

New Rules of Public Intimacy

Multitudes of scantily-clad bodies splash across anonymous screen, some just shy of naked, but none shy. Women deftly strike erotic poses, flaunting their feminine attributes for economic gain, visual consumption, and masturbatory enjoyment. The ancient trope of selling sex for money is being reformed thanks to the internet. And in this particular meeting of sex and technology, Oren Lukatz finds art. His most recent project blasts us with an abundance of images of women as he artistically explores a new phenomenon that is changing the way we think about sex workers and eros in the virtual world—thus his title, *New Rules for Public Intimacy*.

The rules are new because women call the shots, and the intimacy is “public” because matters most personal migrate through the wire into the public domain of the internet’s virtual theatre. Samuel Mateus has coined the term *extimacy* when referring to the simultaneous existence of the intimate and the exterior as they are facilitated by the internet. *Extimacy* is a kind of virtual “intimacy”—an abstraction of traditional intimacy, a “closeness” that nonetheless is far away. The pleasures and dangers of extimacy are also more abstract. New rules are required. And the women are making them. As Hannah Reiter, one of the women Lukatz showcases in his art, says, “I just get paid to be myself, and I get to wear whatever I want, and I get to work wherever I want, and I get to do whatever I want in that time that someone has decided they want to spend with me.... I never do anything I don't want to do.” Now that’s different.

Lukatz views himself as a sociologist/anthropologist, documenting the intersection of sex work and social media. He focuses on the phenomenon called OnlyFans, an online content

sharing-platform linked to Instagram and launched in 2016 that has become increasingly popular during the coronavirus lockdown. While OnlyFans creators can upload any kind of content, the platform became highly popular with sex workers. The sex content creators upload erotic pictures and livestream videos in which they perform erotic dances and sexual acts. They also chat with their fans, and generally promote their business. Though the site has grown to include celebrities, LGBTQ influencers, and others who promote their work, Lukatz's focus is on its female sex workers and the men who subscribe to their content-driven platforms. Men pay monthly fees to view imagery too explicit for Instagram. If they add tips, they can direct message the women and receive photos and videos created on demand. Lukatz calls the women *erotic influencers* because they ultimately control the nature of content they monetize. Currently OnlyFans has more than 130 million registered users, the majority being Americans.

Lukatz's art employs multimedia tools to convey the breadth and depth of the OnlyFans performers, showcasing the women and the ways they choose to present themselves and interact with their followers. The photographs are selected for viewing by the women themselves. Some show glimpses of their behind-the-scene lives. Audio recordings have the women reading texts from their fans and describing their feelings about what they do for a living. Short videos and bits of their bios are shared. All of this is made possible through the internet, the heart of the tech revolution that has revolutionized just about everything, including the ways people obtain sexual and social fulfillment.

Sex and technology have a long history of partnering for pleasure, novelty, and limit breaking. Both originate in the restlessness of humanity whose core desire is to transcend limits and existing frameworks. Both can be creative or destructive. Both risk hidden dangers in the

quest for greater benefits. Both are aggressive, invasive, and potentially addictive. Not surprisingly, the sea change in our world due to advanced technology also creates a new sexual landscape that includes but is not limited to sexting, cheap, accessible and widely varied on-line pornography, sex chat rooms, virtual sex, teledildonics, sex dolls and robots, and more, always more.

Lukatz's art project is following a subset of these possibilities in pursuit of the revelatory spaces being opened in the new cultural milieu in which remote sex work is possible. In one sense this is a very old activity. Women selling sexual favors. Men wanting to buy them. Men wanting to look at women. Women wanting to be looked at while remaining safe from the violence that can at times accompany male sexuality. Women wanting to perform. Men wanting women to perform for their sexual pleasure. The trope is primordial, since human biology and its evolutionary imperative to mate is basically the same as it was some 100,000 years ago. However, due to advanced technology, this trope finds new expression, one that alters the traditional power differential between sex worker and client in favor of the former.

From this viewpoint, OnlyFans can be a feminist sex worker's dream. The erotic influencer has complete freedom regarding what she chooses to exhibit and how she wishes to interact with her fans. She is a model, a performer, a creative artist. Most of all, she is a businesswoman. OnlyFans takes 20% of what she earns. But the most popular of the influencers can make upward of \$100,000/month. In addition to being their own financial managers, the OnlyFans platform sex workers use has a built-in safety net. The influencers are no longer beholden to pimps or porn managers; they do not need to touch or be touched in real life; they are not in danger of violence or abuse, STDs or COVID. The risk they take has to do with the

loss of anonymity, yet not all women experience this as a risk because many enjoy the exhibitionistic and performative aspects of OnlyFans.

