The Harris Experiment

By Tanya Corrin 2/26/01 12:00am

Instructions for the interested: Go to www.WeLiveInPublic.com. There you will see Josh Harris, sleeping in the master bedroom of his magnificent Soho loft. You will see his cat, Neuffy, jump onto the bed and curl up at his feet. I see him, too, though I’m a few blocks away, watching him on my laptop at 56k. Josh looks so vulnerable that for a brief moment I want to reach out and hold him. The moment passes. I turn down the volume and his snoring fades.

A few days ago, I was lying next to Josh. You could log on and watch in full-motion video as I woke up, tossed on my purple robe, brushed my teeth and fed Neuffy. We’d planned to live together in public—every minute of our lives in the loft, documented by 32 cameras and microphones—for 100 days. By day 60, I had to get out. By day 78, still unable to find an apartment, I chose couch surfing instead of remaining in a very public nightmare.

For four years, Josh and I were Silicon Alley’s “it” couple. We met in 1996, when he was running the Internet entertainment site Pseudo.com and throwing Warhol-scale parties. I loved his galvanizing personality and wild ideas. He said he loved my ambition and spunk. Soon, Josh had convinced me to quit my corporate job and start an online animation company to make erotica tailored to women, my dream when I’d moved to New York just a year before. Silicon Alley was flush with cash. Anything was possible. I’d never been happier.

Then, last March, he told me that he wanted to find out if I was the one. We’d already tried living together three times, but I packed for what I hoped would be the last time. By then, Josh’s first company, Jupiter Communications, had gone public, and he had worked himself out of a job as founder of Pseudo to become a “full-time artist.” I had become an Internet TV producer, making digital videos and hosting my own show on Pseudo.

Two months later, instead of asking me to marry him, Josh asked me to go public. One morning, as I was putting on my robe, he announced that he was planning to have cameras installed all over the loft—above the bed, behind the bathroom mirror, inside the refrigerator, even in the litter box—and wire them to the Internet in the name of art. Art? More like porn, I said. But Josh calmly explained that we would never do anything that made us uncomfortable, and that he eventually hoped to sell unedited tapes of our lives to a museum. Factor in the public’s “pent-up demand for personal celebridom,” which would lead exhibitionist viewers to buy camera kits so that they, too, could live before the masses. Did I see the potential business model?

I was terrified, but I knew that I wanted to share this experience—or rather, this experiment; to find out, as Josh put it, whether life was better lived in public or private. I somehow imagined that this would bring us closer together—just us against the World Wide Web.

Being watched wasn’t the issue. I’d been on camera five days a week for the past year as the host of TanyaTV, an Internet show I created for Pseudo about real New Yorkers facing their sexual insecurities. Over the course of 52 episodes, I broke out of the hermit-girl-from-Maine mentality and grew to like myself. I quit therapy. So maybe a few more cameras would be good for me. Besides, I thought, who was going to sit at a computer and watch people putter around a loft?
As we were gearing up for the November launch, Pseudo tanked, as did the rest of the tech stocks. Josh’s share in Pseudo was now worthless, and the fortunes he made from Jupiter Communications were slashed. Meanwhile, he was sinking over $1 million into Living in Public, hiring me to produce the Web site, manage press and plan a launch party (I was not paid to live in public), and bringing in a team to rip open the walls and fill them with a complex nervous system of wires, cables and cameras. New, more mediagenic furniture arrived. I bought highly visible Pucci underwear.

Josh wanted us to be able to interact with our visitors. We bought laptops with wireless Internet cards so we could tell who was watching by looking at the user names on the screen. We couldn’t see them, but we could talk back via cameras and keyboards, giving us a flimsy sense of control.

Josh liked to tease me that he’d be the most popular. Getting press is one of the things Josh does best. Since living in public was his idea, he positioned himself as the “visionary” and me as “the hot girlfriend.” I would have preferred to be presented as more of a partner. But it was Josh’s project and money, and he was starting to freak out about the latter, so I let it go.

DAYS 1-6: THE EXPERIMENT BEGINS

At midnight on Nov. 21, Josh and I were curled up in a curvy Herman Miller chair in the control room, surrounded by 42 mini-monitors and 18 VCR’s that were about to begin recording the next 144,000 minutes of our lives. Michael Auerbach, then a producer for WeLiveInPublic.com, called to tell us we were live.

