

Remedios Zafra

A CONNECTED ROOM OF ONE'S OWN



**(Cyber)space
and (self)management of the self**

fórcola

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Señales

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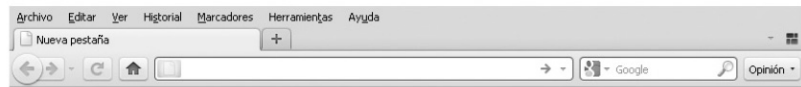
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For rooms with passwords

Real life is just another window of a connected room of my own.¹

JAN EKATO



The Net has split my life into 300 tasks, of which 98 have to do with writing and using a keyboard; 35 relate to search, search!; 6 to updating software; 51 to saving files; 67 to minimizing-maximizing; 18 to discovering my body (oh, goodness, my body!); 34 to waiting for “that” email to arrive; 19 to drifting online, 45 to contacting you; you; you; 36: “do it yourself” (myself); 21 to “they can’t see me”; 9 to “tomorrow is another day”. The Net does not deny other miscellaneous tasks to be carried out in the privacy of a room of my own. The sum of them does not tally with the expected amount of splits because new tasks and classifications emerge constantly.²

LAURA BEY

A WARNING ABOUT THIS BOOK

There exists an evident desire to hide behind a formation of thought based on the artificial division into fields in order to reject the useless, vulgar and irksome concept of “everyday life”. Such a concept harbours a residue of catalogued and classified reality which some find repulsive to confront, since it constitutes a point of view of the totality and, at the same time, implies the necessity of global judgment, that is, of politics.³

GUY DEBORD

To the cataloguers of stories, organizers of bookshelves and supervisors of compartments for science and world knowledge:

Believe me, I realize you are only doing your job and that the categories, forms and computer programs you use are prearranged, that they make it easier for you, and they aim “to make it easier for us” to understand things. I realize those tools are designed to ascribe this text to the “essay” section of the “book” category, see: subjects “books about building rooms for thinking”, “books about rooms with windows”, “books about daily life on the Net”, “books for swatting flies”; see also any other established archival heading you have been handed down and wish to use, trying to overlook the fact that these began life as conjectural and random. I apologize for making things difficult, but I need to warn you just in case you were expecting this to be an in-depth subject study or a single discipline study that either proclaims its truth or registers its *amazement* from a one-way, rooted viewpoint. And if it were rooted (we can accept the possibility), it would be as it was for Woolf: *I am rooted, but I flow*.

Consequently, do not waste your time on this book if you intend to fill a bookshelf of your mind tattooed with a heading of established wisdom. This is not a book that

revisits what the extant bookshelves of the world already know or corroborate.

To those of you who ask yourselves what viewpoint does the writer speak from, what arrangement of things does the writer appraise and tackle on which to rest the authority of her words and, on its corresponding bookshop's ledge her way to arrange them, I say that you will not find herein a treatise about Philosophy, Art, Computers, Anthropology, Activism or Literature, or an essay about erecting walls or aluminium shutters for the windows in a room of one's own. And although an analysis of contemporary culture, Internet, the political theories about the *individual*, the economics of private spaces, the construction of identity and the critical observation of the spaces of intimacy are contained in the writing that follows, they are like a liquid that is not impervious to interplay and mixture. Indeed, it would even like to risk changing categories from a resigned and grumbling title to one of imagination, space and potential.

You should know that you are not obliged to read this book. Without vanity, it does not hide the fact it navigates through the blends of daily life, where specialists able to understand and accept the most complicated scientific images *turn stupid, in the dismantling sphere* of a momentary collision with the *incapacity of living*⁴.

You will find that the conclusions herein do not set out to lay the foundations for a new online revolutionary, post-capitalist movement with cells in each of those rooms of your own. We do, however, welcome any radical plans that may be inferred, any significative re-location undertaken so as to begin the task of re-semanticizing the critical practice and subjectivity of our on-screen lives.

A rejection of linearity and disciplinarity from a non-unitary perspective of discourse, does not necessarily lead to a

kind of cognitive relativism, but rather, to a network of vanishing point lines in the manner of a theoretical project that does not discard the creativity of contradiction and doubt; lines that may join the conversation with questions of their own, which have yet to be cracked by an accepted order of things, as they do not wish to reiterate that which has been said before. Unafraid, they seek to disorder to make us think differently.

These possibilities of reception, if they actually manage to be built during the act of reading, do not shoot from a blue, monochrome, clean, transcendental, tidy, specious prism or from an ambitious question of *zeitgeist*. Their origin is more modest and untidy, more liminal, yet more authentic too perhaps. I am referring to a *connected self* which spends more and more time in a room of its own; a self which refuses to yield its willpower to the mediated and rapid symbolic excess of its everyday world –as though its willpower were something tired and useless, a little finger, an ornate fingernail.

