

The Selfie That Dares to Go There

Men are not the only ones texting pictures of their private parts.

By Laren Stover



It was Thanksgiving, and Matt Silver was sitting around a table with his family when his 24-year-old girlfriend texted. “It was the first time we’d been apart,” he said. A full-frontal bare vulva popped up on his screen; he fumbled and the phone landed faceup under his 10-year-old cousin’s chair. (He retrieved the phone with his foot.)

In the dim glow of St Mark’s Theater bar after a Naked Angels reading not long ago, Mr. Silver, a 33-year-old screenwriter, was telling me of receiving his first V-selfie eight years ago. He likened it to a scene in Joss Whedon’s 2012 comedic film, “Much Ado About Nothing.”

The male equivalent, deployed by a roués’ gallery that includes the former congressman Anthony Weiner, Kanye West and several famous athletes, has become so common as to be mocked virally on Snapchat.

The V-selfie, though very much here, is perhaps less insistent. Shared on dating apps or in texts, it has been sent to create longing and a sense of intimacy: a missive of lust and promise to lovers, or would-be lovers, who are separated.

“You’re giving a piece of yourself,” said Mr. Silver, whose new long-distance girlfriend of two years (they met on Tinder) took seven months before she sent her first intimate portrait from her bedroom in Hong Kong in shimmering morning light, with a glimpse of a Buddha in the background.

He describes her V-selfies as “bold, courageous, beautifying, radiant and captivating when there’s a story and based on a conversation that led up to it. It’s not just an image. It shows an element of trust.”

The new intimacy, like everything else, is virtual. Wooing, connecting, arousing and even cuckoldry is virtual.

A tale of cyber-infidelity is what inspired my research into the selfie erogenous zone after a group of us at Bosie Tea Salon in Greenwich Village glimpsed one that a married man received by direct message from a Twitter fan in California: a 48-year-old Turkish-Armenian housewife, mother of two and “lover of fine art” called Vivien (not her real name). It was captioned, without irony, “snap.”

From the awkward angle, purpled hue and identifying features, we realized Vivien had missed the advice on lighting and how to take the perfect anonymous shot (it’s all out there on Google) and included not only the beauty mark under her right breast but also a pierced heart necklace.

An attendee of the gathering named Shiran, 26, who recently received a degree in sustainability from Harvard's extension school, said he didn't get intimate iPhone selfies, only booty pics, but would be "pumped" if he did. He looked disappointed when he saw the shot and deemed Vivien's "not well curated."

A Proud History

From the assorted reactions to her "snap," Vivien had clearly been oblivious not only to filters but also to the compositional mastery of Gustav Courbet's famously explicit lush vulva painting, "L'Origine du Monde," a close-up view of a supine woman's genitals, thighs and abdomen. The work was commissioned in 1866 for the erotic collection of Khalil-Bey, an Ottoman-Egyptian diplomat, long before the internet's enabling of mass vagina gazing.

According to Roberta Smith, the co-chief art critic of The New York Times, [Courbet's painting](#) "identifies woman as proud possessor, revealing the ultimate object of the male gaze with a forthrightness that can stop the gaze in its tracks."

The vulva has been occasionally flashed in real life as performance art. The artist Deborah De Robertis [exposed her genitals](#), glamorously framed by her shimmering gold sequined dress, in front of Courbet's painting at the Musée d'Orsay in 2014 (the viewers applauded) and more recently bared her vulva in front of the Mona Lisa at the Louvre, accompanying the display with a chant.

The smartphone has democratized and arguably cheapened, like so much else, this particular form of expression.

How had I — a former art student and artists' model with a stint in San Francisco as an exotic dancer who admired the shamelessly vaginal-like flora of Georgia O'Keeffe — missed out on the trend? Nudity was celebrated in my art and striptease world. But to my somewhat puritanical mind, your vagina, or technically vulva, was a sacred region glimpsed only in person.

My idea of an erotic message was a perfumed handwritten letter with curvaceous letters lacing the page, not a texted iPhone flora selfie, or even an analog portrait on my Rolleiflex.

A quarter-century before [Kim Kardashian West revealed](#) her waxed mons venus to draw us in to the allure of her KKW Body fragrance, Madonna straddled a mirror gazing at herself in her 1992 book, “Sex,” writing, “Sometimes I sit on the edge of the bed and spread my legs. And stare into the mirror and wonder what others see.”

And then there’s Eve Ensler’s “Vagina Monologues,” of course.

Now singing the praises of female genital pride is Regena Thomashauer in her book “Pussy: A Reclamation.” After being buried under 5,000 years of “patriarchal conditioning,” Ms. Thomashauer writes, “she is ready to re-emerge.” Her therapeutic advice involves a hand mirror and frequent peeks and greetings of “Hello, gorgeous!” to the region in question.

Millennials are doing more than taking a peek. Many are happy to share.



Titillating Filters

Mieka Dovey, 28 a musical theater actress born in Denmark, said she and her friends take artistically styled and composed shots but don't send them to married people. "Being in a long-distance relationship, that's kind of the only way you can be intimate," she said. "I only want my significant other to see my pictures." Ms. Dovey was not impressed by Vivien's "snap."

"The robe is godawful," she said. "If you got a little pudgy, you got to work around it and find an angle that's flattering."

What about grooming, which Vivien seemed to be approaching casually if not indifferently? "I might have a triangle or the landing strip, just enough that it doesn't show through your underwear, but I actually had a partner who asked me to grow it out and not trim it up at one point. He was like, 'Yeah, get the '70s porn star on,' and I was like, 'all right! I'll try it.'"

