Cyber Corpus

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Abstract

Cyber Corpus addresses the new media territory of cyberspace and the ways in which artists have adapted to represent embodied experience on this platform. The way that identities mutate and multiply on the Internet has been examined by feminist discourse and its descendent, cyber-feminism, begetting new representational strategies for female artists. The first chapter addresses the "selfie" as a representational strategy gaining momentum in broader cultural discourses of embodiment in cyberspace. This genre of self-portraiture reveals the male-dominated economy of images and the appropriation of women's bodies, illustrated by the circulation and appropriation of their images online as pornography. The struggle of women to compose and control their own self-representation is identified in net artists' revealing works and statements about the tension between their embodied experience and virtual co-existence. The second chapter explores alternative embodiment strategies, proposing the critical construction of individual identity through ambiguity, fragmentation, and networking as a defense against misrepresentation. Redefining cyberspace through the metaphor of the matrix and its connection to metaphors of the female body illustrates attempts to control the flow of information and relates to the problematization of pornographic images in the first chapter. The female body as metaphor and physical reality is complicated by the question of gender identity online and off, which has become increasingly fluid. The third chapter offers another re-conceptualization of the body and its relation to identity in cyberspace by analyzing the representational strategy of inhabiting avatars' bodies. The disconnection of the surrogate identities of avatars from their human operators has been theorized to transcend the social stratifications of gender, race, and class, allowing the figure of the cyborg freedoms that the human body could not experience without technological mediation. I posit that the Tibetan Buddhist system of *bardos* is a constructive alternative framework for considering strategies of liberated embodied experience on and offline.

Introduction

The female body has been one of the most prevalent subjects of Western art, from the famous nude goddesses of ancient Greek art and Renaissance art to modern and contemporary representations continuing the canon of the nude. Authority and precedence have been given to the gaze of male artists to assess and represent these female figures. Feminist art criticism examines this centuries-long tradition and the place women artists have in art history with an awareness of the bias of Western history against canonizing women as the authors, and not only the subjects, of art and history. This thesis examines how representations of female embodiment in new media remain fraught, highlighting the ways female artists have responded by establishing a new regime of female representation, by women and for women online.

The project of redefining gender for the digital age has fallen to cultural theorist Donna Haraway, whose *Cyborg Manifesto* remains a germinal text for cyberculture studies. The figure of the cyborg is genderless and post-identity. It is created through human interaction with technology and generates a new kind of post- or trans-human subject to oppose the liberal subject whose gender, race, and class are assumed to conform to the dominant paradigm. While Haraway's cyborg challenges many established dichotomies such as nature and culture, humans and machines, and men and women, it is also put in opposition to the "goddess." As the ultimate symbol of femininity, the goddess has been forgotten or discredited by secularism in a male-dominated patriarchal society increasingly influenced by technology. In a culture in which media representations of women are often oppressive and disempowering, the goddess can be used as a symbol of women's empowerment. To this end, it seems important for feminism to not only revive the goddess, but to update her for the modern world. In this context, all women are considered goddesses as well as cyborgs, so that the category of cyborg does not erase their experience as women.

Representations of the female body and representations of experiences of female embodiment are complicated by the ubiquity of technology. Online, identity is fluid, multifaceted, and performed in new ways. This point can be illustrated by a famous New

Yorker cartoon (two dogs sit in front of a computer terminal, with the caption "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog") and Alan Turing's test for machine intelligence (originally designed to guess whether a man or a woman was behind the computer). While it is an important part of this project to expose the work of female artists who use images of their bodies to express their experience, the biological determination of femininity is also outdated by the cyborg. Including disembodied, transgendered, and queer figures in this analysis illustrates alternative ways that gender can be performed in cyberspace, where the body is completely immaterial. The body, as visualized in cyberspace, symbolizes and instantiates its physical reality.

The question of how to translate embodied experience into cyberspace is answered by a diversity of representational strategies. These strategies include self-portraiture, pornography, collage, video art, data aggregation, text-based chat rooms, and the deployment of avatars as surrogate bodies. As each chapter explores the pros and cons of employing these modes of representing embodied experience, each mode reflects aspects of the human-cyborg experience. The first chapter analyzes art pertaining to the difficulty of representing embodied experience online. It begins by deconstructing the aesthetic of simulation, and the aesthetic specific to the genre of net art. The aesthetic of simulation reveals the tension between bodies and bodies mediated by technology (cyborgs). The "selfie" is used as a surrogate body, and unintended consequences are realized when it is released to the public. The artists in this chapter are responding to the disjuncture between their real and virtual selves, using images of their own bodies. The second chapter explores alternative strategies of constructing and representing an identity disconnected from the physical body. Artists in this chapter establish their identities by denying, fragmenting, or replacing their bodies with other signifiers through various media. The third chapter explores the construction and use of avatars as surrogate bodies. Unlike the selfie, these surrogates do not resemble their operators, but nonetheless provide an embodied experience and identity. As the body and identity mutate throughout these three chapters, the artists illustrate a resolution of the tension between humans and cyborgs, or cyborgs and goddesses.

The figures of both the cyborg and the goddess attempt to transcend the limitations of humanity in the interests of increased liberation. Departing from a

perspective of cyber-utopianism, in which all cyborgs are considered equal, feminist issues concerning the representations of gender, race, and class still crop up in discussions of online identity. When these issues appear in cyberspace, they create new spaces for reflection and discussion offline.

Chapter 1: Embodiment and Representation in Cyber-feminist Net Art

"A/S/L?"

> "The dream of cyberculture is to leave the 'meat' behind and [for the subject] to become distilled in a clean, pure uncontaminated relationship with computer technology."[1]

The meat of the body, the flesh, blood, and viscera are the hardware of human interface with the outside world. The software of the brain is programmed by interactions with the hardware, from the basest human desires to lofty intellectual stimulation. The software is the locus of human subjectivity, defining the self by embodied experience. The dream of cyberculture rejects the embodiment of human subjectivity, the contamination of the desires of the flesh, but, as Lars Lovlie points out, simulated reality on computers relies on the same situation and orientation as bodily experience. This is the case because there are very few other templates for experience than those of the bodily senses. Without simulating the senses of vision, hearing, touch, etc., there is no desire, no basis for interaction, just as there is no intersubjectivity without sensory exchange. The self is defined by the life span and boundaries of the body. Identity, particularly one's gender identity, is a category of experience in which these boundaries are questioned. Many still believe that biological sex determines gender; others such as Judith Butler argue that gender is socially constructed, based on a performance of gender roles. On Internet chat forums, "a/s/l?" or "age/sex/location?" is as common a question as asking for one's name. Knowing these qualities of an individual's embodiment in the physical world remains a necessity for interpersonal communication online, even if the translation of the physical body into a virtual self could allow one to exceed the boundaries of their physical reality and proscribed roles. Disembodied netizens must ask themselves:

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[1] Lars Lovlie, "Is there any body in cyberspace? Or the idea of a cyberbildung," (UTBILDNING & DEMOKRATI, 2005), 116

> What is the nature of my relationships? What are the limits of my responsibility? And even more basic: Who and what am I? What is the connection between my physical and virtual bodies? And is it different in different cyberspaces? These questions are framed to interrogate an individual, but with minor modifications, they are equally central for thinking about community. What is the nature of our social ties? What kind of accountability do we have for our actions in real life and in cyberspace? What kind of society or societies are we creating, both on and off the screen?[2]

The goal of this thesis is to explore some of the answers to these questions of physical and virtual embodiment. The first chapter explores how cyberfeminist artists answer based on representations of the female body in online visual culture.

"No Girls On The Internet?"

Regardless of the potential for a disembodied, post-identity society online, it remains evident that sex and gender identity have a discernible impact on cyber-relations. It is a common practice in chat rooms and role-playing games to gender-swap, presenting as an alternative to one's biological sex for social or sexual purposes. The fluidity of gender online allows netizens to explore the experience of altering their gender presentation, but Sherry Turkle, who has interviewed hundreds of Internet users, also points out the ways that the elimination of the physical experience limits the extent of understanding:

> Many of the people I interviewed claimed that virtual gender-swapping enabled them to understand what it's like to be a person of the other gender, and I have no doubt that this is true, at least in part. But as I listened to this boast, my mind often traveled to my own experiences of living in a woman's body. These include worry about physical vulnerability, fears of unwanted pregnancy and of infertility, fine-tuned decisions about how much makeup to wear to a job interview, and the difficulty of giving a professional seminar while doubled over with monthly cramps. To a certain extent, knowledge is inherently experiential, based on a physicality that we each experience differently.[3]

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[2] Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, (Simon & Schuster, 1997), 231
[3] Ibid, 238

Since even the earliest days of the Internet, female existence in cyberspace has been categorically denied with the adage, "there are no girls on the Internet." All users of the Internet are gendered male by default, and anyone presenting as female is considered a potential scam artist. Although female subjectivity is denied, the female body as an object of desire is ubiquitous online. Women must carefully construct their identities online, and attempts to simulate their embodied experiences are developing a new aesthetic of representation. To begin my discussion with the net art aesthetic and the aesthetic of simulation, I will explore the works of Meghan Forsyth, Krystal South, Anna Utopia Giordano, Petra Cortright, Rachel de Joode, and Jennifer Chan. The tension between two-dimensional and multi-dimensional representation parallels the tension between simulated representations of these women's bodies and their embodied experiences offline, in the flesh. The exploration of the "selfie" illustrates how the self-portrait is deployed to represent virtual embodiment and mediate these spatiotemporal conflicts. Works by Krystal South and Jennifer Chan further illustrate the impossibility of autonomous representation, revealing the unintended audience of these artists and others' freely circulating self-images. The following discussions of cyber-feminist net artists' works explore the ways that female embodiment is politicized and desexualized by the assertion of a kind of female subjectivity that destabilizes conventional representations, thus redistributing pleasure, reclaiming and dismantling the body through remix and reinvention.

The Aesthetic of Simulation

Internet artist Krystal South, who claims to have been online every day since she was twelve, has defined net artists as anyone who uses computers or the Internet in the production or distribution of their work. Her definition not only carries her authority as a native netizen, but as an artist attempting to identify herself. To use such a broad definition comprises those who write code and those who do not, those who use the Internet as their medium or simply as the conceptual background for their work performed on traditional media but containing content relating back to the Internet. Given the increasing ubiquity of computer technology in all aspects of modern life, the category

of net art has expanded rapidly to include a broad range of styles. New media critic Lev Manovich defines media-specific styles in the context of art history by quoting Clement Greenberg's comments on modernism: "'Because flatness was the only condition painting shared with no other art, Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else.'"[4] Manovich goes on to argue that the aesthetic of software is media-independent, but his main concern in creating this definition is not to theorize about art practice but about technology. He argues, "the technical ability to sample media work by others has become the basis of the key aesthetics of our time - remixing."[5] The artist's technical ability to mix and remix various media in net art is enabled by software, but the orientation of the net art aesthetic, to continue in Greenberg's terms, is not only towards the flatness of the screen, as in Modernist painting, but in the aesthetic of simulation which seeks to represent the rest of the world by the media available within the confines of a computer screen.

