

**SELF-IMPROVEMENT THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY**

by Chris Reilly

5/13/05

I was a sophomore at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the spring of 2004, when I began an art project that consisted of taking digital photographs of myself every two minutes. For the first version of this project, I photographed myself continuously, twenty-four hours a day, for almost a week. I used a camera with an interval timer, so the frames were exposed automatically. I carried the camera everywhere I went, making sure I was in the frame at all times. I didn't pose; I just went about my business as normally as I could. After the week was up, I compiled all the still shots into a video, with the frames in chronological order. For the second version, which took place in the spring of 2005, I bought a new, more suitable camera specifically for the project, and planned to photograph myself continuously for about six weeks. The shoot ended up lasting ten days. I again compiled the shots into a video. However for the second version, I categorized all the images according to which activities were being performed: eating, sleeping, showering, sex, etc. I then ranked the categories and presented them in ascending order of importance to myself.

Over the course of a year, and two separate manifestations of this idea, I have come to realize that this project is about analyzing my own lifestyle, and facilitating changes in the way I live. The motivation for this project arose, in part, from intense feelings of anxiety which I had been experiencing for about six months prior to the execution of the first version, mostly in regards to the relationship I was in at the time, and also involving a broader questioning of what I was doing in art school and with my life in general. I had been feeling quite strained by the weight of these issues, and my troubles resulted in a fairly extreme case of isolationist workaholism: I was working twenty hours a week in addition to taking 18 credits that semester, the majority of which

were for studio classes. I worked feverishly on my assignments, adhering tenaciously to the hope that, if I created a work complex and ambitious enough, someone would come along and affirm what I was doing, tell me that going to school (specifically art school) is a worthwhile and fulfilling experience and furthermore that my artwork was compelling and noteworthy, and richly deserving of wide acclaim and ample public support.

I used work as an excuse to isolate myself from others: my friends, my girlfriend, my family members. I thought something redemptive would come from the frenzy of work I underwent, and in a strange way that is what happened—though not the way I had expected it to.

## **BACKGROUND NOTES**

### **The Crisis of April, 2004**

I had been thinking all that spring of breaking up with my girlfriend, Laura. We had been together over a year, yet still hadn't quite pulled out of that honeymoon stage where you don't have fights about anything. This had been, for both of us, the first attempt at a serious relationship that had actually gotten anywhere. Needless to say there was a lot of attachment on both sides. I was desperately afraid of alienating her by getting angry or exposing any sort of conflict, ever. I felt claustrophobic, like I was walking on eggshells whenever we were together. I loved Laura and cared about her, and I worried about the consequences of running away from it all. I certainly had no desire to hurt her, but I was unhappy.

I needed to change things, to be able to express myself without fear of everything crashing down around me as a result. I found this aversion to conflict, and preference

towards minimizing social contact for fear of alienating anyone by asserting myself, had leeches into most of my relationships. During the previous fall and winter, I had become very withdrawn. I had gradually stopped spending time with most of my friends; I wanted very much to be alone most of the time. I was much more interested in trying to make artwork and/or extra money than in socializing. Pretty much the only friend I saw with any regularity was Thorne, my roommate, who I stayed consistently angry at for one idiosyncrasy or another: not doing the dishes, being loud, sleeping all day, etc.

I have literally dozens of close family members in and around Chicago, and I rarely took the time to see them, even around holidays. I'd make the mandatory Christmas party in Beverly, but only because I could bum a ride to the suburbs with one of the many folks going that way. I virtually never came back to my hometown, Kalamazoo, for fear that I'd run into one of the horrible ex-girlfriends I'd accumulated, or worse yet, one of my high school classmates.

I had a nice little routine going—class all day five days a week, work at the restaurant on Saturday nights, and leave little time for anything else. Mostly I remained stuffed inside my cluttered dorm room, working on the computer, watching TV, napping. I was constantly anxious and irritable. I felt like I was too attached to everything, work, relationships, anger. It was like being caught in a spider web. I was, for the most part, conscious of these actions and at least somewhat aware of the motivations behind them. In short, I knew on some level that I had to change the way I was living, to open myself more to other people, to stop bracing myself for some kind of horrible loss.

