

THREE FROM THE LEFT, TWO FROM THE BOTTOM

NOTES ON RELATIONAL POSITIONS

Method

I began by selecting two hundred-twenty, assorted personals ads from the May 1, 2001 *Village Voice* (Vol. XLVI, No. 17). The ads appeared in seven categories: “Women Seeking Men,” “Men Seeking Women,” “Men Seeking Men,” “Women Seeking Women,” “Multiples,” “Anything Goes,” and “Transgender.” Rather than include every entry from that issue, I sampled different ads in proportion to the size of their respective categories and assigned each a number. Many, however, had only a tenuous connection to the headings under which they appeared. A few even contradicted them.

This “fieldwork,” of course, is only that of an armchair sociologist thumbing through a publication anyone else could easily obtain. What interests me is how the interpenetration of public and private space within personals ads reconstitutes prevailing social hierarchies as signs of free subjectivity. In other words, despite the singularity and intimacy they uphold (in a community, lifestyle newspaper dispensed from plastic, street-corner containers), the ads restage the preconditions of the advertisers’ social or sexual dissatisfaction. Their autobiographical component is accordingly both deliberate and unconscious; they thus retain their particularity, even when many appear in long columns. The mediation between the newspaper-as-public-forum and individuated subjectivity manifests itself not only as content, but also in the stylization, special jargon, abbreviations, etc. As such, the prospect of “self”-representation – or self selection – concerns ideological displacement, i.e., not a representation of concrete means and relations of production, but an imaginary relation to those means and relations. Exactly who can grasp such an underlying “reality” in its concreteness may be beside the point. Here, it is the imaginary that counts, the threshold where fantasy and reality promise to meet. When an individual takes out such an ad, she or he projects an idealized selfhood. Some of this may be an obdurate blindness to personal flaws; some, conversely, may be tactical, as in conventional advertising. A degree of pragmatism might temper the self-idealizing tendency: the need to appear real, the need to lay a credible foundation for a relationship, the need to be honest, etc. Marketing, of course, haunts the whole enterprise: selling the self in an arena of competing goods and services, a phantasmatic heterotopia. Beyond these preliminary assumptions, however, my survey is not tentative. Nor does it draw from a range of different sources for objectivity’s sake. It sticks to just one that only weakly claims to feature “the world’s

most-loved personals” – a pseudo-universalist claim akin to “world’s best cup of coffee.”

Limiting the survey to the *Village Voice* obviously shapes the results. For example, one Internet service claims to handle 10% of all the Jewish dates in the U.S. Although such a claim is impossible to verify, it reminds us that, here, fragmentation of the “market” is the rule, not the exception. Moreover, versus the Internet, printed personals columns are slow and inefficient; they cannot match the immediacy of web cam contact. (Although the *Voice* features personals on its web site, they are, thus far, identical to those it prints.) Within the *Voice* classifieds department itself, adjacent sections further qualify the focus of “personals ads”: “Mind, Body and Soul” on one hand (yoga, massage, acupuncture, shiatsu, rolfing, etc.) and “Adult Bodywork” on the other (various sex workers, ranging from phone sex, to escorts, to prostitutes). While photos are notably absent in the personals, they proliferate in the sur-rounding sections. Even so, the boundaries are not absolute. If a few of the personals simply seek partners willing to give a free sensual massage, undoubtedly just as many are taken out by professional sex workers.

Organization and Composition of Social Fields Within the Survey

As an artwork, this project is an outgrowth of untitled posters I made in 1990 that drew from similar material. Those contrasted ads in *Screw* and *New York Magazine*, especially modes of address by men who possibly were seeking the same woman. The first simply described what the genitalia of his prospective partner should look like. The second, a CEO, listed a love of fine dining, opera, theater and “the arts” as traits that would make *him* ostensibly more attractive than someone like the first man. I wanted the contrast between the two to highlight sublimation vis-a-vis class ascendancy, domination and repression. Whatever your social station may be, in placing a personals ad, you must present yourself as a (human) commodity, which explicitly reflects at least one basis for social relations within a capitalist political economy. Although this suggests the inadequacy, even pathos, of advertising as “self”-representation, the poster was still primarily a cartoon. Moreover, it set a patriarchal imperative (women as exchange objects) in practices that, in fact, may be less patriarchal than those of the mainstream.

In contrast to the caricatured first poster, the sexual practices and gender roles articulated within the personals ads section of the *Village Voice* are di-

verse and nuanced. This apparent plenitude, however, is tantamount neither to sexual liberation nor to a nascent polymorphous perversity. In formulations such as “straight-acting gay,” “45 but looks 30,” “successful white exec” or even the fetishist’s “age and race not important,” the texts reconstitute principles of social hierarchy most sharply at the locus of sexual desire. Of course sexuality need not – and cannot – be politically correct, but this does not depoliticize its articulation either. To assess this, I realized I could arrange ads according to differences in sexual, religious, gender and cultural orientation. To demarcate distinct social fields, I selected eight such oppositions and combined them, Bourdieu-like, into four sets of two axes each: a) white/black, dominant/submissive; b) religious/atheist, clean/d&d (drugs and disease) c) straight/gay, financial capital/cultural capital and; d) single/married, old/young. The combinations of axes may be arbitrary, but because I drew the criteria directly from the ad copy, the categories reflect the self-categorization of the advertisers themselves. Thus, the arbitrariness shows such prospects for social cohesion to be provisional at best. Of course, to register on the graphs, an ad must reflect at least two sets of criteria that happen to appear together. Here, none of the ads appear on all of the axes; some do not appear at all. Moreover, the mapping process, i.e., the spatialization of perceived positions, says as much about my assumptions as it does the disposition of the ads per se. For example, even how much *space* a subcategory receives, even just for legibility’s sake, affects the pattern of the over-all graph. This means that every graph can be re-mapped in any number of ways.