I am referring to a self that is disappointed by the lack of imagination in the ideation of new on-screen critical *figurations*⁵, a self which questions itself about the *present* state of the subjective construction with careful deliberation. A deliberation not divorced from the sensations on our bodies and spaces which, often ineffably, accompany the things that upset and hurt us in our online lives, the things that fight against being fully exposed, which desirous of being perceived by so many of the age's hurried reasons, bear up dignified and pock-marked with holes at our side, without showing themselves fully. Accordingly, I will speak from the legitimacy of the self which, despite being intertwined in identities of the age, knows itself (would like itself) to be agent of its words, even when its words are a quote, appropriation or parody

of others. I would like in this way to communicate with the world through my own world, conscious of possible prejudice, defending one's own experience, reading and motivation as any another argument of authority would do, ordering things from viewpoints that are as random as they are solid, in an attempt to reach them by means of a critical approach, but also thanks to the unconcealed empathy and bias of subjectivity, which act as an assurance of authenticity as opposed to an impediment.

Consequently, I should tell you that I *exist*. I'm not a computer application that writes books, nor am I the marketing product of a popular and powerful publisher. I am not a wiki-style avatar operated by a number of individuals, nor a fiction masking a textual experiment. I should tell you that I have a body, desires, doubts, manias and questions. I should warn you that I write about the present through the body and "not fleeing from it"⁶. And from this position of *embodied* materialism I am aware of my own cultural and *geopolitical* location in Southern Europe, oscillating between the rural and the urban world, *and in a time balanced between the end of a century which never completely dies and the beginning of a new one*, a non-static position, which changes as I write.

Very shortly you will see how these changes which I suggest are related to our days connected to the Internet and which were not heralded by the collapse of towers, or by pictures of thirty-something year olds removing their belongings in cardboard boxes under a (suddenly) decrepit Lehman Brothers sign to the rhythm of the beat of the stock markets which also collapse. There is no epic picture that symbolizes the change I am referring to. It is a change devoid of the roar of finance, of wars for petroleum and of real physical death. I am talking about a subliminal change parallel to the epic changes, unnoticed, like the tinkling

erosion caused by the dripping of water on stone, like the action of symbolic universes on bodies (slow, but crucial). I am referring to the change affecting the ways of interacting with one another on-screen and the resulting formation of a Net-society: a new framework of symbolic and imaginary references in which to build identitary models for use in life. I insist there was no epic, but change occurred, and to a certain extent it was reminiscent of the vision of change that Virginia Woolf described in the following terms, a century ago:

On or about December 1910, human character changed [...] The change was not sudden and definite [...] But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910 [...] All human relations have shifted –those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910 [...].⁷

We could, with regard to our case, state (with a pretence of epicness if you like) that it was in December, or in September perhaps –well we only really know that it was in the first years of the first decade after the year 2000– when the Internet became normalized in the globalized world, or better, when the Internet irreversibly globalized the world by connecting us. It did not take long for us to take it for granted, for it to become an indispensable part of our daily lives. One fine day we found we had become riveted to our computer keyboards to be and to live in the world.

We may, if you like, try to visualize the period by walking back in time, shifting ourselves into the last century, like one of Benjamin's angels, inspiring thus our grief for something that dies and which heralds the birth of an era of networks. However, I should stress this would be an incomplete and incorrect symbol because the change happened quietly, devoid of any explicit signs of war and

without any ruins that could not be archived and subsumed by the Net itself. Neither do we have sufficient pictures that witness, albeit synthetically, the process of change the Net performed on all of us. For once, history was being made by each and every one of its actors, by each and every person connected to the Internet.

The crux of the matter happened because the Net took over the screen -window, mirror, blackboard and panoptical- and it was portable, and it made it possible for us to be producers of digitalized things and ideas which could be shared and built with other connected individuals from our own homes or from any other online space. In addition to this, the screen had a “unipersonal” design, made for a single set of eyes, two hands with fingers to type and one person who could release part of his or her archival and present memory inside the machine.

There were many who began to speculate about whether the fact we were doing (or could do) almost everything from our private spaces connected to the Internet would isolate us in our rooms of our own, or if we would transform into chubby creatures paralysed by the lack of physical exercise, or if the eyes watching the screen would dry-up from lack of blinking, making us into computer-obsessed beings devoid of tears, into *Derridian* creatures with “hard, dry eyes”⁸. But none of this happened, or it did not completely happen. This was the outer edge of a range of life forms with a common denominator: the immersion in an immaterial world and the restructuring of our intrinsic spaces and (dislocated) times into new, period-specific, *biopolitical* settings⁹, settings where life and power are sometimes quite dramatically present, sometimes like a vortex of emancipation; settings where we could re-manage the realms of public and private, subvert them even; where our idea of “loneliness” required alteration as did our

working, affective and identitary bonds with others; where we could get carried away (or, to the contrary, take sides) by the shared ideation and construction of our imaginaries of identity and period. These ideas are on the table for discussion in a connected room of one's own, they can be handled and combined with your own. If you are ready open the doors that follow, come inside and make yourselves at home...