**Speaking of Attachment, Allow Me to List all the Electronic Devices I Need  
to Carry Around With Me At All Times  
(for survival, pleasure, comfort, or in case of emergency)**

- Cell phone
- Insulin pump\*
- Glucose monitor\*
- Laptop computer
- Digital camera

These machines are the tools which allow me to overextend myself: to fly from one part-time job to the next, work 14-hour days, eat, drink, sleep and breathe, be sexually gratified, spend more money than I actually have, and generally live well beyond my means financially, physically, spiritually (and I'm sure in many other ways not listed here). And I'm not being melodramatic or sentimental in saying that, either. True, some of the attachments between these devices and myself do arise out of convenience and/or a desire for a leisurely, middle-class lifestyle. Some are incidental, and could easily be omitted from my life with no adverse effects. But others, I literally depend on to keep me alive. I am physically attached to a small vibrating electronic life-support system twenty-four hours a day, which has the power to drastically affect my moods, coordination, energy levels, and long-term health.

These devices, though inanimate, are far from passive. They require almost constant attention: monitoring, calibrating, recharging, restarting, refilling, repairing,

---

\* For a description of this item, please see the Appendix section.

emptying, organizing, adjusting, locating, remembering. They communicate with me as well as one another, sending back and forth sounds, images, letter and numbers, a great deal of which are drawn directly from results of my physical being and social activity. My sister text messages me from Germany to tell me about her trip; I use Thorne's phone to take a picture of him playing ping-pong, then email it to myself for printing later; I prick my finger and squeeze until it bleeds, then the glucose monitor measures the amount of sugar in my bloodstream at that exact moment, sends the reading to the insulin pump, which computes the amount of the hormone to inject through the tube inserted in my leg; I call my bank's automated phone system to see how much is in my checking account; I call Mom and ask her to send me some money; the camera takes a picture of me every two minutes.

It is a love-hate relationship that I have with all my little electronic friends, not only the camera. I very much need them to maintain the levels of functionality I'm so used to in terms of my physical, social, and leisure activities, as well as to lend a sense of security in the routine of using, maintaining, and remembering them. Despite this, I continually drop them, break them, allow them to run out of batteries, forget them, or remember them and feel as though I'm forgetting them anyway.

### **The Crisis of April 2005**

Again this spring, I find myself retreating into my shell of overworking, rarely taking the time to do anything else that normal people do: clean up, shave, visit friends. Again, stuck in a horrible roommate situation, even worse than last spring, this time with two jobs and the same course load. Laura and I are still together, though we spent a good

portion of the summer apart. I started exercising regularly over the summer, then promptly quit as soon as school started back up.

I don't mean to come off as though nothing has changed since last spring—it certainly has. But there is still a lot of ground to cover. My checking account is overdrawn, and I owe a lot on my credit card, \$400 of which went towards my new camera, a really nice little point-and-shoot that takes some pretty beautiful shots. This model makes photographing myself much easier than the first time. Before, I used a huge, bulky SLR whose batteries enjoyed running out, and whose quality was nowhere near my new one. The relationship situation is better too. Though I still feel overly attached at times, our communication is much better. Perhaps some of my anxiety has transferred over now to wondering what is going to happen after I graduate, with the relationship as well as with gainful employment.

I've learned a lot about art this semester. I've finally calmed down about the validity of my situation, and the need for affirmation, which has allowed me to make some very good progress. I've still managed to fall back into my old patterns again, of working too much and bracing myself for the end of the world, of putting off simple things like buying groceries until the end of the semester. Despite my relapse, I seriously considered not going through with this project a second time. I dreaded having the camera with me all the time, and recalled how much it amplified my anxiety during times of stress. Looking back, I am very glad I decided to go through with it.

### **PRODUCTION NOTES**

It only took me about three days to really start hating the camera. Although this model is smaller and lighter, and the batteries last longer than the model I first used, it is

still a total bitch. It restricts me, intrudes on me, harasses me—I feel like I can always see it flashing its little red light at me. Though I try to ignore it as much as possible, I am constantly reminded of its presence whenever I hear its little whirring shutter noise, which is often (every two minutes when I'm awake, every ten minutes when I'm asleep). It intrudes on my most private activities (sex, peeing/shitting, nose-picking, etc.) and makes me feel at times like I am very much on display for an audience, and must to make myself look (at least somewhat) presentable. I find that I'm much more concerned with my appearance than I normally am, wondering if I will look like a fat, undesirable, boring middle-class computer nerd, or worse yet, a fat, undesirable, boring middle-class artist.

