

REVIEWS: *Rhode Island*

WENDY RICHMOND: ALONE IN PUBLIC

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In the late 1930s it was illegal to take photographs in the New York subway system, but that didn't stop Walker Evans. With a small hidden camera, Evans clandestinely documented people lost in thought as they awaited their destinations. Those intimately austere photographs became *Many Are Called*, first published in 1966. Almost fifty years later, *Many Are Called* inspired visual artist, educator, and writer Wendy Richmond to probe layers of meaning found in private "cocoons" of thought with one's phone or computer in public spaces, such as trains, cafés, or libraries.

Spawned by her course taught at RISD, *Alone in Public* is a three-channel, black-and-white video installation that projects faces of subjects head-on. The video portraits of Richmond's friends and acquaintances derive from the vantage point of their laptop cameras as they think, create and write in public spaces such as libraries and cafés. *Alone in Public* manifests Evans's formal and thematic influence,

and adds a twist to the surveillance content in contemporary practice. It encourages us to recognize and register familiarity with the shared language of private, inward dialogue in public places. Though their appearances are as diverse as the projects they work on (ranging from booking travel to writing a screenplay), each portrait uncannily profiles similar gestures such as fleeting, scant eye contact with fellow café dwellers, or thoughtful, even stoic, physiognomy.

Attended only by the din of a library or hushed clatter of a café, the oversized heads effectively transform the viewer into the "virtual eye" of their computers, transmuting personal experience into a very public roaming camera of sorts that assimilates particular gestures



Wendy Richmond, *Study for Alone in Public*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.

of an individual into a digital catalogue of universal, normalized signs of thinking. Accentuating this idea is *Gestures* (2012), a vinyl text piece delineating actions portrayed in the video through a list of verbs (derived from Richard Serra's *Verb List Compilation: Actions to Relate to Oneself*). Tucked away from *Alone in Public*,

Richmond's *Gestures* exposes how we depersonalize the experiences of others in public spaces, thus inversely transforming the strangers with whom we share our private moments into neighbors, recognizable via a common language of thought process made visible. Richmond shows us that we are not so much distinct from one another in our expressive language of thought, nor from our predecessors documented by Evans. —Leah Triplett