With all the stigma attached to the profession of being a sexual performer in *any* venue, surely having a strong exhibitionist bent helps one along, as it can make the work more enjoyable. Convention frowns upon exhibitionism and traditional psychiatry labels it a disorder. This may be because exhibitionism in women transgresses against the notion of passive female sexuality, disrupting the patriarchal narrative while challenging the power differential it imposes.

The other side of exhibitionism is of course voyeurism which certainly applies to the followers of these female performers. But here it also applies to the performers themselves. They see themselves in the feedback they get, the following they build, and the income they grow. They see themselves in the mirror of their brand and their success or failure as a performer. This offers the possibility of an additional level of self-enjoyment. *I see myself being seen and by and large I like what I see. I am a star.* Since much of their content is video, they can literally watch themselves perform and use those clips to critique and improve their performances.

Thus, OnlyFans offers multiple layers of exhibitionism and voyeurism. The influencers display their bodies in seductive poses and during sexual acts. Their subscribers delight in voyeuristic and masturbatory pleasure. The women relish the attention they receive by sharing in the men's visual indulgence. Like most photographers, Lukatz sublimates his voyeuristic desires into his art. The gallery audiences are also drawn into the role of voyeur.

One of the intriguing facts about OnlyFans is that subscribers don't always pay more for increased nudity or sex acts. Many appear more interested in seeking intimacy. After all, porn is free on the internet, and orgasm is the goal of porn watching. With OnlyFans, orgasm is not

necessarily the center of sexuality. What the men get from OnlyFans that porn doesn't offer is an illusion that they are in a relationship with the woman. It is ongoing. It is interactive. The woman responds to their requests. It becomes easier for the men to overlook the fact that they are in the midst of a business exchange.

Some erotic influencers are so attuned to the male need for bonding with a woman that they express concern and compassion for their clients. They remember their names, their children's names, birthdays, surgeries, etc. A few may even provide counsel. To say an emotional relationship, however fueled by fantasy, is not possible because sex is being sold is ridiculous. A kind of intimacy (extimacy) can exist between influencer and client that transcends the parasocial relationship fans have with stars. It gets personal and it gets real.

Like any relationship this one does not come without its difficulties. Erotic influencers pay a price for the existential conflict that exists in the space between lust and decorum, between the transactional nature of all relationships and what we call love—between *who we are below the table* and *who try to appear to be above the table*. (This gap, and all its accompanying neuroses, is the very same gap Freud cited as existing between civilization and its discontents.) When a client pursues a performer as if she were a goddess and then demeans her as a “whore” at a later date, because he was disappointed or slighted by her, he is expressing the hypocrisy of a social order that is at odds with its own desires. He is also reflecting an embodied social attitude of hostility toward women, especially toward those who sell sex. He hates what he needs because he cannot control it and it threatens him. Men are afraid of women because of the psychic damage they might cause. Women are afraid of men for the same reason but also because *they might kill them*. Yet, the danger that each presents to the other is at the heart of what charges

the erotic space between them. Sex is risky business. It leads to love. To life changing decisions. To kids. And, yes, sometimes to heartache, violence, and even murder.

Capitalists who invest in platforms like OnlyFans build them on sex because sex draws customers like no other product, but once that aim is achieved the puppet masters of the site want to dissociate themselves from it. Recently, OnlyFans announced that, beginning in October 2021, they will no longer allow sexually explicit content and the depictions of sexual acts. Many of the sex workers were furious and frightened, feeling betrayed and exploited by a website they helped build and prosper. A few days later, OnlyFans changed its mind about not allowing sexual content. No matter what happens, Lukatz's photos have succeeded in capturing the time-limited golden age of sex work on OnlyFans. It may also prove to be a timely freeze-frame of the golden age of 21st century internet sexuality.

Lukatz's art also exposes the hypocrisy around sex and the site(s) that promotes it with a wink and a nod through the "poetry" written and performed in his project, stanzas spoken by OnlyFans erotic influencers that alternate between lifted content of community guidelines and the messages they receive from clients.

{Hey beautiful}

Let your hands loose

Nice tits babe

Bend over please

Lift up that dress,

I wanna see under that hood

I know you can hear me lol

*We want Instagram to
continue to be an
authentic and
safe place for
inspiration and
expression*

I like what I see,
do you like what you see?!

*Help us foster
this community*

Dance please
Can u twerk?
Shake ya jugs
Don't be angry sweetie
Tell us what types of dudes you like

Post only

your own photos and videos

and always follow the law

Erotic influencers work hard *above the table* producing content, relating to subscribers, and marketing their product. They also work hard *below the table*, reconciling what they do against whatever reservation they themselves may have about doing it.