One of the times I'm most self-conscious is when I'm spending time with my Laura. I worry whether or not we look happy enough? Affectionate enough? *Do I look like a selfish asshole sitting alone at the computer? Should I go sit next to her and put my arm around her just to make sure?* At the same time I don't want to look like one of those couples, clinging to each other like static-charged socks. The absolute worst is when we're arguing. I feel like a complete jackass trying to position the camera and plead my case at the same time. If the shoe were on the other foot, I would be doubly mad at her for fiddling with a camera when we were trying to fight about something. The camera becomes a weird little chaperone when we spend time together.

Fucking and jerking off have become quite awkward as well. Again, it's almost as if there's someone watching the process—imagine doing it in front of a large window, at night with all the lights on inside. Turning the lights out helps, but still, it's just weird. I worry that Laura's parents and/or my parents will one day see the footage of us having sex and become highly offended. Likewise for jerking off.

I worry that one of my family members will see me drinking and smoking that joint at the dinner party I went to, and give me a disapproving, “Oh, *Christopher!*” I worry generally that viewers will disapprove of my overall lifestyle: “Why do you spend *so* much time at the computer? Why don’t you ever exercise? Do you ever shave?” I’m afraid being looked down at for being a nice boring middle-class comfortable well-fed guy.

Attachment to the camera also becomes a stumbling block in areas that are much more mundane than sex and class. When I am out running errands, one hand is automatically reserved for holding the camera, a hindrance that frustrates me to no end—*looks like I can’t buy that 30-pack that’s on sale at the grocery store, or carry home that nice shelf someone left in the alley.* It prevents me from reading on the subway, because I can’t hold the camera and the book and have my face in the shot at the same time. So instead of reading, I am free to notice the weird and curious looks from strangers. Some people don’t notice at all, but others seemed quite puzzled and/or intrigued, giving me those sly sideways, ‘hey-don’t-mind-me-I’m-just-casually-glancing-around-but-*whoa-what-the-fuck-are-you-doing???*’ looks.

I have also had the distinct pleasure of trying to explain the project to many friends, family members, and total strangers. While I make it a point most times to be discreet about what I’m doing with this camera, I have often been spared the trouble of bringing up the topic, because without fail, in whatever social situation I happen to be in, one of my friends or family members who already knows about the project will pipe up; “Guess what *he’s* doing? He’s taking a picture of himself *every two minutes!* Isn’t that *crazy?! Hey, Chris, come tell them about your project!*” Reactions usually vary around

the themes of confusion, embarrassment (for me, most likely), mild interest, or my personal favorite, “That’s nice,” accompanied by a polite smile, nod, and a glance in an upwards, far-off direction.

Despite the disdain and resentment I’ve developed towards the camera, it does lend an odd sense of security to many of my actions. I am never quite alone, which feels nice sometimes, and there is always the redeeming hopefulness instilled in me by the thought that whatever I am doing will probably look interesting in the final video. Still, I can’t shake the conviction that I really do hate the thing and all its demands and intrusions. More and more often, I’ve found myself completely forgetting about the camera—setting it down, often in a state of disgust, and walking out of its range for several minutes. I’ve seriously considered tethering myself to the camera with a string, but decided that would be too cumbersome and limiting to my range of motion, and I would probably end up having to take it off at times anyway to avoid becoming hopelessly entangled, for instance when I went to sleep. The tether would also increase the odds of the camera falling and breaking. It’s an expensive camera, and I want to finish shooting for the six-week duration I planned.

After ten consecutive days of continuous shooting, I drop my camera and break the lens. I set it on top of the refrigerator when I come into the kitchen, and it falls off when I open the refrigerator door. The camera is broken so I have to stop shooting and send it back to the service center to get it repaired. At first, I’m pretty upset that my camera is broken, and a bit embarrassed since it was completely my fault. Maybe, subconsciously, I was just sick of having to deal with it. I can honestly say that part of me is quite relieved to be free from its watchful eye.

It has taken me quite a long time to get used to not having the camera with me. I am constantly convinced that I'm forgetting something when I leave the house, and I'm still just a little bit more on edge than usual. And weeks after I've stopped shooting, I'm still convinced of hearing the tiny buzz-whirl-click of the shutter that sounded every couple of minutes. I'm especially convinced of hearing it in the mornings, just after waking up, and it usually takes a second or two for me to realize the camera is not actually there anymore. It gives a weird jolt to imagine I'm hearing that noise, almost a conditioned response. It's like that little noise the alarm clock makes just before it rings full blast, and the reaction is like that unconscious start, and deep quick inhalation that overtakes you every time you hear the noise when you're awake.