Freda, 25, a photographer and studio manager who identifies as being part of the L.G.B.T.Q. community and asked that her last name be withheld for privacy, has been taking V-selfies since she was 20 and said they are "empowering and help you love and accept every part of your body."

"Snapchat filters banish blemish and razor bumps," she said, adding that when she gets really fancy she uses Photoshop. "My mother is a photographer — lights and background are everything. Sometimes filters can make the 'v' look shaved even if it's been two days and you're stubbly. You want your 'v' to look good, so whatever light, filter, position will make your 'v' look best, that's the one you should use. I use it as a narrative, as if you're telling a story. It's an aspect of that, it's not just a vagina."

Lexi Stout, 27 and the executive director at VSpot Medi Spa on Madison Avenue, which provides grooming services for the nether regions, has flashed her iPhone flora, stored in the cloud, to friends at a bar. "When I was in high school, if you had pubic hair, it was embarrassing," Ms. Stout said.

The VSpot can get your vulva “pretty” for photo shoots and also offers services that promise health and more intense orgasms. Cindy Barshop, 54, a former Real Housewife, opened the VSpot at the end of 2015. Models come for V-Lightening.

The more fearsome-sounding V-Plump, Ms. Barshop said, injects fillers and your own blood plasma into the labia majora to smooth and plump. There’s also a 24-karat gold wax and “vajacial” on the menu.

With its floor-to-ceiling vulva floral wall art, bleached wood floors and champagne chilling on ice, the waiting room looks like a scene from “[Sex and the City](#).” Clients, Ms. Barshop said, include porn stars and princesses.

“The human body is beautiful and women need to embrace that everybody’s vagina looks different, just like every face looks different and every hand looks different, and to embrace their beauty,” she said.

Madonna’s dermatologist Dr. [Paul Jarrod Frank](#), the founder of PFrank MD Skin Salon and a partner on her skin care line, is offering vaginal rejuvenation services at his offices with Dr. Catherine Goodstein.

I asked Dr. Frank how vaginal rejuvenation plays into the expectation that with intimate portraits we are all meant to look more polished, sculpted, refreshed and perfect.

“We’re in a generation full of people that want cosmetic improvements so they can share images,” Dr. Frank said. “I think the feeling of one’s sexuality is very much a center point of one’s image of themselves.” Intimate pictures have become more common in courtship, he pointed out. “I think you and I are both a generation out of that, but it appears that it is a major form of communication.”

Stephanie Moreno, 30, is a lingerie consultant who likes to startle her boyfriend with smartphone flora as a way to stay connected during their opposite work schedules.

Ms. Moreno, who is accustomed to seeing women naked for fittings, is comfortable with every part of her body and often incorporates her abdomen, breasts and waistline in her V-selfies. She likes natural light streaming in from her window.

Filters from the VSCO app, she said, create a more ethereal look. "I sit on the bed, prop the phone on a pillow and set the timer," said Ms. Moreno, a petite brunette with large luminous brown eyes and tapered nails painted bright sapling-green. "It's not just sexual, it has artistic merit and beauty. It's sentimental and more intimate than sending my face."

Recipients React

Not all women feel empowered, and some are afraid to look at or experience their own intimate feminine beauty. Nick, a 31-year-old software salesman and former Marine who served two combat tours in Iraq and the Republic of Georgia, brought up his girlfriend's sexual inhibition to his PTSD therapist, who prescribed they take V-selfies over a mirror.

"She was very unsure of herself, very unconfident," Nick said. "We didn't have sex very often. It wasn't something she was super-comfortable with, but I was in love with her. I was like, 'O.K., well I guess I'll find a way to make this no longer an issue.'"

A subsequent lover was far more overt, sending some images "including her face, which I thought was ambitious and I would advise against it, but yeah — she just wasn't afraid."

I broached the topic with my friend Tom Robbins, an author who has received panties at book signings, but never a V-shot. "I don't have a smartphone," Mr. Robbins said, but he expressed discomfort with the idea of seeing "disembodied" genitalia. "I wouldn't want to see just the vagina but the whole woman," he said. "Otherwise it's like leftovers at a cannibal dinner party."

He is not alone in the “more is more” club. Oliver Kramer, a 37-year-old screenwriter, said: “I’d never discourage anyone sending anything erotic, but if it’s anatomical as opposed to personal, it can be like a medical illustration. Without a person, it’s not erotic.”

Sach Dev, 29, a television news producer who writes philosophy, said he had gotten only two unsolicited (but not unwanted) images from women he has dated. He described vagina snapshots as “a little less common and much more underhanded in the commerce of nudes” than their masculine equivalent, “which is a somewhat ubiquitous fixture of the millennial zeitgeist.”

After pondering the topic overnight, Mr. Dev emailed: “Penises themselves are poised for a more straightforward viewing. Vaginas are more nuanced, and both their pictorial encapsulations and the reasons for sharing them might correspondingly brim with dimensionality.” Either way, he wrote, he thought it was “high time” for the “proud and *voluntary* baring of feminine mystery.”

Mr. Silver, the screenwriter, said: “Vagina pictures are kind of like the Mona Lisa. Part lust, part love. You can interpret the mystery many ways.”

“The latest one she sent me of her private parts she shot in her bed with a celestial blue blanket in what looks like morning light,” Mr. Silver said.

He gazed at his phone as if he was looking at painting. “Her left hand was on her heart, like this,” he said, gingerly touching his chest. “And she had her right leg up. It was erotic and loving. I don’t know if she used a filter, but it was beautiful.”