POSITION CHAPTER

Verify you are not a robot

LOCATED WRITING:THE SELF THAT SPEAKS FROM A
CONNECTED ROOM OF ONE'S OWN (THEY CANNOT SEE
ME)

Here-Now. Between the kitchen and the window, fifteen feet of my own room and four bookcases. Facing my computer.

(x)_// *Here* is relative. Here is where I am connected and where my writing emerges. Here is a connected room of one's own, but a room of one's own does not always stay the same, although it is invariably a space for privacy and concentration. The constant trips and removals of contemporary nomadic life have led me to build and tear down walls, rooms and my relation to the space. Yet I will say that when I reach the place where I will live for a while, I build my own room as though it were a burrow or a nest. It consists of a chair, a soft one is best (an armchair, cushion or sofa will serve the purpose), my laptop, modem and I myself. I prefer subdued lighting, the corners and any variant of a wing chair, or the real thing, whenever possible. Sat there, one feels (between the foam-retaining wings) that the world does not become so scattered when the screen and the connection are switched on, and they function as small rooms where you can inhabit the Net from home.

A personal part of my own room is a surface near, but not aligned, with my computer on which I can place an energy drink, fizzy drink or water. This surface has to comply with the layout law of the connected room of one's own: drink and computer must coexist on different surfaces, to avoid the tried and tested risk of losing the "ñ" key, the "ç" key or the whole keyboard when the computer (now a cyborg) yearning for glucose gets sick from a spill. The feeling I

have while I am writing is that I am all fingers and eyes, but the liquid I drink gives me back the feeling that I am writing from my body (oh goodness, my body!).

(n)_// I cannot speak as a “native of the Net”. Owing to my age and I think, to a certain extent still to gender culture and generation, computer access and literacy was quite unevenly distributed, it was not egalitarian. I mean it was not like I made the machine into a new limb, reaching out my hands to the mouse and asking questions about the motherboard, as soon as I gained control of the movement of my hands in my infancy. Like many of you, I did not grow up in one of those garages, one of those “Silicon Valley” wannabes, where boys assemble(d) their gadgets, enthusiastically turning their hobby into their job. I had experienced the world before the Internet with intensity, the world of the single screen of the television, but soon and irreversibly the Net arrived. By the mid 1990’s life without plugging the telephone cable into the computer had become unimaginable. Back then we knew what life was like “without living” connected, but we did not know there would be no going back. From that time I have the recollection of a world that disappears almost without nostalgia, and I confess feeling slightly resentful about not knowing more about code and machines, about not having played with the boys in the garage.

(p)_// As my plan is to speak from my own experience in my connected room of my own, I should tell you that I spend a great deal of my time in front of the screen. I also admit to liking it, and I nearly always prefer it to physical encounters. There is no exegesis based on childhood traumas or on special backgrounds to explain this preference for the digital world and that might shed light on it, justify it and provide, en route, a sense of release in the writing of this book. But actually my reasons for staying at home connected to the Internet are small, minor things -

but what can I say, they are important too! A mixture of the warmth of a private, intimate space which when managed online may be made public; of a thinking space for writing granted by the screen in contrast to the hasty pressures of the outside world; of a setting where I encounter this destiny; of a rest from things and their importance; of freedom from intermediaries; of *“do it yourself”*; of a sustainable world; of going over what has been said; of the conversion of the stubborn world of objects into a magical and immaterial universe; of seeing without being seen; of my relationships without the pressure of physical judgements; of sharing the intimacy of the world of others; of giving up insubstantial meetings; of telework and optimal use of my time; of not using the car; of the power of minimizing the email program where one can “wait” for something to arrive, potentially for something to change; of tolerating temporary agreements to be or not to be; of loyalty to one’s rhythms – often disrupted– to mention just a few examples.

In any case, do not think I take these things to the limit. I am not daring enough for a memorably radical, cloistered life. I accept my common ambiguity and just doing so leads me to defend it as a virtue. So much so that, despite frequently choosing my connected room, I often go out, I continue to touch my friends, and I exchange hugs with the people I love. At my age, I know what it is for the body to feel and love, the intensity of its impulses, the touch and palpitation of another next to your own. However, I do feel that affections, desires, relationships, and even creativity and thought, are occurring differently in our time, they adapt to suit our bodies and our way of feeling and thinking about the other too. And I, like Woolf, believe that when the way we interrelate changes, a concurrent change also happens in writing, economics and politics; a reaction, a change affecting our idea about the self.