I refreshed the browser. The video started streaming. Text flowed onto the screen.

Within minutes, there were 15 people in the room. Josh and I froze. We hadn’t announced the site launch yet, so who were these guys? Before long, we got weirded out and retreated to bed, the camera whirring into focus overhead as a pack of strangers watched us cuddle.

The next morning, Bob Stratton from Controlled Entropy, the company that designed the camera infrastructure, called and woke me up. “I just wanted you to know that there are 62 people in the chatroom, and they are all speaking Chinese,” he said.

Soon we were being watched by the French, Swedish, Germans, Canadians and Australians, too. The first season of Big Brother was just ending, and there was an onslaught of homeless reality-TV addicts scouring the Web for a new life to click on.

Josh and I became celebrities–albeit in our own little world. Visitors thought Josh was a genius. They thought I was cute. They wanted Josh to talk to them. They wanted to see me naked. For the first week, Josh and I spent evenings in the control room hamming it up and talking to them through the camera. Then we started calling them on the tapped phone. Both sides of the conversation went out over the Internet; if we wanted to order food to be delivered, we had to do it by cell phone in a closet or everyone would know our address. It was invasive and bizarre, but it felt cool.

DAYS 7-13: I LEARN HOW TO SHOWER

Life under surveillance was making me jumpy. I started looking for hidden cameras in public places and friends’ apartments. I bought Mace and stopped answering the door. I began spending a lot of time outside the house, focusing on yoga and friends while maintaining the press schedule Josh had set up.

A lot of people came to the site in search of sex. Josh had told Wired that we would conceive in public, although until that interview we’d avoided discussing children. The chatters got angry when Josh and I wouldn’t perform for them. “Gee, Josh,” one said, “she looks horny. Why don’t you go do her?”

We felt pressured to do something “interesting,” like say the name of whoever had asked...
Newcomers were so surprised that they could make their computer talk to them that we were constantly fielding juvenile requests of the “Show us your tits!” variety. I wore a bikini in the steam room and was forced to read that “Tanya looks better with her clothes on.”

Before the project began, I was hoping I’d be able to do absolutely everything in public, even masturbate. But I never got comfortable with being naked or using the toilet (that was Josh’s specialty), and especially not having sex. Josh wanted to have wild simulated sex, but that felt too manipulative. This was about real life, real feelings. So we did it under the covers late at night, or else we’d cover the cameras. Once we had dirty-talking sex with the camera covered, still unaware that the audio had gone out crystal clear. We were mortified. Viewers went berserk.

They finally got what they wanted one weekend when we went upstate. One of the site’s engineers invited people over after a swingers’ party and had an Internet sexcapade. When we got back, viewers said, “I wouldn’t sit in that chair if I were you ....”

Once, I changed my clothes on camera, and dozens of weird e-mails instantly flowed in. From then on, I used a ridiculous gym-class technique: new clothes on top, old clothes removed from underneath. Showering was easier, since our steam room fogged out the cameras. I had programmed the cameras myself, so, unlike Josh, I knew where I could hide in our interactive zoo. I’d jump into the steam semi-clothed and strip down, keeping a robe on a hook right by the door. It felt like cheating, but staying sane was more important.

For a few minutes a day, I visited the chatroom, where I began to recognize some regulars who treated me with respect. Soon I would only engage when they were around, giving them power to kick out the horny interlopers. Feeling more comfortable, I threw some parties and started inviting friends over, some of whom loved the attention.

By now I was answering hundreds of fan letters. Josh was apparently too busy to reply. Soon he was only getting three or four a day.

**DAYS 14-54: JOSH WITHDRAWS**

I went skiing with friends for a few days while Josh stayed home “alone.” Traffic took a nose-dive. When I called, Josh seemed depressed and distant. Life, we agreed, had become more exciting with lots of people watching: There’s nothing like knowing 300 people are checking you out to make preparing your morning protein shake feel like an event.

When I got back, I was determined to develop a rapport with our viewers. At a friend’s suggestion, I started hosting nightly video chats. I awkwardly answered questions, which ranged from stupid to valid: “When are you going to have sex?” “Why isn’t Josh chatting with us anymore?”