### **POST-PRODUCTION NOTES**

Until the very last minute, I had been planning to present the photographs from the second version of my project in the same way that I had presented the first: a chronologically ordered time-lapse. I actually rendered such a version, but in the end decided I needed to intervene further into the footage I had taken. The chronologically ordered version, while interesting and mesmerizing to watch, makes it seem as though the whole process is about my ability to endure my own pseudo-scientific regiment.

This project is not really about the endurance aspect of carrying a camera with me everywhere, it's about looking at myself, looking at what I do with myself, how I think and interact with the people and things around me, how I prioritize my actions, and how the frequency of different actions relates to their importance to me.

I'm realizing now that much of my motivation for undertaking this project was a desire to analyze and understand my own lifestyle, and possibly to let some improvements come about as a result of what I see myself doing. This is, potentially, a fairly large risk to take on as part of an art project. Most artwork I do has little or no prospect of directly causing me to change my own behavior, especially behavior that is not directly related to the art-making process; I see this as a chance to mature, directly, from an artistic action.

I don't think it's any coincidence that I chose to document, for both versions of this project, the period of the year which is the most stressful for me: the end of the spring semester. I think it's fitting that I chose to examine the emotional, physical, and social attachments that I have not by distancing myself from these behaviors, but by immersing myself further in them in order to document them without disruption. It is only as a result of this extra attachment to the camera that I can look back on what it is I've been doing and how I have been behaving: to organize, categorize, and prioritize my past actions in a way that is not possible through mere recollection or reflection.

The changes I hope to come about as a result of this project go far beyond the superficial alteration of daily activities, for example getting more exercise (Though I do feel a need to change that part of my daily routine—indeed there are many behaviors I would like to add and subtract: more reading and playing, less time in front of the computer, more time outside, etc., etc.). I am hoping that I can relieve myself of the need for any extreme attachment, whether it is in a relationship (familial or romantic), whether it is in my own emotional processing, or whether it is an attachment to the functions of technology in relation to my social or physical being. I'm not saying that I

want to become some untouchable hard-ass that doesn't feel emotion or need human contact—quite the opposite. I want to be able to feel and experience things without the fear of losing them, without trying to control them, without the need for the security instilled by their presence; in relationships, social situations, all aspects of my life. I want to be able to hold on or let go freely, without fear or anxiety.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Insulin Pump –**

I have been diabetic since age two. I use a device called an insulin pump that automatically injects the hormone into my body. It is small, about the size of a cell phone or large pager. It has four buttons and a 2-color LCD screen. A small plastic insulin-filled cartridge fits into the side, and a tube extends from the cartridge into the infusion patch, which is another piece of plastic with a smaller tube that actually extends into my body --usually it's inserted under the skin of my leg. The pump itself is quite sophisticated, and emanates numerous alerts to let me know how things are going. It vibrates and beeps quite frequently. The vibrations are quite abrasive; they always make me think of one of those small, yapping dogs that just won't shut up. The pump is attached to my body twenty-four hours a day, continuously infusing small amounts of insulin into my body, which regulates my blood glucose levels.

While the tube is detachable, I can only be free from it for about an hour before I start feeling tired, irritable, and dehydrated. If I were to go on continuously without taking any insulin, I would become violently ill and eventually go into a coma and die,

probably within the course of a few weeks. Conversely, if I were to take too much insulin, I would become tired, confused and uncoordinated. Eventually I would go unconscious if I didn't eat anything, and could even risk brain damage had I taken a sufficient dose. Before lobotomies, insulin was used to treat mental patients by chemically damaging their brains.

### **Glucose monitor –**

Again, about the same size as a small cell phone or a pager. The glucose monitor measures the amount of glucose in my bloodstream, which reading I use to determine whether I need to take more insulin, or whether I need to eat something. It works by inserting a small test strip into a slot on the top of the meter. A lancet device—a small spring-loaded needle—is then used to prick the tip of my finger, for the purpose of extracting a small blood sample for testing. The test takes about five seconds, and the reading tells me the amount of sugar in milligrams per deciliter of my blood. A normal reading is about 100, give or take 10. My readings range from 50 to 350, most of the time. The meter has a transmitter which sends the reading to the insulin pump, which then calculates the amount of insulin, if any, I should take based on its reading.