boards with high tack glue dots in rows of 10 x 10. I had a total of 10 boards on display in the gallery totaling 1,000 cherry stems, 1,000 trophies of a moment in time. They exist as a physical and symbolic record of the 1000+ views of my profile.

Wink ; )
After tying 1,000 plus cherry stems, constantly thinking about what the act represented and how I treated the event, this weird talent became a reminder of something I consistently do to keep my public life tidy. I keep it tidy by maintaining distance – like the space surrounding the cherry stems inside the box and by repeatedly containing the same set of information in neat little boxes.

Detail from Wink ; )

My sameness exists in the treatment. Andy Warhol famously used sameness in his subject matter, like repeated iconic images of Coca-Cola bottles or Marilyn Monroe in varied colors. Where his process is not uniform, his subject is. And where my process is uniform, my subjects aren’t. If you look closely at the cherry stems you notice that they each have a knot, but they have different size, shape and color as if they truly represent different people. The overall affect is pretty and easily appreciated – in fact, this was the most complimented aspect of my thesis exhibition.

Wink ; )
My cherry stem wall is very pleasing because of line, color, and the aesthetic of repetition. Another more subtle idea of repetition lies in the ability of a person to encounter this experience multiple times, just as someone online could repeatedly view my profile. Indeed, repetition can make an experience or event more meaningful. Seeing the expanse of cherry stem boxes certainly has a bigger impact than reading a number with four digits.

Then again, small doses of repetition creates cohesion among otherwise differing elements, such as in the display of the shelf of mugs, viewed upon exiting my exhibition. My coffee cups displayed in the gallery are artifacts from the coffee dates that ensued from my online connections. Each cup being unique is essential because each real world encounter was truly distinct. Each mug is a record of social interaction.
Sophie Calle’s latest book, Exquisite Pain, uses repetition for a different reason.

She retells the story of a painful break-up, embroiders it on grey silk, and pairs it with someone else’s story of pain embroidered on white silk. As she retells the story, details are omitted and the
versions become shorter and shorter until the last panel is just a statement of the event and not about the emotion tied to it. Calle’s work is not just about repetition, but is also about relationships and disclosure. She creates work based on human interaction. This was influential to my thesis work.

While Wink ; ) signifies interactions, I allow no knowledge of whether one stem mattered more than another or if one mug was more significant. However, one may make inferences based on the numbers.

While there are one thousand cherry stems, there are only nine mugs on a small shelf left with no room beyond the last mug. I may have interacted with many people online, but you are able to see that I only interacted with those few in the real world based on the contrasting coffee cups.

CHAPTER 5: Happy Endings

The weaknesses of Wink ; ) came out in the profiling of the participants. If given the chance to refine Wink ; ), I would like to challenge the participants a bit more by having them only gain access to the parts of the exhibit if they truly did match my online profile. As displayed, the maze may have been too easy for the participants to modify their route. What if they had to go through the rigors of making an online profile in the gallery and were given a prescribed path to follow? What if they couldn’t see what the other participants got to see at the end of their path? I could have kept the maze open but closed the final section in a way that would physically force a participant to go through the entire maze again if they wanted to view the other parts. It was too easy for them to physically access my entire profile on display in the gal-
lery. In order to accomplish this I would need a much larger gallery space, but I do think it would make the participatory experience more authentic.

Upon further consideration, I would have changed the photograph options in the maze, making them more extreme in their relation to each other to filter them differently. In my maze I identified pathways with images rather than words. I also limited the number of paths, sticking to general categories that the most participants could relate to. For instance, I did not want to confuse or limit someone’s ability to engage with this experience by offering a junction in which one must choose between what I thought might be obscure references such as two different types of cars. What if people didn’t know the difference between a Fiat and a Mini Cooper? However, looking back, doing the very thing I was worried about doing might have provided even more thought-provoking visual options at each junction.

The other component I would change is the display of my profile. It could be a more intimate experience all together. Perhaps closing off each ending section would have created that feeling. In the beginning stages of Wink ; ), I had considered placing my physical self in the piece, but then reconsidered. Now I would reconsider that again. What if I had taken the response sheets that were collected in the ‘yes’ boxes in the gallery and sent the participant an e-mail if I

Wink ; )
were interested in them? Not to date, but to give them that feeling of excitement when someone finds another person interesting.

On the other hand, giving participants an actual experience was a major strength of my work. Visitors to the gallery were not just viewers of artwork, not just an audience. They were an important component of the exhibit’s performance.

The other stand-out strength of Wink ; ) was the cherry stem project. It provided one of the most striking visuals in the exhibited display. When you take a close look at each individual transparent cube, and you had to get real close to take a good look at it, the viewer became intimate with it. It made people question the authenticity of the performative act. People continue to ask if I really did tongue-tie all of those stems. That question of the authenticity was resonated through the experiential construction of the exhibition.

A participant viewing the visuals in the maze of chocolates and cigarettes was heard to say, “even though I’m not a smoker any longer, when it came to chocolate or cigarettes I choose cigarettes!” The visuals triggered a memory and a desire. How did that experience shape her knowledge of herself and possibly challenge who she thought she was? Did her choice reflect her authentic self? A married couple were surprised at each other’s choices after walking through the maze, learning something new about each other because of the novel experience they encountered together. Did my project enhance their relationship even in a minute way?

From beginning to end, the form of the maze engaged participants on many levels: making decisions, walking through assigned spaces, visually entertaining them, asking for written responses. It also might have caught someone’s interest, perhaps someone who had never been to a gallery before, in the same way that a Match.com profile is novel to a new customer. But
ultimately, just like the fleeting act of tongue-tying a cherry stem, the preciousness of the moment leaves and the experience is over. After all, traveling through a public space does not necessarily forge any kind of deep connection between oneself and another in the space, although repeated presence in a public space can create familiarity both with others who are also often there and with the space itself.