The aesthetic of simulation seeks to exceed the confines of the screen, in its attempts to simulate reality in all that takes place on and in the computer, as well as outside of it, which netizens refer to as "irl" ("in real life") or "afk" ("away from keyboard"). The aesthetic of simulation need not be a media-specific style, but often references the medium itself in context, with such examples as software programmed to resemble paper, used for word processing. By imaging the cursor on the screen as a hand with a single pointing finger, the physical hand controlling the external mouse or track pad is digitized and disembodied, able to interact with the two-dimensional simulation. Artist Meghan Forsyth has captured the phenomenon of this interface symbolically touching the female body in a 304-page book entitled *Virtuality,* which features pixelated images of cursor "rollovers in inappropriate places." (fig 1.1)[6] Forsyth's images convey the paradox of the aesthetic of simulation: the lack of sensation. While the sense of vision is easily conveyed by three-dimensional animation rendering, the sense of touch is not easily digitized. Technologies are activated by our desires, and *Virtuality* illustrates the virtual expression of the desire for real women's bodies, and how poorly this desire is

[4] Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command* (Bloomsbury, 2013), 120.
[5] Manovich, 122.
[6] Meghan Forsyth, "Virtuality" http://meghanforsyth.com/Virtuality.html

met by the two-dimensional simulation of touch via the cursor. It also evidences the images of women most commonly accessed by this touch, those exposing their bodies' flesh in pornography. From the examples on her website, it is clear that very few of these pictures feature the women's faces, focusing on specific body parts and flesh textures.

Rachel de Joode's *The Imaginary Order* (2012) is another illustration of the tension between the three-dimensional body and the two-dimensional representation (fig 1.3):

> Google home screen printed on foil and mounted on glass, with the name of the artist in the search bar. This is a performance piece: a woman sits, hangs and presses herself against the glass plate and licks it. Her movements are weak, extremely slow and viscous like dough. She moves without beginning, without end. She is in a soft state, pushing her mush against the plate which becomes a wall she cannot go through. This piece is about a parallel, Google existence and the border between the physical and the imaginary. The internet offers the possibility of another kind of life, a non-physical, mechanical existence which resides separate from the body. On the internet, there is an 'ideal' self, a fictional self, that is not real. This parallel persona is reproduced and distributed in a place that we cannot see or grasp, and it lives and decays at a rate different than our physical selves. However, this alternate, Internet being is still a real thing, its thingness Google.[7]

In de Joode's description of the work, her movements recall the performance of Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* by Marina Abramović as one of her *Seven Easy Pieces* performed at the Guggenheim in 2005.[8] Nauman wrote the original instructions for the piece in 1974, and it asks the performer to "Press as much of the front surface of your body (palms in or out, left or right cheek) against the wall as possible. Press very hard and concentrate. Form an image of yourself (suppose you had just stepped forward) on the opposite side of the wall pressing back against the wall very hard."[9] De Joode could be imagined to be following Nauman's instructions, with Google representing the

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[7] Rachel de Joode, "The Imaginary Order" http://www.racheldejoode.com/index.html 2013.
[8] Guggenheim Museum. "Exhibitions – Marina Abramovic: Seven Easy Pieces" http://pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/abramovic/ 2005.
[9] Bruce Nauman, "Body Pressure" 1974, c 2002 http://www.e-flux.com/projects/do_it/manuals/artists/n/N001/N001A_text.html

indexed image of herself projected into cyberspace. De Joode's piece also recalls the work of Pipilotti Rist in *Open My Glade (Flatten)* (2000) in which videos of Rist pressing her face against glass were projected on advertising billboards in Times Square.[10] In these performances, the women have as much contact with the glass surface as they can, appearing to be attempting to pass through it and ultimately failing. The visual spectacle of the flesh being distorted by the glass makes the flesh and the performer part of the art object. In Abramović's case, this distortion of the flesh and the sensations of her body are emphasized by Nauman's voice directing her actions, in what "may become a very erotic exercise." Rist's work uses similar imagery, but in the context of a billboard, she describes it as "advertisements for emotion." Rist appears to be struggling to escape the glass of the screen, not to merge with it, but to pass through and make contact with other human bodies. In de Joode's case, there is also a hypothetical body implied on the other side of the glass that is made of the aggregate of data referring to her on Google.

De Joode's work shows how attempts to merge or unite the corporeal self with this hypothetical body are physically impossible without shattering the glass surface of the computer screen, as it is impossible to touch ones reflection through the surface of a mirror. The difference between the mirror subject and the screen subject, however, is that the screen subject reflects only the image of the self that is created by interfacing with the computer. Hayles writes, in *How We Became Posthuman,* "the overlay between the enacted and the represented bodies is no longer a natural inevitability but a contingent production, mediated by a technology that has become so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject."[11] If the "overlay" and the "mediator" are seen as the glass between de Joode's real and cyber self, the computer screen is part of her cyborg body and the tension between her flesh and its in-screen counterpart is a tension between de Joode and a part of herself. In de Joode's case, by explicitly implicating Google Inc. as the artist behind the representation of her cyborg body, she questions how accurately it reflects her identity.

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[10] Public Art Fund, "Open My Glade" http://www.publicartfund.org/view/exhibitions/5855_open_my_glade 2000.
[11] Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. (University of Chicago Press, 1999) xiii, via Jones, 44.

Flesh and Commodification

Further commentary on the state of digitized female flesh can be found in the work of Krystal South, who created a website referring to Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* of entirely butt-shaking animations[12] and Anna Utopia Giordano, who has digitally retouched masterpieces to conform to the beauty standards of popular culture.[13] South's use of found .gif files in her reference to Duchamp seems particularly apt, as the piece she is referencing was a postcard-sized reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* defaced by Duchamp by the addition of a moustache, goatee, and the caption "L.H.O.O.Q.," homophonous in French with "She has a hot ass." The valuation of the sexualized posterior in digital images of women is illustrated by the widespread availability of these short, looping images, which consist only of rippling flesh. Giordano's project shows an opposite mutation of female bodies by digitization. As she presents her *Venus* project on her website, she shows a side-by-side comparison between various artists' depictions of the goddess Venus from Botticelli to Velasquez, and gives them all the same digital treatment with Photoshop as real women's bodies receive in popular media: an overall shrinking effect, emphasizing the roundness of their breasts and hips while eliminating all other fleshy protrusions: a distillation of the signifiers of femininity, without the burden of female subjectivity or corporeal existence. For a modern version of Venus, this embodiment seems appropriate to provide an updated image of the goddess who is in opposition to Donna Haraway's cyborg subject. The dichotomy between the cyborg and goddess is mediated in this case by the fact that Giordano's Venuses are also cyborgs, by nature of their bodies being digitally manipulated.

Petra Cortright's website[14] is an excellent example of net art which illustrates both the use of two-dimensional, specifically digital forms of communication, and images of bodily experience. Her art works take the form of videos and expose her embodied experience through various technological filters. Cortright refutes the "no girls on the Internet" rule, because her presentations of herself are exactly that: a girl, with a webcam. For videos such as *SICKHAIR & SICKHANDS* and *RGB, D-LAY* (fig 1.2) she uses an

[12] Krystal South, http://www.krystalsouth.com/lhooq.html, 2009
[13] Anna Utopia Giordano | Venus, http://www.annautopiagiordano.it/venus-ita.html, 2012
[14] Petra Cortright, http://www.petracortright.com

image manipulation software for the web cam called Magic Camera and plays with her hair and hands' effects, producing cascades and rainbows of afterimages. For many net artists, their intent is to obscure the sign and referent through the remix**,** digitally manipulating images until they are unrecognizable. Petra's image is not obscured in her videos, she uses the special effects to ornament or enhance her digital presence, emphasizing her physical existence. She is a conventionally beautiful woman and uses her face and body in her videos to perform femininity, often dancing, modeling, or simply displaying herself for the webcam against the background of her home or a digitally rendered scene of an entirely different environment, for example a beach, placing her body in cyberspace. According to her page on the Steve Turner Contemporary site, a gallery site where her videos are displayed for sale, she has been making webcam videos since 2007 and made the decision herself to correlate the prices of her videos with the number of views they receive on YouTube.[15] Both the clicks and current prices of her art are in the $1,000.00+ range. Her own commodification of herself in her videos is not very different from what teenage girls across the country are doing without profiting. By using software to create a marketable, digitized self-image and cashing in on the clicks and the attention she receives, Cortright makes a powerful statement about her ability to control the commodification of these carefully constructed images. Through her own digitization, capitalizing on her bodily femininity, as in South's project, and digitally enhancing it as an artistic practice, like Giordano, her art practice instantiates the commodification of female sexuality in the twenty-first century. As in their corporeal existence, young female bodies in cyberspace are objectified as commodities, often in bizarre and unexpected ways.

Selfies, Self-Reflection

Krystal South implies the metaphor of a computer screen as a mirror by quoting Michel Foucault on her personal website www.krystalsouth.com. He writes,

> The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space

[15] Petra Cortright Video Catalog, Steve Turner Contemporary http://steveturnercontemporary.com/petra-cortright-videos/

> that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.[16]

In the essay *IDENTIFY YOURSELF* South writes about collective and personal experiences of subjectivity on the Internet and how Foucault's conception of the heterotopia, a liminal space for perceptual shift, is expressed online. The format of the essay is a website called idyrself.com, featuring two columns of text interspersed with moving and static images. The left side, under "IDENTIFY" is concerned with the collective experience of life on the Internet and "YOURSELF" is written from South's perspective. The two columns are of different lengths and scroll at different speeds, discouraging the reader from attempting to read them simultaneously. Key passages in each column are highlighted wherever the essays' subject matter converges, and a third column between them contains links to relevant net artworks.

