

# 16 CHAPTER FABRICA

by Magdalena  
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## You're Never Alone With Your Mobile Phone: Experiences of Intimacy<sup>1</sup>

INTRODUCTION BY  
LIZ WHITEHEAD, FABRICA

In 2016 in partnership with Brighton Digital Festival and Dr Cecile Chevalier, Lecturer in Media Practice, University of Sussex, Elly Clarke was selected for a small-scale commission, Remote Intimacy.

As one of Fabrica's two commissions for TIPP Remote Intimacy was tasked with investigating human to human contact and intimacy across geographical distance, as it is increasingly mediated and entangled with nonhuman others. This thematic had first been explored at the opening conference for the Understanding Territoriality project via Mary Agnes Krell's paper on proxemics and digital intimacies.<sup>2</sup> The commission theme was developed by Elly Clarke to function as a series of live in-person and online performances, running over four days as part of Brighton Digital Festival 2016.

The Remote Intimacy commission was supported by AHCR Research Fellow, Dr Magdalena Tyżlik-Carver. A researcher and curator, Magdalena's interdisciplinary work investigates how computation influences contemporary cultural practices, a subject explored in her PhD thesis. Magdalena was based at University of Sussex and Fabrica for the duration of her fellowship (March-July 2016), where she researched *the ecologies of intimacy*<sup>3</sup>, focusing on if and how intimacy is experienced when mediated by contemporary computational technologies.



**Video still from *I Want to See You From a Different Perspective* by Elly Clarke for #Sergina, 2014**

<sup>1</sup> The first part of this title is a line from the song *Instantaneous Culture* by Elly Clarke.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Agnes Krell is Senior Lecturer in Media and Film Studies, University of Sussex

<sup>3</sup> <https://ecologiesofintimacy.wordpress.com/>

*So that intimacy of mind established between us was a bond, indeed, but an obscure and austere one, not so much admitting further light (as I had expected it to) as showing the extent of the darkness.*

Ursula K. LeGuin



**Video still from *Instantaneous Culture*, by Elly Clarke for #Sergina 2013**

Migration into the digitally networked sphere of human encounters has been taking place for some time now. Networked infrastructures of the Internet and the World Wide Web started as glorious examples of neutral spaces, located away from the centres of power while assuring individual freedoms for all.<sup>4</sup> Today when half the world population is online and in the UK almost all adults aged 16–24 use social media regularly, the story is rather more complex.<sup>5</sup> Our social lives move online as we meet and friend people on Facebook, via WhatsApp or Snapchat and we increasingly become more intimate in this online social space. Experiences of friendship, love and intimacy are transformed; we are surprised by online intimacy and at the same time it seems that intimacy online is not possible.

Intimacy is often associated with love and friendship and is regularly used as a euphemism for sexual contact and satisfaction. In either case it is believed to encompass a particular kind of accomplishment, an experience of wholeness of the self, or a wholeness achieved when in a close relationship with another. Through defining our most personal feelings and therefore being closest to our ‘inner self’, intimacy can be expressed as the ability ‘to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures’.<sup>6</sup> This kind of intimacy results from a particular kind of self-knowledge; being in touch with one’s own feelings allows a person to be able to know themselves better and deeper.

The self-knowledge that arises from intimacy is a condition of the self-government of rational beings.<sup>7</sup> The experience of the self as a rational being suggests that intimacy is ‘a matter of degree rather than kind’,<sup>8</sup> as it marks the depth of knowledge about the self: intimate self-knowledge as a process of knowing. However, in the seventeenth century, when the word intimacy first entered the English language, it was connected to a rational practice through which the self emerged as an objectified and disengaged entity, able to rationally reflect on the actions and emotions of the subject. It allowed man (sic!) to relate to himself in a rational and civilised manner, producing a particular humanist subject of “rational man”. This subjectivity was only available to white men of certain social status, leaving space for ‘an other who may or may not enter into an intimate relation with the self.’<sup>9</sup>

In Plato’s *Symposium*, the character Aristophanes delivers a speech describing early mythical people.<sup>10</sup> They combined both female and

**4** Net neutrality is a principle that all data, users and platforms are treated the same by the Internet service providers who transfer data, and government and related agencies who regulate laws and standards that govern the Internet. For introductory reading on the subject, see Wikipedia entry for net neutrality and post blog by the inventor of the Web Sir Tim Berners-Lee, <http://dig.csail.mit.edu/breadcrumbs/node/144>.

