

# IT IS IN YOUR SELF-INTEREST TO BE VERY TENDER

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We are seeing more of other people than, perhaps, we ever have. We are seeing them experience the world in uncountably large numbers; we are making judgements loudly and boldly. We are choosing what we decide to experience with others and what to hold back. We are negotiating the narratives of our selves, and doing what we can not to compromise them. We are being brave, yet guarded, in the face of uncertainty.

For those of us who were swept along in the rise of social media and lived through the slow, timid death of the chatroom at the turn of the millennium, sharing our relentless juvenile emotions through convoluted usernames became an early performance. We may not like to think of ourselves as performers, but that is what we are whenever we search for authentic feeling. As Leslie Jamison writes of Chris Kraus's blisteringly honest explorations of self, writing in the first person feels more sincere but is no less a show. We live through a mediation of who we understand our own first person to be, at various times facilitated or contradicted by the media and digital platforms that surround us.

As young people developing, nakedly, on the Internet, we survived our selves through LiveJournal, on MSN Messenger and AOL Instant Messenger, where we pretended to be older, and sexier, and bolder than we actually were. "Sorry, wrong window" means something intensely painful to some of us. Wandering deliberately into an over-30s chatroom to see who liked the sound of the person we were pretending to be, bearing witness to the clumsy

scatter of “a/s/l” throughout other people’s conversations. I learned quickly to adapt the awkward manifestations of my personality to these new structures of representation. The world we occupied offline seemed small and oppressive, especially to those who didn’t quite feel like they belonged. The Internet, above all, had other people on it—other people who we didn’t know and who didn’t live within a ten-mile radius of us and who couldn’t tease us for our societal transgressions. All it took was the discordant purr of a dial-up tone. Being “online” was seductive to me as a 14 year old, just like it was seductive to the generation above us who, ten years older, were already deep into their attempts to make sense of what that truly meant.

As I got older, as MySpace’s more social functions closed and AIM became quieter, these experimental behaviors manifested in new arenas, and in new ways. The Internet became a place for radical softness, a place for my own hard edges to be worked through, and the feelings that I was allowing myself to feel exposed in a carefully curated space. Radical softness can best be understood as the tendency to be unashamed of our emotions as we encounter them; to favour them over the instilled obligation to be rational, rejecting the expectation of “strength” as a requirement to battle a difficult world. Radical softness is the permission to feel everything, and the necessity to do so. As Jenny Holzer reminds us, “IT IS IN YOUR SELF-INTEREST TO BE VERY TENDER.” (from *Survival* series, 1983–85).

On Tumblr in particular, I found (often unattributed and decontextualised) images of sex, love, emotion, anger, and deviance interspersed with guts-out poetry and playlists that you desperately wished someone had made for you. I met the greatest loves of my life on Tumblr. The soft boys and unapologetic women that I previously had only dreamed about appeared as artists and poets with feelings that I struggled to find in others, and perhaps myself, in my everyday life. Cy Twombly’s deep, lustful complexities running under Frank O’Hara’s explicit romance; Sylvia Plath’s anger swarming amidst the deepest reds and blacks that Mark Rothko could conjure into existence. Everything was a difficult feeling to work out. Perhaps I leant on these patron saints of emotion too much, using these fully-formed feelings to support the complexities I had to prepare for in growing up.

A few of us grew older together on Tumblr, and I’m still friends with some of them today. I watched them get real jobs, find partners, have children, become seemingly more stable versions of the selves I ran my own chaos alongside. I once sought solace in the blogs of individuals who I imagined building intense, fulfilling friendships with; almost ten years later, we are starting to meet each other in the flesh. It is delicate territory, reconciling a user’s aesthetic sensibilities with their real-life, vulnerable body. We tried so hard to show ourselves to each other through what we reblogged, what we

commented on, what we took out of context. One of my fondest recent memories is meeting an artist friend who, for almost ten years, I sent them a photo of whenever I saw the Windsor typeface in my daily life, from thousands of miles away. We met in May, had coffee on my continent and then, a month later, breakfast on his.

Who we grew up to be is inextricable from what we grew up with. Radical softness was essential then and is even more vital today, as the fragile territory of the Internet becomes increasingly co-opted by capitalism, with all of our anxieties on the growing application of algorithmic efficiency. Amazon and Google can't really understand the messiness of our emotions, but they'll be damned if they stop trying to quantify them. Those who seek to profit from our emotional expression by using our data reduce this intimate knowledge to something easily processed. But as long as these companies see potential profit in subjecting these vulnerable spaces to machine reading, however crude, they will continue to profile depressed, isolated teenagers and their neighbours, communities, and friends, to advertise objects of desire to them as remedies. We are becoming acutely aware of what it means to place ourselves in networks, to reckon with edgeless spaces, and yet we still choose to enter them headfirst. Sharing online, which can be a life-giving exercise for those who feel disenfranchised by the alienation of the everyday—for a queer teenager in a conservative town, one of the only means to explore their queerness—has become an exploitable form of labour for those that understand the value (and profitability) of feelings.

When I think of sharing, I think of Frank O'Hara, a poet who has affectionately been called a "prophet of the Internet" because of his tendency to inform the world, status-like, about everything (and everyone) he experienced in daily life. He knew what it meant to reach beyond allegory and say what he meant to say, and he knew the risk of doing so. You knew if Frank was in love with you, you knew what Frank liked, what filled his world with colour. You could never resent him for it, because he wanted to share all he loved with you; every poem feels deliriously intimate and personal. In "Having a Coke With You", Frank ends a great rant about art with a line that I keep in my back pocket at all times.

*"...it seems to me they were all cheated of a marvellous experience which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I'm telling you about it."*

Frank collapsed and reassembled the world with care and tenderness in a context—1960s America—that was brutally cruel to a homosexual man coming of age. He is the king of radical softness. For me, he is a model of the kind of Internet where I feel at home, albeit one that I feel too shy to take part in now that I think that I'm grown up. In today's networked, cached,

monetised and indexed version of the Internet, we are told that to say too much, too loudly about the tender parts of ourselves is too much. Frank was too much. Though I hide this vulnerability behind password-protected blogs and Twitter accounts, sometimes it finds its way out.

Regardless of one's feelings about football, it recently became the unlikely domain for one of the few revolutionary turns in how we understand and connect with one another in hard times. Gareth Southgate's management of a young, inexperienced England team evoked a surge of emotional energy and an unconditional embrace of softness in public forums that can otherwise seem unbearably hostile. It's a far reach, but in times of trouble, this networked appreciation of kindness is crucial. Maybe it's my own echo chamber, but no mockery was made on Twitter of Southgate's gentle yet firm cradling of his player's necks as they wept following their defeat in the semi-final against Croatia. Not even the *Daily Mail* shook that delicate branch. A quiet light, a faint glimpse of something kinder.

The Internet I occupied as a teenager allowed me to play with the emotional scaffolding I would later need to face the harsh politics of the world through my body, as unsure and untested as it was. Our contemporary networked living is so sharp and treacherous that finding a space to place a steady foot feels unequivocally necessary. Before I became aware of (and involved in) the politics of the network, I wanted the Internet to save me. Olivia Laing, writer of the dark night of the sensitive soul, reminds me of the value of acknowledging the world beyond the door:

*We are in this together, this accumulation of scars, this world of objects, this physical and temporary heaven that so often takes on the countenance of hell. What matters is kindness; what matters is solidarity.<sup>1</sup>*

1 Olivia Laing (2016) *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*, London: Canongate.