Under the heading of "THE GAZE," in "IDENTIFY," South explicitly writes, "The Internet is a mirror," and within this text provides a hyperlink to www.theinternetmirror.com, a website with an orange and gold wallpaper background and a golden frame. If the user allows the site to connect with their webcam, the site functions as a mirror within the frame, showing the user themselves through the eye of the webcam. Highlighting the words, "We are putting forth, creating and contributing, and participating in systems from which we receive feedback," under "IDENTITY," she

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[16] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias" *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984): 46-49. http://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heterotopia.en.html via www.krystalsouth.com

pairs this idea in the "YOURSELF" column with the statement: "We can eliminate unsightly feedback as easily as we can create the content that garnered it. This process of self-editing is not new, but in the age of screen-caps, with the amount of attention people expend grooming their digital feeds, monitoring these streams seems equally important."[17] This point is illustrated by an anecdote she provides about finding pictures of herself on a fetish website devoted to pictures of women cutting their own hair. She writes, "The most banal selfies become the pornography of the diverse fetishist." South admits there is nothing she can do about the redistribution of her image. She writes, "I found this simultaneously appalling and hilarious. I could take the images down from Flickr, thus ending their fun, but knew that if people really got off on these images, they had probably already downloaded them to their personal archives. So I left them, because that's just how the Internet plays out."[18]

As mentioned, it has become increasingly common for netizens to project their physical embodiment into cyberspace by means of self-portraits taken with web cameras, and a cultural dialogue around the concept of the "selfie" has come up in response. The Oxford English Dictionary made "selfie" their word of the year in 2013, and define it as "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website."[19] The dialogue centers mainly on the millennial generation and attacks them for being self-absorbed and narcissistic. The criticism of narcissism reflects the conception of the computer screen as a mirror, and expresses disapproval with the amount of time young people spend interacting with technology, interpreting it as a form of self-obsession. An article called "Everything is Embarrassing: Finding an Audience for Teen Angst Years Later" republished by Laura Marie Maciano on *alt crit*, a collectively authored art criticism blog, points out the gendered nature of these criticisms. It refers to an article by Alicia Eler and Kate Durbin on the "Teen Girl Tumblr-Aesthetic," described as "an abundance of raw, sparkling, vulnerable and honest accounts of visuals, writing, and moving gifs, which more often than not, center around their bodies, self images that represent where the emotional and

[17] Krystal South. "IDENTIFY YOURSELF" idyourself.com, 2013.
[18] Ibid

[19] Oxford Dictionaries "Word of the Year 2013" http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/press-releases/oxford-dictionaries-word-of-the-year-2013/, 19 November 2013

physical landscapes of 'girl world' meet the concrete flesh of phallic (gross) reality."[20] This is the same aesthetic that Mary Bond of www.selfiemary.com calls "girlcore," that is described as "an art 'philosophy' which basically holds at its center an unapologetic expression of and admiration of young female subjectivity."[21] This aesthetic is to be found wherever young women can express themselves online in large groups, from blogs to social media.

Sarah Gram models the experience of young girls in a critique of capitalism on her blog "Textual Relations." Gram recalls how, in a discussion of the selfie, "two adult men laughed out loud at the idea that young women's bodily experiences under sexism might play a role in the evaluation of the selfie's moral status." She argues that the commodification of women's bodies that young girls are socialized to accept in a capitalist society necessitates these "narcissistic" actions as a standard for their performance of femininity. Arguing that the selfie is the product of gendered labor under capitalism, she points out that the disgust reaction is evident of hegemony: "We elevate the work women do on their bodies to the utmost importance, and then punish the outcome of that labour [sic]."[22] Although narcissism is commonly thought of as a perverse self-love, as in the Greek myth of Narcissus, the psychoanalytic tradition defines it as:

> a personality so fragile it needs constant support. It cannot tolerate the complex demands of other people but tries to relate to them by distorting who they are and splitting off what it needs, what it can use. So, the narcissistic self gets on with others by dealing only with their made-to-measure representations. These representations (some analytic traditions refer to them as 'part objects,' others as 'self-objects') are all that the fragile self can handle.[23]

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[20] Laura Marie Marciano, ed., Alt crit. "Everything is Embarrassing: Finding an Audience for Teenage Angst Ten Years Later" (Iconno Magazine, 2013).
[21] Mary Bond, "GIRLCORE: RADICAL NARCISSISM, EXPRESSIVE HONESTY AND MACABRE SEXUALITY," 2012 www.selfiemary.com
[22] Sarah Gram, Textual Relations. "The Young-Girl and the Selfie" http://text-relations.blogspot.ca/2013/03/the-young-girl-and-selfie.html, 2013.
[23] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology And Less From Each Other* (Basic Books, 2011), 177

Turkle argues from this psychoanalytic perspective that the millennial generation has been accommodated by technology to use and discard these representations of themselves and others through social media. Widespread narcissism of this kind may be detrimental to society, but in the selfie's function as part-object or self-object is exactly what the young girl needs to function in cyberspace. She is continually provided with social capital in exchange for the validation of others, even if it means creating alternate identities to be consumed and discarded. The selfie represents an identity that is only the same (the Latin root of the word "identity" being *idem*, "the same"[24]) as the selfie taker because they share the same appearance; they are not the same entity. This disjunct is similar to the one expressed by de Joode's *Imaginary Order.* Mary Bond, in a response to Gram's "The Young Girl and the Selfie," points out how identity is reduced to physical appearance when "we treat their bodies as extensions of themselves and commodify them… they are compressing her humanity into her physical self."[25] To quote another of Bond's sites, autodissociate.me, which is wallpapered by her selfies and peppered with thoughts about self-representation, "there's less freedom in a way, because every action is documented… you can't ever escape your past aesthetic… kind of ironically, the superficial becomes fundamental."[26] Marciano, in "Everything Is Embarassing," points out that in her own adolescent experience she felt that her Internet activity was a product of her isolation and that it was performed in a vacuum, without the knowledge she has now that all of the content she contributed could be consumed by others. As Krystal South writes, "My loneliness, stemming from alienation, drives me to the most open space."[27] It is clear to South and Durbin, who curates the blog "Women As Objects"[28] that these young girls' self-expressions are not private, and the youth are being made increasingly aware of how their online presence will affect their lives "irl" and "afk."

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[24] Heidi J. Figueroa Sarriera, "Connecting the Selves: Computer-Mediated Identification Processes" *Critical Cyberculture Studies* Silver and Massanari, eds. (New York University Press, 2006), 97

[25] Mary Bond, Alt crit. "Re: The Young Girl and the Selfie" http://altcrit.tumblr.com/post/48731963433/re-the-young-girl-and-the-selfie, 2013.

[26] Mary Bond, autodissociate.me

[27] South, idyrself.com, 2013.

[28] http://womenasobjects.tumblr.com

As the real body is translated into the virtual by means of self-portraiture, it is taken at, pun intended, face value as the identity of the individual it resembles. A definition of identity that relies only on the physical appearance is all too common in a male-dominated cyberculture where women are defined by their bodies. Furthermore, now, not only do they have to be aware of the perception of their physical bodies, but also of the cyber body, which others can manipulate. When the images used by women for their own self-representation are redistributed by pornographers, they reveal the economy of images online, which is powered by the desires of the male gaze.

Fetishized Objects

William J. T. Mitchell quotes Oliver Wendell Holmes describing the "capitalist political economy of the photographic image" in the context of the stereograph, as "expeditions of visual conquest and plunder."[29] Holmes describes the capture of photographs in the language of hunting, or more aptly pointed out by Mitchell, poaching: "Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their skins, and leave the carcasses as of little worth." Collecting the skin, the outer surface light is reflected off of to produce the photographic image, and abandoning the body. Poaching is an appropriate metaphor for stealing or appropriating embodiment in analog photographic form, and digital photography is even easier to reproduce and re-appropriate. Mitchell moves from Holmes' description of the economy of images to a Marxist critique and ends with Susan Sontag's critique of the capitalist use of images: "It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to stimulate buying and anaesthetize the injuries of class, race, and sex. And it needs to gather unlimited amounts of information, the better to exploit natural resources, increase productivity, keep order, make war, give jobs to bureaucrats."[30] In this quotation from Sontag and throughout Mitchell's chapter the focus is primarily on how the technology of photography and photographic image distribution has caused these social effects, but Sontag's quote still rings true if applied to the Internet and digital media distribution as

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[29] William J. Mitchell, "Intention and Artifice" *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Photographic Era* (The MIT Press, 1992), 56.
[30] Ibid.

well. In the case of online media, "vast amounts of entertainment" would likely refer to the billions of fetishized images of female bodies constantly circulating in pornographic images and videos, which exacerbate the injuries of class, race, and sex.

Net artist Jennifer Chan exposes the phenomenon of Internet fetish communities in a series of videos called *CRUSHES*. They are a set of five videos uploaded to YouTube in 2010 explicitly intended for fetishists who are sexually stimulated by watching women step on things in heels. These videos, taken out of a pornographic context, are bizarre pieces of performance art. They reduce women's bodies to objects in a context in which objects are symbolically destroyed. If the objects are taken as an extension of the female body, or the body of the viewer, they illustrate the messy combination of desire and inanimate object, which is a predominant theme in most modern pornography. In the video, she seductively steps on a wheel of brie wrapped in bubble wrap and doused in crème de cacao in stirrup leggings and black heels in "*birthday blow trample*: brie and bubblewrap." The video shows her blowing up a balloon (definitely another fetish object) and microwaving the brie before wrapping it up. This gesture in particular is out of place in the context of this video, as the viewers are there to see the food destroyed, not prepared, but it is also worth noting here that food preparation is considered a woman's traditional role. Chan's performance is sexualized by the way the camera focuses on only her legs and feet as she steps on the bubbles, avoiding the brie at first, teasing the viewer with how close her feet get to it before demolishing the cheese. According to YouTube, it has been viewed over 8,000 times, but has only a single comment: "sexy leggins and shoes awesome vid." Despite the lack of commentary, the intended audience has clearly been reached based on the view count, which has clearly been inflated by a small group of fetishists sharing and replaying it. In "an inquiry into the tensile strength of sealed bags," which has over 7,000 views, she steps on plastic bags full of air in red heels and a commenter requests: "sit on a unopened bag of chips."

In "paper crush," a man tramples and compresses paper with his body. This video, featuring Johnson Ngo as the main actor instead of Chan, has less than 300 views and no comments at all. This huge discrepancy in viewership leads me to argue that it is Ngo's male body that the viewers are not interested in, despite the crushing action. It is Chan's female body and its interactions with the objects that the crush fetishists are most

interested in, not only the manipulation of objects by specific bodies, but the manipulation of specific bodies as objects. The fourth video of the series, "1190 calories," has only 399 views and a single line of description: "59g fat." In this video, Chan spreads peanut butter onto slices of bread, stacking half a loaf into a tall sandwich tower for the first four and a half minutes of the video, and then squishes it down with her hand. Based on Chan's statements in other videos about her relationship with her body, and the conversion of nutritious food objects into numbers of calories and fat grams, this video was not intended for the same audience as the other crushes, and also carries a personal statement about her relationship with her body and the objects she must consume, or destroy, to maintain or destroy herself. She has been inundated with the same images of women referenced by South and Giordano in the "Flesh and Commodification" section, in which the female body is valued for the amount of flesh on it or absent. Nonetheless, it is available for consumption to a community of fetishists and receives a comment from user "bradley williams" requesting, "please do 1 with a pack of hamburger buns."

The last video, "trample redux," is the ultimate anti-crush video. She appears to be crushing something with her feet, but the camera only shows her from the knees up, focusing on her impassive facial expression. This video is only a minute and a half long, and ends with Chan laughing into the camera for the last ten seconds. The viewer perceives that she is laughing at them, laughing at her own joke, her own wildly successful entrapment of Internet fetishists, if they have bothered to watch the video until the end (and 4,700 have). It is clear from her position as a video artist that she is aware that these videos are being distributed, and by publicly uploading them on YouTube, she consents to their accessibility. However, this is not always the case in cyberspace, as evidenced by the struggles of South and de Joode to maintain control over content that also contains their embodied experiences. By connecting with just a few fetish groups, Chan makes them visible as the audience of her work by ensnaring them with her own self-produced image, intentionally inserting her body as an object into a very specific formula for erotic experience, in which it is clear she has no experience of desire. She expresses desire only to manipulate and destroy the objects around her. The commentaries on her own body image struggles embedded in the context of her

pornography were no doubt lost on most of her viewers. In this set of videos and many others, Chan subversively represents female subjectivity by exposing herself and imposing a subtle commentary on a codified form of female representation.