**5** For Internet Usage Statistics visit <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm> and <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2016>

**6** Lauren Berlant, *Intimacy: A Special Issue, Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 281.

**7** Oswin and Olund, *Governing Intimacy*.

**8** See for example: Richard E. Sexton, *Intimacy. A Historical Perspective*, in *Intimacy*, ed. Martin Fisher and George Stricker (New York: Plenum Press, 1982); Chris Rojek, *Presumed Intimacy: Parasocial Interaction in Media, Society and Celebrity Culture* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015); Natalie Oswin and Eric Olund, *Governing Intimacy, Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 60–67, doi:10.1068/d2801ed. Other examples include popular literature and self-help guides on the subject.

**9** Oswin and Olund, *Governing Intimacy*.

**10** *Ibid.*, 60–61.

male features, had four arms, legs and ears, two sets of genitals and two faces on one head, each face set in opposite directions. They were strong and proud people who decided to assault the gods and for this they were punished by Zeus who cut them in two. In his speech, delivered in praise of love (Eros), Aristophanes describes how, since those earliest times, we humans have been only separated tokens that have to be brought together 'because we are sliced like fillets of sole, two out of one; and so each is always in search of his own token.' In the story it is Eros that is 'the bringer-together' and the 'healer' of human nature. The popular idea that intimacy can only be experienced by people in a close relationship, completing each other through love, can be seen as having its beginnings in this speech. What also becomes clear in Aristophanes' speech is the connection between intimacy, power and governance. The gods' fear of people led to this slicing and dividing into two while creating the need for intimacy among humans. To find the self as another is a focus of human life according to Aristophanes, but it can also be seen as a way to govern.



Video still from Trailer for *#Sergina's Stimulatingly Sexy Simultaneous Simulation of Herself* edited by Nicky Miller for #Sergina, 2016

The paradox of intimacy and its simultaneous connection to power can be traced in intimacy today. Displaying the personal in public as a form of self-revelation marks the experience of intimacy in the digital era. Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp or Google Search are a mix of private and public engagements. They are private because they are often (though not always) meant as a personal communication with friends and family, or as private searches for information. They are also private because the tools used for this communication belong to



private companies, often located somewhere in Silicon Valley. They are public because they contribute to creating an online public sphere through tweets and posts that comment on current affairs in politics or social life. Recorded for Vine,

Video still from *Instantaneous Culture*, by Elly Clarke for #Sergina 2013

uploaded to Instagram, or revealed on Snapchat, our intimate moments are no longer restricted to private rooms or homes, nor are they shared with closest friends or lovers, as registered users routinely sign away any rights to the content they create or contribute to the company that owns the platform they use. Such content can be revealed repeatedly online, infinitely tagged, linked, liked and logged and so any private content is already (potentially) public since there are myriad ways in which private and personal communication leaks out into the open.

How do we rethink intimacy for the digital age? Could the phenomenon of fake news or desire for authenticity in social media be other ways through which contradictions that pull intimacy and power together are played out online? Today when we connect not just with people but platforms and algorithms in what is referred to as an extreme sharing culture, are we able to achieve intimacy as self-knowledge, close friendship or love?

These questions are at the heart of #Sergina's queer life that presents itself as a multi-bodied, gender-ambiguous and multi-locationable persona performing simultaneously offline and online, most often in *places beginning with B*, in Facebook and Instagram posts and Soundcloud, Vimeo and YouTube uploads.<sup>11</sup> #Sergina is 'a border straddling drag princess with a mobile phone obsession.' She exists through appearances on social media and in her poetry.



<sup>11</sup> See Sergina's social media: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UColcthG1GopxFhGl-BCOepOw>, <https://soundcloud.com/ser-gina>, <http://theultima-tesergina.tumblr.com/>, [@sergina](https://www.facebook.com/sergina/), <https://www.facebook.com/sergina/>

Performance still from #Sergina's *Stimulatingly Sexy Simultaneous Simulation of Herself* at the Marlborough Theatre in Brighton, Belgrade and Berlin - at Kulturini Centar GRAD - with Vladimir Bjelic. Photo: Vesna Lalić

She is mediated and like any social media user, she is profiled while sustaining a constant relationship with algorithmic processes. Created and regularly impersonated by Berlin-based artist Elly Clarke, #Sergina sings about trying to love and her desire to 'exist and get laid in a world that is increasingly experienced through screens' and 'in a society that is increasingly narcissistic.'<sup>12</sup> Yet, the identity of #Sergina is not fixed to any one organic body, but is (in the words of #Sergina's manifesto) up for grabs, a transferable (viral) identity that can be played (out) and worn (out) on different bodies thus further disrupting the idea of intimacy or any true reflection of a single, authentic self.

<sup>12</sup> Elly Clarke's statement about #Sergina.