The first set (a. white/black and dominant/submissive), by registering the largest number of samples overall, shows an overlap of two prominent concerns. The white/black axis projects a delusional racial spectrum – “delusional” because it concerns neo-colonial social hierarchies more than race per se. Even the notion of a “spectrum” (white, Italian, Asian, Hispanic, black) is specious because what it really pertains to is cultural affiliation. The Hispanic category, for example, is primarily linguistic; Italians, at the time of the American Revolution, were not generally considered “white”; Asian is a radically heterogeneous category. These criteria read against an ordinarily more covert axis: dominant vs. submissive sexuality. The purpose of the ads, however, requires that this information be absolutely clear. I mapped dominant and submissive positions according to explicit indications in the ad copy. Otherwise, I presumed neutrality. Most of the positions clustered loosely around the white and black poles of the racial axis, the majority be-

ing white. Between the two, the white field showed an evenly polarized distribution between extremes in sexual orientation while black positions clustered more around the center. The Hispanic category fell in the middle of the racial axis, producing a relative “void at the center.” The reason for this is probably language; publications in Spanish would predominate over the *Village Voice*. Although not as pronounced, the number of positions in the Asian category was also sparse, probably for similar reasons.

The second set (b. religious/atheist and clean/d&d) registered the smallest number of samples, because the religious/atheist axis probably acts as a filter. With one exception, none of the advertisers expressed pointed religious conviction. Perhaps religiosity is a weak criterion in choosing a partner. Or, perhaps more specialized venues claim more religious advertisers. In any event, despite the over-all lack of strong religiosity, none characterized themselves as atheist either. Most were impossible to plot because they simply said nothing either way. Those whom I could fell vaguely within the cultural/spiritual range. The d&d (drug and disease) axis was two disparate axes in the guise of one, created in reaction to the demand for partners who are “drug and disease free.” In other words, “d&d” appeared in the ads only as a negative qualifier. Here, the need to produce parallel scales established bizarre correspondences between “drugs” and “disease”: athletic/vegan, slim, trim/alcohol, overweight/cigarettes, herpes/cocaine, AIDs/heroin. Who, indeed, could fit in anywhere? The athlete who takes steroids? The slim, trim heroin addict? The HIV+ vegan? Although alcoholism can be more serious than smoking, I positioned smoking lower on the scale because Americans almost universally stigmatize it. On this axis, only a few defiant advertisers described themselves as smokers and only one described himself as HIV+ . Most likely, those with health or substance abuse problems would not mention that information. Thus, on this axis, the “moral majority” fell between social drinking and veganism.

Although the classified section definitively categorizes all of the ads as heterosexual, homosexual or between, the third set (c. straight/gay and financial/cultural capital) also registered few positions. Thus, the financial/cultural capital axis served as a filter here. Far more advertisers specified the kind of financial or cultural capital they sought in their prospective partners than what they themselves possessed. (The graph, of course, only charts the financial/cultural capital of the *advertiser*.) Those who did were heterosexual by more than a two-to-

one margin.

The fourth set (d. single/married and old/young) combined a universal axis (old/young) with one that differentiates only among heterosexuals (single/ married). Marriage went entirely unmentioned in the gay ads. Because those who have entered gay marriages would be unlikely to take out personals ads, I presumed all gay advertisers to be single. Conversely, it is an advantage for straight advertisers to advertise that they are single, while those who are married would hide that fact. Indeed, only a small minority stated that they are. Thus, I could set no default for the straight ads. Since age is perhaps the only legitimately graduated scale in the entire survey, I could set no default this coordinate either. Those who consider their age to be a liability would tend either to omit it or to lie. Because verification is impossible, I had to accept stated ages at face value. The vast majority fell between 30-50 years of age. Before 30, perhaps one would feel no hurry to make a suitable match. With singles older than 50, the desire to find a suitable partner – at least through personals ads – appears to decline sharply. The handful of ads on the married side, however, was mostly 40 and older, perhaps reflecting boredom with long-term marriage.

“The cries for help from different people, different ages . . .” Despite the various kinds information that comprise the ads, just who takes them out remains mostly a mystery. It is easy to picture someone who, after having exhausted all the conventional channels desperately turns to advertising in a last ditch attempt to find a partner. This at least is the cliché. Only this much, at least, is true: the usual social relations of those do not offer some contact with the partners they seek. Beyond that, some may be professional sex workers hoping to land a paying client after an initial contact; some may be “dummy” ads placed by the newspaper itself to titillate its readers and keep the personals section lively. The latter alludes to reading and writing personals ads as a libidinal gratification in its own right. Here, the libertine prospect of “falling in love with” all the advertisers – without ever having to see, touch or smell their bodies – arises. Outside this charmed circle lies everyone else, the proverbial masses, which begs the question, “What is the space of the graph?” Does it coincide with social space? A newspaper page? Or does it just boil down to a number on a large sheet of paper, three from the left, two from the bottom?