Woman's Culture: Cyberfeminism

In his 1991 essay "The Aesthetics of Disappearance," Paul Virilio quotes the following phrase from Walter Benjamin: "'We know nothing of woman's culture, just as we know nothing of the culture of the young.'"[31] Virilio goes on to draw his own comparisons between women and children, specifically hysterical women, but this quote of Benjamin's out of context still rings true as a feminist statement about popular culture: mainstream culture remains male-dominated, created majorly by and in the interests of entertaining men who know nothing of women's culture. In a later (1997) essay, "From Sexual Perversion to Sexual Diversion," Virilio fears for the future of the human race due to the interventions of technology and "cybersexuality." Beginning the essay by lamenting the transformation of the "woman-object" into the "object-woman," he ends it by quoting cyberfeminist discourse from 1994. Excerpting only his quotes from the cyberfeminists of the early '90s, this article brings up many of the arguments cyberfeminists remain in dialogue with today about technological means of embodiment:

> Cyberfeminism participates in the development of a feminist consciousness and emphasizes the importance of the multimedia in perception of the body… Who will in future generate the codes and the specifications by which bodies will be represented in cyberspace where everything exists as metaphor? This already depends on the matter in which cybernauts choose to engage with the virtual body… What will happen to the social relationships of sexuality, the body's sexual modes of communicating, desire and sexual difference in the age of the coded metaphor? Control of interpretation of the body's boundaries is a truly feminist issue… It is urgent that women participate in the construction of cyberspace by developing a cyberimaginary capable of becoming a tool of their own self-construction. If it is true that the multimedia can be a formidable

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[31] Steve Redhead, ed., *The Paul Virilio Reader (European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism)* (Columbia University Press, 2004), 59.

> instrument of control and subjugation, it is up to us women to turn it into a tool of emancipation.[32]

Virilio fears, in his own commentary, that cybersex will prevent the perpetuation of our species, but it seems that the cyberfeminists he quotes had slightly different goals. To a contemporary reader, the shifts in sexual and cultural identities the cyberfeminists speak of aspire to a desexualization of women's physical bodies, not because feminists want to eliminate sexual reproduction, but because they want to exercise their ability to control their sexuality representationally as well as biologically. To control how they are perceived in cyberspace is a feminist response to the cultural oversexualization of women's bodies and the disempowerment experienced by women who are not in control of their own representation. The cyberfeminist project to reinvent female sexuality online as a free, un-subjugated sexual subjectivity, is evident in the practices of female net artists such as Chan, South, Cortright, and many others who perform female embodiment in their Internet art. The control or lack thereof that they wield as artists over the representation of their physical bodies and the bounded or unbounded cyber-constructs they use to extend their subjectivities into cyberspace are emblematic of the struggles netizens face as their subjectivity is mediated by technology that is controlled by corporate interests and larger hegemonic power structures.

At the end of the article, "Who invented Surfing the Internet?" librarian and long-time netizen Jean Armour Polly (also known as "Net-mom®") reflects on the terms in use before "surfing" the net became the norm: "Before we surfed the net, folks mined it, navigated it, explored it, used it, or cruised it."[33] These are the linguistic signifiers of the colonialist perspective extending beyond physical space and culture and into the discourses of cyberspace, most of which have disappeared through disuse. Throughout these critiques, the possibility of the selfie as a tool for empowerment is largely discredited, because it is seen as a product of capitalist and sexist hegemony. As Bond puts it, the availability of options in a capitalist society is false freedom. Freedom of representation within selfies themselves is one issue, but a larger issue seems to be how

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[32] Redhead, 187-188.
[33] Jean Armour Polly, "Who invented Surfing the Internet?" http://www.netmom.com/about-net-mom/23-who-invented-surfing-the-internet 2006.

these selfies, the embodied identities of thousands of young girls, are commoditized and distributed. As evident from South's example, their commodification is highly sexualized. The content creators have very little control over the distribution of their images once they are available to the public on the Internet. A more effective critique of the selfie implicates not only those who create them, but those who collect and redistribute them.

This is the actual result of the cybersexuality Virilio's feminists described. Their question of what will happen to the social relationships of sexuality, communication, desire, and sexual difference is answered by the ubiquity of pornography on the Internet and the thousands of communities uniting fetishists of all kinds. The notion that women would be able to control the use of their representation in cyberspace has proven nearly impossible if they choose to participate in an embodied way. To quote Peter Lyman in Douglas Davis' "The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction":

> A computer is both an object, a machine, and a series of 'congealed' social relations which have been embedded within the object: it is a tool which makes the work of writing more efficient; its software contains a cybernetic model of knowledge derived from technical culture which does not address the ethical and social issues which have been part of the project of qualitative social research; it is embedded within an everyday male culture of aggressive images of control which constitute a cultural barrier for some users.[34]

The struggle against this embedded cultural programming, which is imposed on cyberculture and on the body of the netizen, is the project of cyberfeminist artists.

Feminizing The Network

In the same year that Virilio published his fears of cybersex, Anne de Haan circulated an essay entitled "The vagina is the boss on the internet." She describes the work of seminal cyberfeminist net artists, including an Australian female artist group called "VNS Matrix" (parsed by Haan as "VNS – VeNuS - Matrix") who were pioneers of the cyberfeminist movement. In conclusion, she states, "These feminist artists see the

[34] Douglas Davis "The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (An Evolving Thesis: 1991-1995)" *Leonardo*, Vol. 28, No. 5, Third Annual New York Digital Salon (1995), 382

internet as an opportunity to be the boss on the internet. They do not want to lose their gender, but they want to gain dominance over the male in their female glory. The gender identity should therefore be emphasized according to them."[35] Indeed, the female body is the source of power, specifically the genitals, according to the VNS Matrix manifesto titled *All New Gen* (1995). The text of the manifesto appears on a sphere bulging out of a pink patterned background of empty ovoids with pinched edges and radiating lines surrounding them resembling hairs, seeming to represent a cartoon vagina. The manifesto reads:

> we are the modern cunt / positive anti reason / unbounded unleashed unforgiving / we see art with our cunt we make art with our cunt / we believe in jouissance madness holiness and poetry / we are the virus of the new world disorder / rupturing the symbolic from within / saboteurs of big daddy mainframe / the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix / the VNS MATRIX / terminators of the moral code / mercenaries of slime / go down on the altar of abjection / probing the visceral temple we speak in tongues / infiltrating disrupting disseminating / corrupting the discourse / we are the future cunt[36]

While the language of this manifesto is militant and aggressive, the aesthetic is typically feminine, and does not assault the eyes of the viewer. The angry "cunt" referred to in the text is rendered as a pleasing background pattern which is distorted as the background is ruptured by the sphere, further evoking the imagery of birth. The play of aggressive textual statement of intent with contradictory hyper-feminized images seems evident as a subversive aspect of the aesthetic of cyberfeminism. As Jennifer Chan points out in her essay, "Why Are There No Great Women Net Artists?" early cyberfeminists appropriated misogynist terms such as "cunt" for the purposes of their manifestos and acted antagonistically towards masculine technological culture, creating their own websites and mailing lists to stake a claim in cyberspace.[37] The vagina is used in the text as a

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[35] Anne De Haan <sigorney {AT} knoware.nl>. "Translation: The vagina is the boss on internet." (nettime, 1997) http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9706/msg00111.html

[36] Media Art Net, "VNS Matrix: All New Gen" http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/all-new-gen/. Accessed October 2013.

[37] Jennifer Chan, "Why Are There No Great Women Net Artists? Vague Histories of Female Contribution According to Video and Internet Art" (pooool.info, 2011) http://jennifer-chan.com/index.php?/writing/no-women-net-artists/

synecdoche for the whole woman and as her eyes and hands, the body parts that interact with the world and observe or create art objects. The explicit threat of infection is one of technologic and bodily consequence, as well as the probing and infiltration that threaten to penetrate the systems of male domination. The vagina is both modern, present now at the beginning of the manifesto, and represents the tool of the future as the ultimate anti-phallic symbol. If the cyberfeminists intend to take control of the Internet with the power of the vagina, they intend to feminize even the network itself.

As Sadie Plant states in her reflections on women and virtual reality, "Cybernetics is feminization."[38] She connects the idea of femininity as already cyborg, a masculine ideal of woman as equal parts natural and artificial, to women's suitability to virtuality. She argues that masculine identity is threatened by technology, likening it to a self-aware system tracing the emergence of cyberspace from a tightly controlled capitalist, military technology to a rapidly expanding and all-consuming information network. Gendering this network, or matrix, as feminine she writes: "Intended to serve man's quest for planetary domination and escape from the corruptions of the troublesome meat, the matrix was always having him on… The matrix has in any case hacked into all self-conscious attempts to shape it in man's image of nature and artifice."[39] VNS Matrix's *bitch mutant manifesto*, published in 1996, graphically illustrates a similarly anthropomorphized idea of the Internet as a dangerous girl child: "The net's the parthenogenetic bitch-mutant feral child of big daddy mainframe. She's out of control, kevin, she's the sociopathic emergent system. Lock up your children, gaffer tape the cunt's mouth and shove a rat up her arse."[40] The violence implied in the last line betrays the bodily conception of a female Internet, defined by its orifices, and the castrative threat it imposes to masculinity and the patriarchal structures by which it was created. As Donna Haraway writes, "The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state

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[38] Sadie Plant, "Feminisations: Reflections on Women and Virtual Reality" *Clicking In: Hot Links to a Digital Culture* Lynn Hershman Leeson, ed. (Bay Press, Seattle: 1996), 37
[39] Ibid, 38
[40] VNS Matrix, bitch mutant manifesto (1996)
http://www.obn.org/reading_room/manifestos/html/bitch.html

socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins."[41] The project of cyberfeminist artists is therefore to destroy the socially detrimental aspects of the Internet from the inside, by aggressively saturating it with femininity. If the network itself is seen as female, what of its creators who thought it was made in their image?

Jennifer Chan's cyberfeminist art explicitly implicates these patriarchal power structures in a video from 2008, entitled *XXX-TRA CREDIT! XXX! *A TOTAL JIZZFEST!** (fig 1.4) The title implies a "risky click," or pornographic content "NSFW" ("Not Safe For Work"), and leads to http://www.jennifer-chan.com/extra.html. Her encoding of the title of the work in the language of Internet pornography points to the male-dominated, capitalist underpinnings of the net as we know it. Chan's graphics fly out of a blue background, which then transforms into a space scene common to the backgrounds of Apple computers. The graphics materialize using a transition mode not unfamiliar to users of Microsoft Power Point presentations, and the downtempo electronic muzak providing the score for her flying slideshow makes the atmosphere Silicon Valley business casual. Chan's logo "HOT CREATIONS" materializes first, fading into a diagram of a peer-to-peer network. Text reading "THE BEST SELECTION" rolls across the middle of the image in sunset pastel colors, pointing to her process of choosing images available on the Internet for this project, and the language of advertising inherent in images produced for marketing purposes.