I couldn’t tell them that instead of stepping into the role of host of the online loft party he’d created, Josh had withdrawn, frustrated that he had so little control over his uninvited guests, who weren’t afraid to say that they thought he was a snore. I heard him say to the press many times that he was “totally weirded out.” He was ignoring the cameras and chatting less and less. I got even less of his time. In fact, the only way I could find out how he was feeling was to log on and eavesdrop on his interviews. He’d occasionally try to interact with viewers in his “Luvvy” character, talking to them in a freaky falsetto. There were clown faces involved.

Van: Why doesn’t he talk normally to us or chat?

Odilon: This is getting scary.

Jwest: Josh, chill out.

At one point, they wanted to vote him out, just like on Survivor.

If I’d left the chatroom to interact with Josh, things might have been different. We’d had
If I'd left the chatroom to interact with Josh, things might have been different. We'd had communication breakdowns before. Now we couldn't even have sex without planning it. To make things worse, the chatters were constantly commenting on our behavior, asking me why I let Josh say shitty things or ignore me. The chatroom became my confessional, the chatters my friends and therapists. They showed me what I had refused to see: My relationship was empty.

DAYS 55-77: SCENES FROM A NON-MARRIAGE

Things quickly spiraled into Bergman territory. Almost 100,000 friends and strangers were privy to our fragmented lives.

On day 55, Josh and I had a yelling match. He accused me of being boring in bed. I told him he was fat. In a momentary truce, we logged on and watched the flood of commentary.

Extirpator: They are not arguing just about sex, but about Josh not “living in public” enough too, and Tanya’s loneliness.

Timike211: We love you Tanya.

Jill1968: Go to her now Josh!

Jwest: Forget all about us in the chat.

Out of loyalty to the viewers, I wanted to stick out the whole 100 days. But I realized I couldn’t endure another month just because people were watching.

On day 60, much to his relief, I told Josh I wanted to move out. We agreed to part as friends and see what would happen. A week later, I went skiing with a girlfriend. When I got back, the vibe in the chatroom was weird.

WeLive: Where have you been Tanya?

Tanya: Skiing with a girlfriend.

WeLive: And who else?

WeLive: We heard that you were having sex with either Bill Clinton or Leonardo DiCaprio.

Tanya: What?

WeLive: You’re not cheating on Josh?

I laughed it off. They must’ve been very bored to make up such crap. But an online friend told me that Josh had gone into “Luvvy” mode on camera and told the chatters in his squeaky voice that I was off on some tryst. My friend said that when he questioned Josh, he started yelling at him. When was the last time your TV screamed at you for questioning its statement?

DAY 78: I’M SCARED!

Five days before my scheduled move, Josh gave his publicist his approval on a Page Six item reporting that he had ordered me out. It referred to the observers as “creepy Internet guests,” which offended me and many of the 90,000 WeLiveInPublic.com members. When I confronted him, he said that I should just be glad that they’d spelled my name correctly. Then he left.

I got it: Josh would say anything to get attention, even if it meant betraying me. I don’t know if it was living in cyberspace that had caused him to lose his bearings, but it was too dangerous to stick around. There was no knowing what he’d feed his publicist next.

DAY 80: I PREFER COLD STORAGE
I slept better on my friend’s couch than I had in almost three months. I rented a storage space so that I could go to Colorado and deprogram myself before looking for an apartment. In my tiny storage room, I closed the door and lay diagonally on the cold concrete floor. I was truly alone. I stayed there for several minutes, exhausted and smiling, squeezing my new lock and key in my fist.

DAY 81: JOSH PROPOSES, KIND OF, IN PRIVATE

I went to the loft early to finish packing. An uncharacteristically wide-awake Josh caught me off-guard with a cheerful hello. His eyes were big, glassy and bright. The cold, calculating man had suddenly found his sensitive side.

“I was up all night looking at your packed bags,” he said. “I’ve been thinking. I know I’ve been avoiding the whole marriage thing. I’ve been stressed about money. Will you change your mind and stay?”

I shook my head gently no. We were aware that the cameras were temporarily down, unfortunately depriving visitors of the big, weepy finale. In the past, I would have coached him into saying the sound bite I needed to hear. But after 73 days in a chatroom, I was sick of words.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

I shook my head again.

Josh plans to stick it out in public for the full 100 days, maybe longer. He must be scared in front of all those strangers, who desperately want to know him intimately, as I once did. I hope he makes a connection with them. He probably has something else in mind. But I won’t be logging on to find out.

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