#Sergina comments on the instantaneous culture of 24/7 contact in which we are never alone with a mobile phone.<sup>13</sup> She contemplates seductive illusions presented on screens, that grow tired almost as soon as they appear. New light, new hair colour, but also a different perspective and another photo angle are all ways to present oneself as interesting, exciting, new and different while attempting to sustain some kind of originality every time you appear on the screen of a mobile phone or a computer.<sup>14</sup> Contact turns into a tedious task of updating online status while #Sergina's question, 'how can we stay next to each other so long?' points to the diminishing capacity for a deeper connection with another person.

<sup>13</sup> *Instantaneous Culture* by Elly Clarke on Soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/ser-ginainstantaneousculture>, Vimeo: [vimeo.com/95290394](https://vimeo.com/95290394); Early punk version with old band in Berlin: <https://soundcloud.com/theodorstorm/instantaneous-culture>

<sup>14</sup> *I want to see you from a different perspective* by Elly Clarke on Soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/ser-gina/i-want-to-see-you-from-a-different-perspective>; Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/101806921>

When Lauren Berlant, an American scholar of literature, says that ‘the personal is the general’ and that ‘publics presume intimacy,’ she refers to a particular kind of public sphere where identities (of women, queers, blacks, etc.) are performed together as an intimate state of belonging.<sup>15</sup> Berlant’s scholarship on the ‘intimate public,’ follows what she defines as ‘women’s culture’ as represented in nineteenth and twentieth-century American literature and its film and screen adaptations. Female fantasy and disappointment is played out in sensational dramatic literature of the past as well as in contemporary reality TV shows that she considers to be melodramas of mass precariousness under neoliberalism. Berlant therefore binds the intimate public to experiences of belonging and immediacy that can be produced by different media and literary styles and genres, as well as by social and political situations.<sup>16</sup>



**Video still from *Phone Me Don't Write* by Elly Clarke for #Sergina, 2013-14**

This ‘women’s culture’ is different from the culture of the rational man and the disengagement and presumed objectivity that this subject offers. It is sentimental, ‘a discourse of disappointment’ and often in first person—a female complaint.<sup>17</sup> According to Berlant, intimacy becomes a public matter that imagines the life of a citizen and follows ‘the migration of intimacy’ between the public and the domestic.<sup>18</sup> The melodrama of digital life, continuously recorded, updated and broadcasted is #Sergina’s aesthetic. She longs for physical contact and one of her songs is a list of complaints that reflects her desire to be close to her lover:

<i>Phone me</i>	<i>I'm here</i>	<i>Touch my skin</i>
<i>Don't write</i>	<i>Touch me</i>	<i>It's real</i>
<i>Talk to me</i>	<i>I'm good.</i>	<i>Smell me</i>
<i>Don't text</i>	<i>Phone me</i>	<i>I'm alive</i>
<i>Come and see me</i>	<i>Don't write</i>	<i>Taste me</i>
<i>Don't chat</i>	<i>Talk to me</i>	<i>I'm delicious</i>
<i>Kiss me</i>	<i>Don't text</i>	<i>Feel me</i>
<i>Don't skype</i>	<i>Come and see me</i>	<i>I'm sensational</i>
<i>Drop by</i>	<i>Don't chat</i>	<i>See me</i>
<i>Don't blog</i>	<i>Kiss me</i>	<i>I'm gorgeous</i>
<i>Fuck me</i>	<i>Don't skype</i>	<i>Hear me</i>
<i>Don't be polite</i>	<i>Drop by</i>	<i>I vibrate</i>
<i>Touch me</i>	<i>Don't blog</i>	<i>Taste me</i>
<i>Don't imagine</i>	<i>Fuck me</i>	<i>I'm unique</i>
<i>Come and get me</i>	<i>I'm here</i>	<i>Feel me</i>
<i>I'm here</i>	<i>Touch me</i> <sup>19</sup>	

<sup>15</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2008

<sup>16</sup> Lauren Berlant and Jay Prosser, *Life Writing and Intimate Publics: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant*, *Biography* 34, no. 1 (2011): 180–87, doi:10.1353/bio.2011.0008.

<sup>17</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Berlant, *Intimacy: A Special Issue*, 284.

<sup>19</sup> *Phone me, Don't Write* by Elly Clarke on soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/ser-gina/>

Somewhere underneath this is a nostalgic recollection of a life that is not mediated and of contact that is not networked. The fantasy is for bodies to touch each other, to feel and be felt, to see each other not from a distance and on a screen but here and now, together. Moving a finger over the phone screen from one side to the other and stroking a face of a lover or a friend are the same gesture that reveals just how close we are to others and how close we become with things always in reach. #Sergina's intimacy is suspended between desire and attachment, between the deeply personal and shared, while the materiality of intimacy includes the remote bodies of those whose presence she desires as well as the "bodies" that she is increasingly attached to, including mobile phones and social media.