“Where do I see myself in five or 10 years? Yeah, now this is a big question. [chuckle]

Yeah, I see myself being a big-time advocate for changing the *stigma around sex work*.” (ref. #5) [Italics Mine]

“Mom doesn't *fucking understand* what I do, but she understands that this is what I do and it's paying money.” (ref. #6) [Italics Mine]

“So, in that sense, yeah, I do agree that it's sort of a *fake intimacy*,... I think it's powerful for women to monetize off of it, these guys wanna pay for it, *so...*” (ref. #6) [Italics Mine]

“I'm very good, and I'm very good at a lot of parts of the sex work industry..... I wanna teach what I've learned and help other girls along the way *so I don't have to do this...*” (ref#6) [Italics Mine]

The art at times touches on the conflict that some performers may feel about their work. One of Lukatz's photographs shows a nude performer dressed only in high heels who writes squibs over her photographs: "Here I am, a muse, a woman, my *image* my likeness, used under the guise of individuality." [italics mine] The image eclipses her individuality so much as to render it a mere guise. Over another photo of her in sexy undergarments and stockings, she writes, "I'm selling myself. My *image*, my likeness, my personality." [italics mine] She is selling herself, yes, but only as she can, in the form of an image. Even her personality winds up being part of the image/fantasy of her male audience. A photograph of "Domo," another influencer's tattooed arm, reads "I love you but I fucking hate you." Presumably this is a message to her fans. But it may also be a message to herself. We are all entangled in relationships, and sometimes we take turns telling each other to fuck off.

Lukatz's art is saturated with risqué photographs of women posing, often with their phones. The art draws attention to the idea of the image, to the replacement of actual presence with virtual presence. Entering the home page of the art site, one sees pages turning through an old copy of Playboy magazine, acknowledging the historical point in America where the soft porn image went mainstream. This is quickly followed by a male hand thumbing through erotic female images on an iPhone. The image does the heavy lifting in the virtual relationship. The art emphasizes that the phone, the camera, and the computer screen have become the windows upon which the performer projects her aspirations in the form of her image, whether still or moving, and upon which men in turn project their fantasies and desires.

We might even argue that the overall scope of Lukatz's art project is to draw attention to the *meta-image and its fetishization*. The image does the work (going from the influencer to her

audience), and the *image of the image* (that returns to the influencer via the audience) is the *meta-image*. The meta-image is then fetishized—the performer becomes her own totem. To put it in the words of the unconscious: *I see my image being viewed by others and thereby see and enjoy a new image of myself as an “object” of desire. I am not a true object of desire but only the image of one, yet my powers are so great that even my image, whether still or moving in some sexual act, can answer the desire of hundreds, if not thousands, of men.*

Lukatz places the idea of the pornographic image in tension with arousal’s opposite, which is calmness or serenity. In the short video titled “How’s the Mindfulness Going?” a plethora of sexual images of women is generated across the screen so fast that the eye cannot seize upon any one. All the images are shot with an iPhone and some even have text entries on the bottom. The stream ends with the question, “How’s the Mindfulness Going?” This video correctly suggests that sexual excitement and the things that elicit it have always been opposed to quieting the mind and managing desire. It also suggests that the internet and communication technology can multiply images and reinforce desire at an overwhelming rate. Finally, the video may be implying that because technology is moving so fast it has itself become an overwhelming reality.

In its various “snapshots” of OnlyFans female sex work, Lukatz’s art reflects how the desire to perform and the desire to *control* the performance (by both performer and follower) is the essential boundary that charges the situation erotically and even makes social connection possible. To reflect a timeless trope, Jack Morin, author of *The Erotic Mind*, devised a formula: attraction plus obstacle = sexual excitement. Every sexual interaction, however technologically

mediated, involves the negotiation for power, the need to control, and the concealment and exposure of vulnerability.

The colors, the lighting, and the entire texture of Lukatz's photos suggest a kind of *cheese cake camp*. Whether this is intentional on the part of the artist is an interesting question. Lukatz is demonstrating something very particular to what we might call *American Sexuality*. A kind of shallow hyper-realism is expressed in bright, colorful, gaudy, repetitive images that catch the eye and almost numb the mind—the idea that sex might exist in its own realm as pure pleasure and delight apart from the incontrovertible truth that it is always accompanied by too muchness and pain (*jouissance*).

Whether this was intentional on the part of the artist is irrelevant. The tension between conscious intent and unconscious motive isn't the point here. Perhaps the point is that sex cannot possibly keep its promises. That might be the meta-message of this artwork.

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The Age of Perversion: Desire and Technology in Psychoanalysis and Culture

The New Sexual Landscape and Contemporary Psychoanalysis