The rest of the video satirizes the images of the men who created the Internet for scientific, militaristic, but mostly capitalistic purposes. Various pictures of men seated at computer terminals flash by, and portraits of men important to the history of computing begin to predominate. The logo of "CSnet international," flashes by, followed by a black and white picture of men at computer terminals in a lab, subtitled "OGs" (for "Original Gangsters," presumably). A man sitting in front of terminals bearing the "W3C" ("World Wide Web Consortium") appears. The space scene in the background has at this point been replaced with an animation of money falling through the air. The men's images bear

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[41] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), 149 -181

the names of the websites they are known for or have profited from, including gawker, eBay, and megaupload, with cute nicknames assigned by Chan such as “study buddy” for Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg. After the first minute of video it takes a turn for the surreal. The electronic music features steel drums and a sample repeating the words, “so real, so real,” as a 3-D rendering of a beach scene with the sky torn open pans down into a virtual landscape where animated girls in bikinis dance with their hands to the sky. An image of Bill Gates reclining on a Microsoft computer partially overtakes the digital landscape and a beam of light streaming out of his forehead towards the viewer obscures the image, before he is replaced by another series of technological pioneers, including a very young Steve Jobs holding an apple. The words “people tend to think the only thing on your mind in your twenties is sex and money” scroll across the screen followed by: “ALL DAY LONG I THINK ABOUT SLEEP.” After letting the electronic music build up and wind down into incoherence, the slideshow continues, revealing the faces of the owners of even more successful web companies. It seems the younger the web pioneer is, the larger their web company is, and the images interspersed with these men are now more commonly labeled “boy.” Before the end of the video, the text scrolling across reads: “you may think i’m just being cool. this is how i inculcate myself from criticism. i consider myself easy to satisfy. i want love. i want my own empire. in the event that doesn’t work out, a refurbed laptop would also be nice. :))))”

Chan uses the format of the music video slideshow to present the men who created the Internet to her viewers. She glamorizes them sardonically by floating their images over a tropical paradise surrounded by dancing girls. The tropical paradise is a glitchy utopia, as the sky tears open a rainbow of misplaced pixels cascades through the rift. Comparing the men’s appearances in photographs from the real world to the images made possible by computer imaging proves unflattering, and is one way for Chan to counteract the near-deification of technological innovators. She could have scrolled the words “LOL HUGE NERDS” across the screen, but based on captions such as “Original Gangsters” on the black and white photo of early computer engineers, she does acknowledge that the history of the Internet is important and useful. The line “you may think i’m just being cool. this is how i inculcate myself from criticism” may be directed at the overall aesthetic of the video, the parts including 3-D digital models and flashy

graphics. It could also be read as showing that she is aware of this history and her debt to the creators of the Internet. By couching her criticisms in the informational format of Power Point slides, she may be saying that she has done her homework and her report is self-evident. She does not intend to completely discredit these men, but to expose their humanity and their embodiment as privileged members of society. In doing so, she exposes her own feelings about the systems they are implicated in benefiting from and perpetuating. By including the "glitch" style art as part of her expressive lexicon, she shows how deconstruction of these systems can be beautiful and meaningful.

Chan's videos could almost be read as technophobic if they were not natural artifacts of her intimate relationship with technology, as evidenced by the net art aesthetic she employs. Her account of female artists' contributions to net art history shows that she is deeply concerned with the historical precedents for the representation of women, which are evident in her representations of men. To define women in terms of their opposition to men is the flaw in Catherine MacKinnon's definition of radical feminism with which cyborg feminist Donna Haraway takes issue in her well-known *Cyborg Manifesto*. By MacKinnon's construction of a woman as a "non-being," Haraway writes "Feminist practice is the construction of this form of consciousness; that is, the self-knowledge of a self-who-is-not." Chan points out after her summary of Haraway that cyberfeminist manifestos such as *All New Gen* have been overlooked academically in favor of theories like Haraway's cyborg which have been "constantly revisited."[42] Although seemingly at odds, these two perspectives are mutually supportive in Chan's work. Haraway's eschewal of the male/female dichotomy in favor of a genderless cyborg anti-humanism supports a reading of Chan's work and her use of technology as an extension of herself and her body. The cyberfeminist perspective, which relies heavily on the bodily and sexual opposition of men and women, reads the lack of female bodies represented in Chan's video as a symptom of a male-dominated culture. Chan's framing of the video as an educational presentation exposes that culture and questions the lack of roles for women's involvement historically, while involving herself in the writing of the future.

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[42] Chan, 12.

Art and Awareness: A New Aesthetic

Another of Jennifer Chan's videos, *Deep Thoughts* (2013) (fig 1.6) describes a cyberfeminist aesthetic by making her own political statements through "remix culture," which she uses to dissect the aesthetic of artistic dissent. Billing *Deep Thoughts* as a remix of Phil Morton's video *Crosseye: Feelin' Man,* she intersperses clips of Morton speaking into a microphone about video culture and remixes him with sped-up pop songs and 3-D animations from video games. Over a video of Morton standing in front of his painted bus, talking about how easy it is to "send yourself" to different places with video, she slides the text "a new aesthetic is in demand." The text is formatted with little stars dotting the "I"s, so it is clear which aesthetic Chan means: a feminine and feminist one. The text is repeated, this time in all caps, as Morton slurs, "You can send yourself to wherever you want." As this statement ends, a video of the style found on YouTube flies into focus and it is of a man also dressed in a hippie style of clothing performing dance moves poorly in his bedroom for a web cam. He is not the captivating Petra Cortright, and serves as an example of the masculine aesthetic, which is as out of style and obsolete as the Nokia phone that hovers next to the clip. Although his body has been transported to the viewer's location in cyberspace, it has not been translated into a cyber body at all, implying a lack of awareness of the conditions of male embodiment across media.

Chan's feminist intent in remixing the video is made clear as the words "This is the fatherfucking remix!" are written across a color-inverted and desaturated pornographic video. "The fatherfucking remix," is a feminist statement switching the common emphatic phrase "motherfucking" with one implicating larger patriarchal power structures. She includes more of Morton's imagery over a soundtrack by the band Knife Party, a song called "Internet Friends," which features the standard ringtone of an iPhone at the climax of the song, before the bass is dropped. The song is an anthem both for and against cyber socialization, featuring a robotic female voice as the sole vocalist over electronic music. Chan excerpts the part of the song where she chants "You blocked me on Facebook, and now you're going to die," as images of dissatisfied anime girls in front of computers fly around the combusting screen. The texts that scroll across and through

the screen at the end of the video convey various statements of artistic and political apathy:

> CAPITALISM FAILED / MARXISM FAILED / NOW EVERYONE IS A DJ / I WANT TO KNOW IF THIS / TERRIBLE FEELING IS MUTUAL,
>
> I AM A VERY FREE SPIRIT, / BUT I DON'T FUCK FOR FREEDOM / PROTEST INTERFERES WITH 420 / AND THE WORLD CANNOT HAVE THAT
>
> luckily this is less offensive / because everything has been done / don't worry there is / no originality after the internet / it feels pretty good to remix in 2013

Her video ends with more flying clipart, a sweatsuit emblazoned with "I HAVE GIVEN UP" on every limb, and a short clip of a cute sloth.

Chan's comments in the description of her video hosted on vimeo.com provide a context for these apathetic visual and textual statements. She writes, "Art and activism are ultimately at odds. In an attempt to politicize or autonomize, every aesthetic ends up in a ghetto unless it adapts to the cult of the contemporary… Having as much sex and drugs as possible to achieve perceptual freedom has nothing to do with political agency."[43] Her disparagement of the liberal counterculture that Morton seems to represent for her is obvious in her video, and it is worth noting that feminism also evolved in American culture in the 1970s, when Morton was active as a media artist. It is clear by the end of her statements that she is not entirely politically apathetic, simply exhausted by the uselessness of antiquated forms of protest embodied by Morton. By juxtaposing his videos with electronic music, anime girls, and clip art heralding the destruction of modern society, Chan contributes to the same aesthetic as VNS Matrix, described by de Haan as wanting "to make chaos in the standards and values from today's society, because they do not agree with the woman's status within."[44]

In what Chan calls her most political video, *Grey Matter* (2012) (fig 1.7) she maintains the aesthetic of cute chaos. It opens with a video game-like first-person

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[43] Jennifer Chan. "Deep Thoughts" http://vimeo.com/61152459 2013.

[44] De Haan, http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9706/msg00111.html

perspective simulation flying around a disintegrating virtual London being attacked by giant beetles with bouncy electronic music in the background. A male voice intones "Welcome to the digital age," before the simulation ends and Chan's style of presenting found images and clip art (the same aesthetic as in her previously discussed videos) takes over. The images in this sequence are framed by the desktop of a Macbook, with a row of icons on the bottom and an open Google Chrome web browser. A web cam video of Chan opening a Macbook computer and presenting it to the viewer (and to the "eye" of another computer) floats across the screen. As she turns the Macbook to display each side, obscuring her own face, her web cam video of her body is then obscured by clip art of two students, a boy and girl, who appear to be having a study session, but are gazing into each other's faces on the verge of kissing. The images that fly around in this sequence refer to Chan's relationship with technology and the way it currently mediates human interaction, with the Macbooks staring into each others' web cams as analogous to the teenage lovers. The soundtrack blares "I'm gonna have a real good time," and the juxtaposition of an online retailer opened in the browser with all of these images points to the replacement of human interaction by technology. Instead of having the romantic experience of connecting with a human face-to-face like the students, Chan is implying she has a similar romantic relationship with her computer, emphasized by the words "connected forever" floating over images of hearts and roses. The words "bored together" fly in afterwards, recalling the idea of an entire generation never looking up from their laptops, constantly connected and seeking stimulation online.

After the words "bored together" fly into the screen, they are replaced by an image of Chan's face in a web cam using the "Mirror" filter, so that she appears duplicated, again recalling the figure of Narcissus. Her voice is distorted, as is her mouth, as her reflections turn toward each other and extend their tongues in a parody of the romantic gesture of the students, as though she is going to make out with her own reflection. A video of Chan's face distorted by webcam software and color filters serves as the background for the next, text-based section of the video. The words "this is the most political video i will ever make." are followed by a stream of consciousness about Chan's goals as a political activist and her insecurities as an artist and feminist, much like her comments on *Deep Thoughts*. As her dissatisfactions scroll from right to left across

the screen, statements such as “I want to change the world but I can’t” and a resume of her activist accomplishments are overlaid on the scrolling text. The words “I still feel like a terrible person” add a third layer of text on top of her resume and the stream of consciousness text becomes increasingly negative, until the words “As I reach 30 I will try my best to live without dogma and irony” appear over top. At this point, the scrolling stream of consciousness is reversed and crumpled as it leaves the screen. In both the text about her actions in real life and the image, the virtual simulation of her embodiment, she is distorted in her view of herself and how she is presenting herself to others. This distortion of her self-image is a reflection of the culture she is participating in, in which women are systematically oppressed and expected to perform above and beyond the expectations set by men in order to become noteworthy.