Video still from *Instantaneous Culture*, by Elly Clarke for #Sergina 2013

Is it intimacy or the lack of it that #Sergina performs in her online appearances? Perhaps she embodies the two states simultaneously and with her drag queen act she makes this available to



others to perform and to experience in the confusion of #Sergina's drag body. The performance re-imagines a life not as a queer body, but through a queer experience of relations that normally go without saying and are enacted daily and as such create infrastructures that frame our lives. It is not just women's culture but human culture that is updated for the digital condition.

People meet each other in the space that does not (yet?) feel like home. They move into environments that are shared with millions of others simultaneously. They inhabit spaces together with algorithmic processes; their bodies next to coltan-induced mobile phones or digital objects, always on, always looking for another way to connect to the network. Scrolling, clicking and linking, these are the gestures of making data. And so to grow and generate more data, online life is a series of interactions with hyperlinks and cookies, with images and sounds, with physical and digital objects, with others. Humans, bots or spiders<sup>20</sup> make browsing histories and crawling patterns together as they reach for information and data. Bodies are always present yet invisible to each other.

Is this where intimacy has migrated to, pulled by desire for another life? As we scroll, look, like, click, link, type, we reveal ourselves to data mining and big data algorithms. Data generated through Facebook likes provides enough information for a computer to make a better judgement about us than our average work colleague (10 Likes), cohabitant or friend (70-150 Likes) or life partner (300 Likes).<sup>21</sup> Intimacy now takes place not just between humans. Technological infrastructures support our communication with another (non) human while an unsatisfied thirst for more data, for big data, accompanies every experience of life online. This is where intimacy happens, between

Performance shots from #Waiting for Ice-Cream / Waiting for #Sergina: Private Performance/ Instantaneous Newsreel at Fabrica, September 2016. Fabrica's commission, *Remote Intimacy*, was presented at Brighton Digital Festival 2016. Participants were invited to perform #Sergina's song *Waiting for Ice Cream* during a two-day experiment to 'open source Sergina'. Both days were recorded with Google Hangouts and broadcasted online. Documentation is now available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ik-KjL3Xy7A&feature=youtu.be&a>. As part of the *Remote Intimacy* commission #Sergina also performed during the festival with *I Got My Phone in my Wallet Ghettablaster Induced Flash Mob* #Sergina-cise fun run through Brighton, performing the song with a group of participating women; and *Sergina's Stimulatingly Sexy Simulations of Herself in Places Beginning with B* in Brighton, Belgrade and Berlin with Elly Clarke and Katy Pendlebury in Brighton's Marlborough Theatre & Pub, with Thomas Duh at Silver Future in Berlin, and with Vladimir Bjelicic in Kulturni centar grad in Belgrade. For more information about these events see #Sergina's Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/sergina/>

people and machines speaking different languages. Communicating with and about each other, them and us.



A screen shot from the film *Digital Selfie*, explaining how the Chrome extension plug-in helps you learn what data Facebook knows about you by logging your behaviour on the Facebook platform. Source <https://vimeo.com/201178499>

**20** A spider is a program, a version of a bot which is also called a Web crawler whose purpose is to browse Web pages for Web indexing.

**21** Wu Youyou, Michal Kosinski, and David Stillwell, *Computer-Based Personality Judgments Are More Accurate than Those Made by Humans*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 4 (January 27, 2015): 1036–40, doi:10.1073/pnas.1418680112.

**22** I borrow the concept of 'diasporic intimacy' from Svetlana Boym, whose take on intimacy, immigration and diaspora, is an inspiration and a guide in my continuous project of rethinking intimacy in the networked age. See Svetlana Boym, *On Diasporic Intimacy: Ilya Kabakov's Installations and Immigrant Homes*, *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 498–524.

Intimacy's location, as private and often related to the home, is changing. The infrastructures that house intimacy are no longer contained within physical boundaries that offer environments where innermost secrets and knowledge can be shared between the closest of friends or lovers. Today, intimacy is expressed across media and can be born out of routine gestures that are performed in public, such as liking a Facebook post when commuting to work. This 'diasporic intimacy' that migrates into another place is dystopian and 'rooted in suspicion of a single home'.<sup>22</sup> It does not promise fulfilment of belonging and authenticity but is precarious and available through stories and secrets that are not told directly nor intimately. It is remote, distant, yet it is this intimacy that increasingly becomes ours.

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Dr. Magdalena Tyżlik-Carver is an independent researcher and curator. Her interdisciplinary work investigates relational arrangements of humans and nonhumans and their biopolitical creations through curating in/as commons, future thinking, affective data and data fictions. Magdalena recently completed her PhD thesis at Aarhus University (DK) titled: *Curating in/as Commons. Posthuman Curating and Computational Cultures*. The research explores how the activities of curating and participation are influenced by computation, and it experiments with practices of curating and commons as actively influencing computation.