As I brought a familiar virtual world into the physical realm, I continued to struggle with disclosure and my piece very much became a tangible experience of what it might be like to have an online profile rather than a reflection of myself or my personal experiences. This still felt like a success because I did indeed merge my private world with a public arena. In doing so, a little of each world fell away and it was right that the event, experience and exhibit was not solely about me, but about choices and impressions and connections, as well as images and representations. Things that had touched my virtual world had now impacted others, as is evidenced by this blog:

Friday, January 27, 2006

another exciting friday night

Working has made me not stay up so late, so I'm back here posting on blogger before bed :-P
My first activity was visiting the opening of an MFA thesis with a friend: "WINK, An MFA Thesis Exhibition by Annalisa Iannone." They forgot to advertise it on the RIT events calendar, but fortunately I managed to find out anyway. Directions to the gallery were clearly marked with bright red balloons, a good thing, as the art building is a giant labyrinth, and one must be careful not to get eaten by the minotaur.

Wink ; )
The food was decent, and they had superb chocolate covered cherries. Half the gallery was devoted to photos of houses at dusk / night time. A couple of them were quite large. Other than that, they didn’t hold my attention that long, although they were good photos. The other half of the gallery was devoted to the MFA thesis (I’m not sure if the photos were at all related). It consisted of 1) a maze, where you make different choices at the intersections (e.g. "dog" vs "cat") which determine how you get out. At the end, there’s a display about internet dating, very loosely connected, I think, in that people’s choices and interests determine something of how they get along.
She also had a display of dozens or hundreds of cherry stems, each tied in a knot (which she apparently can do with her tongue), each in a little plastic box. This connects to the rest in that every time someone visits her profile (on a dating website perhaps?) she ties one of the cherry stems with her tongue.
A the end, she had a display of coffee cups- one for each time she went out with someone for coffee. (There were far less coffee cups than cherry stems)
And in case you were wondering (as I am sure you are all dying to know at this point), this gallery opening had no alcohol.

The Secret Life of Gary, a blog by someone named Gary, contains this record of his experiences on a Friday night, which included attending my opening. He discloses his perception of the event and includes a general description of what he saw. In a textual way, Gary takes something from his external, physical world and puts it back into the virtual. Blogs are generally known to be text heavy, with some images but not necessarily of the author or creator.

Match.com typically includes images of the creator of each profile, text, personal writing samples, categories for your preferences, and a forum for previewing without consequence. The same could be said, perhaps sans the writing sample, for many public spaces. We view others, notice what choices they have made in their attire, attitude, actions, and are able to make snap judgments. Perhaps my conflict was not simply over my own fear of being seen and viewed, but over the idea that my parents passed on a nostalgia for spaces such as the piazza: a place where they were audience and performer in their younger days.

Wink ; )
As a product of the late seventies, I had a front row seat in the development of modern communications. I grew up with a home computer (a Commodore 64), cable television, and the first cellular phone (the one that was the size of a small child and was sure to give its user some kind of health trouble). As our technology progressed, making things go faster, cheaper and smaller, access grew. It is now not uncommon for most people to have these gadgets in multiples. These gadgets allow access to a very large number of the world’s population and communication with the rest of the world is possible within seconds. The Internet became a parallel universe used to inform, collect, connect and communicate.

We can connect and impress masses of people in a virtual world quite easily and quickly, but we may not be satisfied in our physical life. It seems to be understood that humans need or at least thrive and will be labeled more “healthy” if they have relationships in the “real,” physical world. I certainly wanted to know and spend time with people beyond my big, Italian family. My sexual preference, however, does not fit into my parent’s ideal, romantic story. It does not include strolls in the piazza for all to see.

I may have used my artwork as an excuse or justification for being a part of the online world, but it was also something I needed to do. I needed my own piazza. As a result of the online profile, I did indeed meet new people in the real world. I bridged the gap between virtual and tangible. I did not however bridge the gap between my parent’s view of me and my own.

When I created my own “piazza,” I had to immerse myself into a new culture, with a new language (all that online lingo) and very different set of rules. After a few months I began to find like-minded friends I wanted to meet up with in the real world. Winks became dates, until one date became a girlfriend and a new maze of familiarity was born. But what I learned from my
thesis project was that most of us living online were in the same boat — trying to find others who looked beyond the virtual image, an online pretense of familiarity.
Abstract

If you were a member of the Match.com community in 2005, you expressed interest in another member by sending them a “wink.” If someone online reciprocated interest, they also had the option to “wink” at you. In Match.com parlance, “winking” online established personal connections similar to those achieved in the real world—a wink is a facial gesture used to communicate or connect with another person. My thesis, entitled Wink ; ), sought to engage both the online and real world power of this human signal, as a means to understand how I could be myself—a liberal feminist with a sexual preference for my own gender, while still remaining connected, on some meaningful level, to my Italian parents, who held strong conventional values about the role of a daughter within a family and women in society.

For my thesis exhibition, I created an interactive maze that functioned like an analog or 3-dimensional version of the online dating filter, Match.com. Participants entered the maze, made choices based on visual images which then led them through the maze. On display at the exits were images of my actual online profile, a wall of tongue-tied cherry stems, and coffee mugs that represented the online internet participation of my dating experiences, as well as the real life coffee dates. Gallery visitors not only walked the maze but were able to fill out a brief survey along their journey and use it as a ballot. They placed their ballots into boxes marked 'yes' or 'no,' in answer to the question posed at the end of the maze: "Are you interested in me?"


Bacon, Bev. Meet Me...Don’t Delete Me. Internet Dating: I’ve Made All The Mistakes So You Don’t Have To! Slapstick Publications, 2003.