The tone of the video then shifts into a more positive, feminist one with a found image of a group of sporty, happy looking women, as “It’s like that y’all, so hit it up!” is chanted by female voices. An urban skyline provides the background for various stock images of women conversing in small groups over food or books. Positive messages such as “I am a woman of incredible strength and vulnerability,” “I have extreme beauty and ambition to offer this world,” and “I am the perfect woman” appear over Chan’s selfies, symbols of her cyber embodiment. By interspersing an OKCupid quiz implying she is “More Political, More Independent, More Compassionate, More Kinky” than average, she includes another way her identity is quantified by her computer use, via the algorithms of an online dating profile. The words “I have always hated my body and i am ok with that,” are backgrounded by a picture of kale and followed by “I AM JUST ONE OF MANY.” These images harken back to her crush videos and the manipulation of food and flesh – too much or too little, according to the images of the media evidenced by South and Giordano, will make or break her sexual desirability, by which she is problematically defined. Chan uses a ripple effect to draw the viewer’s eye to the part of the background image where a hand (presumably male) is reaching towards a woman’s bikini bottom under the surface of a swimming pool. Although it has already been discussed how problematic it is to define a woman as only the sexually desirable object to a man, perhaps the transition out of this image (a cascade of color-changing rainbow pixel goop) implies the digital deconstruction of this paradigm.

The end of the video keeps rainbow colors raining down as a background, as various emotional sentiments are expressed in text and image, including the phrases: "Envy is wanting something someone has" and "Jealousy is not wanting them to have it at all." Inverted smiley faces fly over a screen showing a code compiler as the words "I DON'T GET IT" and "i am such a failure" express Chan's frustrations with the male-dominated technology industry. The intensely emotional nature of the end of the video ends with the soundtrack chanting "I hate myself, I hate myself" as the text "this is getting so narcissistic i don't know what to do" and "I've said all I need to said" followed by "I NEED TO WIN" and "I WANT IT ALL" appear over a bowl of jiggling gelatin. The prevalence of statements about herself makes Chan's most political video also her most personal. Her self-awareness of the way the media has distorted her image of herself and the high expectations for a female artist and activist create the emotional contradictions expressed in the work. She acknowledges the toxic imagery surrounding women's bodies in the media and the struggle against it, but also acknowledges that she is not above being affected by it, in solidarity with other women.

Chan seems to be presenting a lot of conflicting messages in this video. Although she attacks the way that interpersonal and romantic relationships are perverted by technological mediation, she is advocating its use in consciousness-raising and connecting women. It seems that she knows her feelings of inadequacy as an artist and activist are unfounded, and that she wants to promote a positive message, but by the end of the video her cultural conditioning persists. The video as a whole is more concerned with the topic of Chan's relationship with herself and her self-image as it is projected into cyberspace, than others' perceptions of her. In Amelia Jones' *Self/Image* she points out that although the self portrait is a "technology of embodiment," it is a performative and paradoxical embodiment in that it makes clear the differentiation between the artist's actual, physical, mortal body and the incorruptible body that exists in the work.[45] This tension between the idealized artist's body and the real is even further complicated by the necessity of creating a bodily presence on the Internet, and the availability and corruptibility of that body to unknown audiences.

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[45] Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject*. (Routledge, 2006), 43.

The wide range of Chan's video art presented here deals not only with her relationships to herself and other objects, as she also objectifies herself and analyzes her own subjectivity, but with her knowledge of the ubiquity of her presence as both subject and object. She is aware of the wide audience she is making herself available to, and does not distill or curate her image into a media-mandated ideal or remix it into unrecognizability. Including all of her self-doubts and hatred is part of a radical political statement to express female subjectivity, as radical as distributing her own pornography, presenting her fetishized female body as art in an intentional and subversive fashion. By being explicit about her struggles as an artist and activist she reveals the tensions between the form of her body created by her body of work and her aspirational self-image, which she realizes has been corrupted by media imagery. She is also capable of directly implicating the power structures that have caused this fracturing of the self-image by presenting her with an idealized woman, an image of woman mandated by men. Expressing this anger towards existing paradigms of womanhood aims to foster a new aesthetic of both cyber and cyborg femininity which reacts to these paradigms by destroying them and creating their own. Expressing her romantic desires towards the Internet and the power of connectivity, she attempts to incorporate herself and others in a loving, meaningful relationship with technology and with each other, but not without recognizing the struggle that entails against the mainstream.

Chan not only embraces her multifarious roles as a woman in society, she problematizes them by her actions as a net artist. The incorporation of her various virtual and embodied emanations reveal her subjectivity as an entity that is multifaceted, incorporating her online and offline experiences, her real and virtual embodiments. Earlier, I argued that the "narcissistic" medium of the selfie is in fact a way of separating the virtual and bodily self, while keeping both of them consistent with the individual's identity: it is this entity's cumulative identity which is the rebellious cyborg, the matrix of feminine identity which can be represented in whatever embodiment is necessary for self-expression in cyberspace. The inclusion and absence of the flesh are both used to define female subjectivity online, and the visible processes of the creation of an embodied image of femininity calls attention to the constraints of the medium. Like the mirror, gazing deeply into the reality of cyber embodiment creates awareness not only of the self-image

but also of the origins of the tools for transforming the mess of the flesh into the cyber body.

Chapter 2: Alternative Embodiments

Netochka Nezvanova and the Disembodied Woman

The first chapter of this thesis explored the dilemma female artists face when representing themselves online, due to the misogynist nature of cyberculture and the symbolic and literal perversion of the female body by the media and Internet users. In a cyberfeminist context, the assertion of a female identity and expression of that embodied experience is a rebellious act against the power structures of a male-dominated web. The representational strategies employed by these women rely on extant codes of femininity and an assertive new aesthetic of cyberfeminism, which rejects complicity with traditional performance and presentation of the female body.

A textual statement from VNS Matrix expresses the ways that subjectivity, signification, and desire are mutating on the Internet: "The pleasure's in the dematerialization. The devolution of desire."[46] The pleasure afforded by dematerialization of the body can be seen in a video by Claire L. Evans entitled *Digital Decay: Meditation/Disintegration*. (fig 1.5) In the video, Evans is seated in front of a web camera with a spinning rainbow wheel positioned at her forehead. As she sits quietly, with her eyes closed, the animation consists of individual video frames saved in progressively lower quality formats hundreds of times being laid over each other, to the effect that the video quality is decaying into colorful visual static before our eyes. Evans asks the question "Where is the line at which compression ceases to preserve information entirely?" but the viewer, if unaware of the mechanical processes behind the video, is more concerned with the line at which Evans' body disappears. When the pixels of her body and the background image are both corrupted to the point of random colors arranging themselves without differentiation, the viewer perceives no discontinuity between Evans and her surroundings. She has become assimilated into them by symbolically destroying them and herself through a process of oversaturation in which

[46] VNS Matrix, bitch mutant manifesto (1996) http://www.obn.org/reading_room/manifestos/html/bitch.html

colors rendered in pixels too small for the eye to see are multiplied so many times that they lose their color entirely. This process recalls the remix aesthetic, and the work of art in the age of digital reproduction, but with the added element of mutation, an organic remix process borrowing a term from biological reproduction: "Mutation occurs when pattern can no longer be counted on to replicate itself, when pattern's disruption by randomness becomes visibly evident in the body."[47] In this way, Evans represents the mutant cyborg and cyber-feminist subjectivity, but unlike Haraway and VNS Matrix, she is threatening the patriarchy through a very peaceful form of protest, the symbolic annihilation of her virtual body by its repetition.

While artists such as Jennifer Chan and Rachel de Joode have shown how difficult it is to incorporate their embodied experience in cyberspace, Netochka Nezvanova has avoided this problem by refusing to be embodied at all. She is perhaps the first and only entirely disembodied female net artist. Famed not only for her contributions to net art software, which include the development and distribution of live video editing programs used by electronic music producers, she was deemed "the most feared woman on the Internet" by Katharine Mieszkowski in 2002. In Mieszkowski's article, she stresses the empowering effect of Nezvanova's existence as an incorporeal entity, but a very real presence on the Internet. When her software has won awards, no single person has appeared to accept them. Her name, from the eponymous unfinished Dostoyevsky novel, translates in English to "nameless nobody," but she has also been known to use multiple handles and email addresses on online mailing lists and forums, where her infamy stems from her inflammatory statements and aggressive, subversive aesthetic.[48]

Netochka Nezvanova, also identified by the aliases "antiorp," "integer," "Irena Sabine Czubera," and the cryptic "=cw4t7abs" was best known on mailing lists and public forums for her distinctive typing style, which incorporates several languages such as Croatian, French, Spanish, and a type of hacker slang called "leet," or "l33t," in which letters are replaced by numbers. She also communicated using ASCII art, forming

[47] Hayles, "The Condition of Virtuality", 80
[48] Katharine Mieskowski, "The most feared woman on the Internet" Salon, March 1, 2002 http://www.salon.com/2002/03/01/netochka/

pictures within text using keyboard symbols. A typical example of her cryptic messages, from September 2000:

> "modL c!t!zen t!.me 1999.ad"
>
> "ou!. madame."
>
> "m!.handz=w!tr.dzn.urz
>
> !=ut!l!ze-uLtra.lux++"
>
> "during the korporate fascist occupation.
>
> during the korporate fascist occupation.
>
> during the korporate fascist occupation."
>
> "and – closing the synaptic gap [synapse – greek for juncture – hence the juncture gap – protoplasmic kisses which seem to constitute the final ecstasy of an epic love story – the ethereal kiss which involves no contact]"
>
> "enkouter!ng open zpasez"
>
> "[sand and foam]"[49]

It is curious that in all subsequent interviews with Netochka this typing style is absent, leading one to wonder exactly how many collaborators have constructed her identity over time. It is clear that the Netochka who contributed to the Nato.0+55+3d software, the Netochka who terrorized message boards, and the Netochka responding to interview questions are all different facets of a multidimensional character. Artists in Iceland, New Zealand, and Eastern Europe have been implicated, and her ISP addresses have been traced to Chicago, Australia, and Amsterdam.[50] Several times she refers to herself as a "Balkan girl," due in part, it seems, to both the affected European accent present in much of her writing, but also due to the fragmentary nature of the Balkan countries (to "balkanize," as a verb, is now meant to divide into mutually hostile states or groups).

