

Rebooting the real world *by Chris Reilly*

IT IS 2005. I'M STUDYING ART AND TECHNOLOGY AT the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I am a typical mid-20s American college student, complete with credit card debt, emotional insecurity and a deep-seated need to prove art school as both a fulfilling experience and a worthwhile investment of my borrowed money. Nonetheless, I spend my time happily hacking video games, making fake websites, wiring LEDs and avoiding social interaction. An embarrassingly high proportion of my time is spent interacting with electronic gadgetry.

The fact is not lost on me that my chosen medium of distraction comes with some serious baggage: environmental impacts of its production and social impacts of its use, which include its tendency to amplify hyper-individualism, consumerism, general vacuity and the blind optimism that technology can, will, must solve our problems (including the ones it creates).

In spite of this knowledge, I also know that I am forced into an acceptance of the central role technology plays in my world. I have been a Type 1 diabetic since age two. I use a cell-phone-sized insulin pump to regulate my blood glucose levels. A cartridge filled with synthetic, genetically-engineered hormone fits into its side. While the pump is detachable, I can only be free from it for about an hour before I start feeling sick. Without insulin, I become violently ill and eventually go into a coma and die, probably within the course of a few weeks.

Insulin pump, cell phone, laptop, camera and glucose monitor – my arsenal of machines allows me, in fact encourages me, to work 14-hour days at multiple part-time jobs, eat, drink, sleep, breathe, be sexually gratified, spend more money than I have and live beyond my means financially, physically, spiritually. My devices, though inanimate, are far from passive. They require constant attention: calibrating, recharging, restarting, emptying, refilling, organizing, adjusting, locating, remembering. They communicate with me and one another, sending back and forth sounds, images, text, numbers – data drawn directly from the reverbera-

tions of my physical being and social activity. How I'd love to drop them all, forget about them, but I'm in too deep.

The only way out of the hole is to keep digging, to push all my chips to the middle and forge the "Mediated Experience to End all Mediated Experiences." One last epic war, a slingshot around the dark side of the moon, one final and probably vain attempt to return to Earth. So many of my modern actions leave no trace – the phone calls, emails, text messages, all fleeting impulses that disappear like snowflakes in my hand. I need some way to look back in at myself looking out, to try to glean some sort of insight on how to make an escape, whether it's even worth it, and whether what I need to escape from has anything to do with the state I'm in.

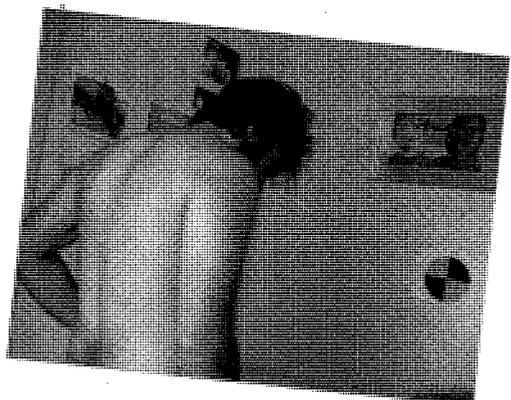
So I am about to begin an art project which involves taking digital photographs of myself every two minutes – a time-lapse self-portrait of sorts. I'm using a camera (bought on credit) with an interval timer, so the frames will expose automatically. I'll carry the camera everywhere, making sure I am in the frame at all times, acting as naturally as possible.

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It's only a few days into the project and already I hate the camera. It restricts me, intrudes on me, harasses me – I can always see it flashing its little red light at me. I try to ignore it. I remember its presence whenever I hear the little shutter noise. It makes me feel like I'm very much on display for an audience (which I am). I'm more concerned with my appearance, 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 girlfriend. I worry whether we look happy enough? Affectionate enough? *Do I look like a selfish asshole sitting alone at this computer? Should I go sit next to her and put my arm around her just to make sure? Or is that too much false sentiment?*

I feel like a complete jackass when we argue, trying to position the camera and plead my case at the same time.



PHOTOS: CHRIS REILLY

The camera becomes a weird little chaperone when we're together. Someone is abstractly watching, or will be. I worry that my parents will one day see the footage of us having unmarried sex and become highly offended. Selective darkness helps, but still, it's weird.

I worry that one of my family members will see me drinking too much and smoking a joint at that dinner party. I anticipate a general disapproval of my lifestyle: "Why do you spend so much time at the computer? Why don't you ever exercise? Do you ever shave?" I'm afraid of being looked down upon for being a well-fed middle-class male.

I have the distinct pleasure of trying to explain the project to friends, family and perfect strangers. While I make it a point to be discreet with the camera, I'm often spared the trouble of broaching the subject. Whatever the social situation, someone who knows will pipe up: "Guess what *he's* doing? Isn't that *crazy*?! Chris, come tell them about your project!" Reactions are variations on the themes of confusion, embarrassment (for me), mild interest, or my personal favorite, "That's nice," accompanied by a polite smile and a glance in a far-off direction. Funny how none of them bat an eye when a friend walks off mid-conversation to answer a cell phone.

Despite my growing disdain and resentment toward the camera, it lends a sense of security to my actions. I am never quite alone, which feels nice sometimes, and there is always the redeeming hopefulness instilled by the thought that whatever I am doing will probably look interesting in the end. Still, I can't shake the conviction that I really do hate the thing and all its demands and intrusions.

After ten days of continuous shooting, I drop my camera. The lens is broken. I have to stop shooting and send it for repair. At first I'm upset and embarrassed, it being my fault completely. Maybe I was sick of having to deal with it. Part of me is relieved to be free from its watchful eye.

It takes a long time to adjust to not having the camera

with me. I always feel like I'm forgetting something. Weeks after I've stopped shooting, I hear the tiny buzz-whirl-click of the shutter. It's especially clear in the morning, just after I wake up, and it usually takes a second or two to realize the camera is not actually there. It gives a weird jolt to imagine I'm hearing that noise, a conditioned response. It's like that little noise the alarm clock makes just before it rings full blast, and the deep quick inhalation that overtakes you every time you hear the noise when you're awake.

Looking back, this was not the "Mediated Experience to End all Mediated Experiences" – nothing as dramatic as I had hoped. Not the glorious transcendent liberation from my technological shackles, not the fast track to simplicity and enlightenment. The result has been a subtle shift, a slight increase in awareness of the breadth of things that lie outside my narrow experience. A tiny change in trajectory that will hopefully, eventually lead me toward a better path.

When I look at the pictures, I remember every scene. Every little detail normally glazed over and forgotten; moods, conversations, meals, minutia. Each frame pulls a

little string in my memory and the time and the place come back, and I compare myself now to myself then. The shrill hyper-awareness of always worrying about the camera contrasts with a comfortability in the attachments, forced and chosen, that surround me now.

I still spend all day in front of a computer – it's how I make my living – but I do so with a better sense of where my priorities lie. Carrying the camera didn't help me much in my quest to escape modernity, but it did help me to see the value of calming down and living more comfortably in the grey areas of my life.

Chris Reilly now teaches in the field of designed objects at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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