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[49] olala on 27 Sep 2000, Nettime mailing list archives, http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-bold-0009/msg00073.html
[50] Ibid

Netochka firmly denies any connection to the art collective NATOArts in her correspondence with Mieskowski, in which she responded publicly to correct several points in the article a month after its publication. She claims to be a singular person and a collective simultaneously, attacking many of Mieskowski's assertions about her identity as false in a 60-point list quoting fragments of the article with her commentary (quotes have been italicized for clarity). Some of her most poetic and salient points regard her humanity, despite her lack of a stable physical identity:

1. \\ Denying my humanity does not a verse make.

Katharine Mieszkowski has written:
'*For someone who does not exist -- at least the way you or I do*'

Prior to the illegal / criminal invasion of Poland in 1939,
NAZI propaganda films depicted Poles as less than human, as inhuman, as not
'you or I' or `us`.

German soldiers however, soon found that Poles much different than 'you or I' or `us` weren't.
They sweated, begot cavities, were prone to bouts of unhappiness and happiness,
when in the mood demanded attention and love, and ... they
were very very stubborn.

http://www.geocities.com/Pentagon/9764/warpoland.html

My skin is filled with human blood.
Not unlike yours.

2. *She's a gifted computer programmer and polemicist, an artist*

I am _not a computer programmer. polemicist nor artist [most artists have died]
I am a person and cyberbotanist.

...

4. *a critic of capitalism and fascism, as well as a capitalist and a marketer.*

I am not. I am. A person.

As a person, I have been known to criticize shortcuts to intelligence,
e.g. ‘employment’, ‘memory’, and the ‘education’ system.

Netochka not only takes issue with her portrayal by Mieszkowski, but with her sexist language. She returns many of her character defamations to the author deftly:

47. *Netochka lives for attention*.

When I am in the mood. Katharine Mieszkowski may relate.

55. *Netochka refuses to be pinned down*.

When I am in the mood. Katharine Mieszkowski may relate.

Although the hacker flavor of her typing style has almost disappeared entirely (note the lack of interspersed numbers and other languages), there is a wit and an honesty to her responses. Unwilling to reveal any further information, but willing to perpetuate the legend, this Netochka embraces the surreal and metaphysical qualities of her existence:

50. *Ask Netochka a question about herself, and the answers appear illusory, like water running through your fingers.*

Local delicacies include ostrige.

51. *‘Is Netochka a figment of the Net's collective imagination?’ meets with this enigmatic reply: "A ty budesh chitat? There is only 01 of me.’*

It has been my destiny to join that great experience.

60. *She's a capitalist who screams anti-capitalism, an artist who infuriates artists, a Net phenomenon who terrorizes her medium.*

She is a lovely person, not very happy ... but she is trying. She has come a l o n g way.
Now, she is approaching the greatest obstacle of her account. Wish her well +?

00 She's a capitalist who screams anti-capitalism, an artist who infuriates artists, a Net phenomenon who terrorizes her medium.

And if I were to portray her as a cruel character assassin who slanders anyone
who disagrees with her publicly -- the great terror of the Net! -- so much the better.

Finished Katharine +?
Good. You do not know NN
for, likewise, I do not know.

As she puts it, in e-mail: "Being ambiguous, we are deemed confused, rather than praised for the complexity of the order in our minds."[51]

It is precisely Netochka Nezvanova's ambiguity and complexity that have sustained her legend in cyberspace, known for her artistically constructed identity as much as for her contributions to digital art. Nezvanova's activity on the Internet appears to have ceased in the early 2000s, and it is hard to find records of her websites (such as m9ndfukc.com), especially given the multiple pseudonyms associated with the artist. Yet her legend lives on, due to how radically she altered the landscape of the spaces she inhabited. The construction of this identity as an online performance on a global scale is made possible by the fact that, as far as the online community knows, there is no body attached to the identity. Netochka is an incorporeal Internet entity, breaking the boundaries between countries and individuals. The performance of her existence is made possible by the

[51] integer on Monday, 4 Mar 2002 Nettime mailing list archives www.nettime.org http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-bold-0203/msg00078.html

interconnectedness of cyberspace, and its separation from the physical world. She is a ghost in the machine of the Internet.

An analogous analog artist would be the photographer Cindy Sherman. Throughout her career as a photographer, Sherman has depicted many different images of women, using herself as the model for a broad range of characters. Simultaneously playing the roles of photographer and model, she camouflages herself in the signifiers of femininity. Both the artist and model disappear, blending into the cultural milieu. Her early works in the *Film Stills* series accomplished this by costuming her in a nostalgic haze of black and white. The identities she takes on in these scenes are constructed by their environment and the artifices of hair and makeup, continuous with their surrounding space in the context of a frozen scene, but utterly disconnected from reality, as the films and characters do not exist. The aesthetic choices Sherman makes to evoke the feeling of the 1950s in American film create a feminist critique of this era's representations of women, and the normative standards of femininity established by such texts as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. To quote Friedan, "the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity."[52] For both Sherman and Nezvanova, their femininity is the only element of the artist's identity that remains consistent throughout these works (although Sherman will later go on to cross-dress as the old masters of fine art).

As Sherman removes the grounding elements of scene from her work, as in her *Untitled* series of the 1980s, her characters appear in full color, graphically fragmenting and decomposing despite their artifice. Her body is increasingly tormented and fragmented by the same artifice that glues it together in the *Film Stills*, until she becomes a grotesque, obscene caricature of femininity.[53] In much of her work, Sherman portrays the "fulfillment" of many women's roles to the point of excess, calling attention to her own body as the medium through which the image is created. Amelia Jones has written both about Cindy Sherman and the artist Orlan, who has undergone multiple surgical procedures in order to reproduce and inscribe the characteristics of aestheticized

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[52] Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 68

[53] Laura Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman" New Left Review (July – August 1991), 137-150

femininity in her own flesh. Jones writes that Sherman's art reveals "ourselves as embodied subjects through technologies of representation in relation to other embodied subjects."[54] In Sherman's case, the technologies she employs are the framing and composition of her photographs, as well as the alterations made to her body by makeup and wardrobe, which she represents to the embodied subjects who visit her exhibitions. To analyze Nezvanova's performance with the same framework, she employed the technologies of Internet message boards to create a disembodied subject in relation to other disembodied subjects online. Her textual performance serves the same function of constructing and obscuring her identity as all of Sherman's photos' manipulations of her body. Nezvanova has as much in common with Orlan as with Sherman, if not more, because they are both European woman artists who use their respective physical and disembodied identities as their artistic medium. In Jones' words, "in her surgical performance pieces from 1990s onward, Orlan enacts Merleau-Ponty's point, cited above, that there is no securable connection between the 'interior' of the self and bodily contour. Both Orlan's practice and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy point to the fallibility of our tendency to read the body as representational (as a 'sign' for the self)."[55] By obliterating any identifying characteristics, through the media of photography, surgery, and text, all three artists sever the connection between their bodies and identities, or rather, affirm that they are disembodied women.

Orlan's "Girl Parts": The Exquisite Corpse

A comparison between the surgeon and photographer, as I have made between Orlan and Sherman, has already been made by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Contrasting a conflation of the surgeon/photographer with the magician/painter, he writes:

> The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous

[54] Robert A. Sobieszek *Ghost in the Shell: Photography and the Human Soul, 1850 – 2000*, (Los Angeles County Museum of Art + MIT Press, 1999), 255, footnote 128
[55] Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject*, (Routledge, 2006), 32

> difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law.[56]

Orlan's surgical work, in which she attempts to incorporate features from the bodies of other women, has also been compared to the work of the mad doctor in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.[57] This comparison, in part, may be due to the repulsion induced in the audience who witnesses her surgical mutilation, but Orlan explicitly wishes them not to suffer watching her. Her reconstruction of her own body through medical technology is less like the resurrection of a corpse than it is an exercise in creating a new body out of a more diverse subject material than corpse parts: the creation of an exquisite corpse. The *cadavre exquis* was a collage technique pioneered by the Surrealists, which gained popularity as a parlor game of collective authorship. In modern versions of the game, a horizontally folded piece of paper is passed around a circle. The first person to draw begins a figure, and then folds the paper so that their contribution can't be seen by the others, who must then continue the figure. The exquisite corpse was exercised as a collage technique by replacing the individual limbs of a figure with other pictures, household objects, animals, etc.[58] This technique is obviously much easier to produce by assemblages of paper than actual flesh, thus producing squeamishness in Orlan's audiences. Some of the features Orlan has incorporated included prosthetics protruding from her skull, inserted under the skin of her forehead. These facial implants were originally modeled after the brow ridge of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, but look more like horns in the flesh (fig 2.1).

The chimerical nature of bodies created using exquisite corpse techniques causes them to be seen as monstrous, but both Orlan and the Surrealists draw from the iconography of art history. In the case of the Surrealists, they often remixed images of the classical female body such as the *Mona Lisa,* and the statue of Venus de Milo. Both the Surrealists and Orlan construct a modern body by dissecting classical forms and

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[56] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), 10, via http://design.wishiewashie.com/HT5/WalterBenjaminTheWorkofArt.pdf
[57] Joanna Zylinska, *Cyborg Experiments: The Extensions of the Body in the Media Age* (Continuum International Publishing, 2002), 39
[58] Elza Adamowicz, *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image: Dissecting the exquisite corpse* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 78

reassembling them with cyborg parts. In Orlan's case, she does this not only by surgically altering her body but also through her photograph series of *Self-Hybridization*. In the first series, from 1994, she overlays pictures of goddesses like Botticelli's Venus with pictures of her own face, using a lightbox and photographs. The varying degrees of transparency she employs allow either her face or the goddesses' to predominate, with a subtle blending of their features in many of the photos, hence the subtitle: "In-Between."[59] As an example of mediation between cyborgs and goddesses, this representational strategy works because the classical image partially obscures the skin of the face, which has been severely compromised multiple times by surgery. It is only through the lens of history that the audience can ignore the Frankensteinian connotations that accompany the assemblage of others' body parts.

The Surrealists' tradition of the exquisite corpse is very much alive in net art projects, such as the virtual gallery at cloaque.org. Created and curated by the artists Claudia Mate and Carlos Saez, it is a vertical scrolling collage without borders, which many artists have contributed to. It is self-described as a "digital landfill… the result of the collection, treatment and joining together of a series of images found online, to create a column of digital compost."[60] Most of the images present in the collages were found as readymades by net artists and digitally manipulated, but there is a disclaimer included on the website: "If any images of you or any images that you own are included in the composition, and you are not happy with this, please contact us regarding their immediate removal."[61] Unlike the "found objects" of chapter one, innocent self-portraits being appropriated by fetish sites, the detritus of the web that ends up in this "digital landfill" is often more abstracted material like texture samples, patterns, and geometric animations using the most up-to-date graphics materials as well as the eight-bit treasures of the past.

The name and description refer to the anatomical cloaca, which serves an excretory function for the intestinal, reproductive, or urinary tracts of many species.[62] Artists are increasingly exploring the use of bodily structures to describe the structure of

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[59] Orlan, "Self-Hybridization, In-Between", 1994 via http://www.orlan.eu/works/
[60] "about" www.cloaque.org
[61] Ibid
[62] Britannica Academic Edition, "cloaca" Encyclopedia Britannica Inc, 2014 via http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/121929/cloaca

cyber spaces as a navigational option, situating the body not only in space but referring to the structure of cyberspace as a body being inhabited. Artist Faith Holland's contribution to the cloaque.org collage is titled *Cyberpussy Pearl Necklace*. It is set apart from the other compositions by a bright pink text that says, "Cyberspace has a Shape, an overall total form. The Shape matters totally. The apprehension of the Shape is the grail." The text is surrounded by circles containing animations that give the viewer the sense of speeding through outer space as lights spin by, leaving trails, or exploding into each other. Expansion, combustion, and exploration are evoked, not only in relation to space travel, but also inside of cities and inside their citizens. These are Faith's "cyber pussies" which can also be found on an external website called vvvvvv.xxx (presumably read as www.xxx).

The Matrix

As the creators of cloaque.org construct their virtual space as an anal cavity, Faith Holland imagines it is a vagina, not only the birth canal, but also the womb. Like cyberfeminist group VNS Matrix, she points out the Latin root of the word "matrix," a word often used to describe the structure of cyberspace, from *mater* ("mother").[63] Before the site can be viewed, there is an age verification page similar to that of hardcore porn sites, with the sound of a dial-up connection embedded in the background. The six v's of the site name are resolved into a "WWW*" logo, for the world wide web, and pink text warns:

> The material on this site is sexually oriented and/or explicit and is related to material of a sexual nature. This material could be considered offensive and/or inappropriate for minors, engineers, programmers, technological governmental offices, science fiction fans, internet service providers, data centers, the Motion Pictures Association of America, United States Copyright Office, net artists, self-hating women, and individuals who self-identify as men. [64]

[63] Faith Holland, "Links," 2013 vvvvvv.xxx/links
[64] VVVVVV.xxx

Before one even enters Holland's site, she cheekily makes her cyberfeminist agenda clear: this is a female-dominated space, not necessarily safe for men. The background of the sites consists of a bright green and black grid pattern stretching infinitely out of the darkness, an obvious reference to "The Matrix" film of 1999. The .xxx address, a type of web domain which only became available for porn sites to purchase in early 2011, connotes explicit content to be found inside, and by additionally making the viewer confirm they are older than 18, Holland makes an explicit reference to pornography. The pornographic body, which is often both as surgically altered as Orlan's, and as culturally mandated as Sherman's, is ubiquitous online but completely absent in Holland's parodic pornographic "Matrix."

The first pop-up window that appears prints the words "Surfing the gap pit gulf lack void hole dent chasm abyss socket dearth cavity absence deficit omission interstice depression inadequacy inferiority insufficiency of language." The front page of the website consists only of a pink navigation bar, the same green-black matrix background, and an embedded video. Within the video, a young boy has an electronic device strapped to his skull by an older woman with red hair. The video has the look of an early 80s movie, with the colors slightly distorted towards red and a frosty filter glazing the scene. He yells "What the fuck!" as a pneumatic sound attaches to the device his head and she reassures him, crooning, "Shh, it's okay. It is harmless… You are the navigator… The chair is powered by your body, the journey is fueled by your imagination. It needs you and your mind to work, and perhaps you need it too. Mutual stimulation… Clear your mind, let go." She waves her hand in front of his face like an enchantress and he closes his eyes as a blue light pulses over his face. Soon frames of Holland's "cyber pussy" animations are interspersed with the same pneumatic sound, faster and faster until the boy is overtaken by the blue glow and the words "COMING SOON" and "Faith Holland 2012" appear. In the video, the artist can be seen as represented by the mysterious older woman, introducing a generation of young men to her new formulation of cyberspace. By framing this interaction as a scene from a movie of a specific era, Holland employs the same techniques as Sherman, but in this case it is to comment on the future, not the past. Using another woman's character from an earlier era of film, Holland is disembodied and embedded in the space she creates, which is being transmitted to the boy directly into his

skull via the technological apparatus. A parallel can be drawn between Holland's seductive surrogate and the way young men are brainwashed by pornography, but with a cyberfeminist twist, further emphasized by a sidebar of parodic banner ads for "Pussy Juice," "powerful & quick clitoral enhancement," pink pills for longer-lasting orgasms, and a black banner with flashing text that reads "Click here to chat LIVE with HOT PUSSIES".

The "hot pussies" are located in the Private Viewing Rooms, where a seductive female voice greets and directs the viewer: "Click on a still cyberpussy to see her come to life in a private viewing room." Selecting the first animation, a green-walled "Birth Canal," leads to another page where the animation is isolated. There are no further instructions, but moving the cursor around the page, it is clear when it turns into a hand that there is another link embedded in the animation. Clicking again leads to a full screen image, an immersive experience through the animation, which loops indefinitely. Clicking again leads to the next private viewing room. In this way, the cyber pussies act as hyperlinks, appearing and functioning as wormholes in cyberspace. The privacy of the viewing rooms is obliterated by their public availability and interconnectedness, and serves as a metaphor for all activity on the Internet. One of the pop-ups in the private viewing rooms presents a list of percentages entitled "%%% XX":

Nudes in Met Museum 83%

Porn Performers 70%

Web Developers 38%

NYC Gallery Solo Shows 23%

Software Developers 20%

Artists in MoMA 8%[65]

These data suggest that women (signified by their XX chromosomes) are overrepresented in nude paintings and the porn industry, but underrepresented in both the technological industries and art world.

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[65] "%%% XX" http://vvvvvv.xxx/vvvvvvpa/percents.html

Clicking on the "About" link leads to another page of embedded video, in which pink text is printed, rearranged, flown in and out of view, bolded and resized for punctuation and emphasis. The final product of these text fragments is Holland's *Cyberpussy Manifesto*:

> The Internet is made of pussies.
>
> These pussies are porn. They constitute the most popular web content.
>
> These pussies are cats. Their images and videos are the second most popular web content.
>
> These pussies are users. Women.
>
> These pussies are creators. Beginning with Ada Lovelace and continuing into the future.
>
> These pussies are the structure and foundation of the Internet.
>
> Pry open the orifice of the internet with a speculum and you will find the tunneling halls of a vagina.
>
> These tubes connect in an orgiastic flow of information.
>
> Link to link, the internet is always touching herself.
>
> It is with pleasure that one site rubs another.
>
> The internet is not a masculine domain.
> Art is not a masculine domain.
>
> Scopophilia is not a masculine domain.
>
> Language is not a masculine domain.
>
> When we surf the webbed sea of pussies, we refuse to fall into the void of language.
>
> These pussies are not commodities. They speak in a polyvocal folkloric language.
>
> Technology is a reconstructed biology.

> Biology is a sociotechnological structure.
>
> Let cyberspace and meatspace join to form a post-millennial re-embodiment.
>
> The Symbolic is broken. The Imaginary is broken. Re-examine the Real through the Virtual.
>
> Cyberpussy Manifesto
>
> Faith Holland
>
> 2013

Considering the cyberfeminist manifestos covered in the first chapter, Holland is clearly not the first to characterize the Internet as a whole as feminine. She is, however, making quite a new statement to say that the network of information is an interconnected web of vaginas. Her likening of the tubular structure to female anatomy recalls a statement by U.S. Senator Ted Stevens in 2006, when he voted against a telecommunications bill, and described the Internet as a "series of tubes." His description went viral on the Internet, producing a meme known as "Series of Tubes."[66] Stevens was not entirely wrong in his description, but to revisit his statement with Holland's structure in mind gives it an entirely inappropriate hilarity:

> They want to deliver vast amounts of information over the Internet. And again, the Internet is not something that you just dump something on. It's not a big truck. It's a series of tubes. And if you don't understand, those tubes can be filled and if they are filled, when you put your message in, it gets in line and it's going to be delayed by anyone that puts into that tube enormous amounts of material.[67]

In the same statement, Stevens went on to mention: "Now we have a separate Department of Defense internet now, did you know that? Do you know why? Because they have to

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[66] KnowYourMeme.com, "Series of Tubes," http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/series-of-tubes

[67] Wired blogs, "Your Own Personal Internet," June 2006 http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2006/06/your_own_person/

have theirs delivered immediately. They can't afford getting delayed by other people."[68] Recalling the fact that the United States Defense Department started the Internet, it is clear that in the thirty years since its initial development, the public distribution of Internet technology has altered the landscape so much that it can no longer be controlled, and the government must re-privatize its own Internet. Because of the fact that the Internet has become increasingly public, one of its highest virtues is that of privacy: for the public, it is the protection of data from corporations and hackers, and for the establishment, anti-piracy and net neutrality laws being considered by the government to control the flow of information through the tubes. For her part, Faith Holland has addressed these political issues with her "Chelsea Manning Fan Art" on her personal website www.faithholland.com.

Chelsea, formerly known as Pvt. Bradley Manning, was the soldier who released thousands of government documents, including material on the Iraq war and US diplomatic cables, to WikiLeaks. Because of this, Manning is serving a 35-year prison sentence, and is considered a hero to those who think all information should be free on the Internet. On August 22, 2013, Manning came out as transgender, and has chosen to live the rest of her life as Chelsea Manning.[69] Holland's fan art emphasizes her enthusiasm not only for Manning's political acts, but her choice of embodiment. Pictures of Manning in a blonde wig have been colorized by Holland and decorated with gifs and clip art, in the style of teenage girls decorating pictures of their favorite celebrities. Two of her pictures, created using Blingee animations, also contain statements supposedly by Manning. The first (fig 2.2) contains text that looks like an online chat from "bradass87": "information should be free", "bradass87: it belongs in the public domain." This collage emphasizes the status of Manning as a hacker, using a background reminiscent of the Matrix, with flashing green 1s and 0s tiling the page, despite the fact that Manning's leaks were not technically acquired through computer hacking (she removed the information on a flash drive). Holland has surrounded Manning's face at the center with pink glitter, a spinning disc and "@" symbol, a Wikipedia logo covered in hearts, and a

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[68] Ibid

[69] About Pvt. Manning, Pvt. Manning Support Network, via http://www.privatemanning.org/learn-more/bradley-manning

picture of a woman drinking coffee in front of a computer, which all emphasize her femininity with the girl power aesthetic. The second collage of this type (fig 2.3) contains the text "I wouldn't mind going to prison for the rest of my life, or being executed so much, if it wasn't for the possibility of having pictures of me plastered all over the world press as a boy." In this picture, Holland's face is in front of a shiny and sparkly background, with a tiara and hearts floating around her head. Floppy discs and CDs float in the air opposite the "quote" (which may or may not be an actual statement from Manning) and next to her face is a computer showing pictures of cats. These collage-type pictures clearly show a valorization of Manning as a girl hero of the Internet, using the language of Internet fandom and the symbolic repertoire most readily available to teenage girls.

Other images in the Fan Art series make more of Manning's transition, including one in which the same picture of her head is placed atop a flashing male or female body made of ASCII art, posed in classical style. Through her Fan Art images, Holland helps to disembody the image of Manning portrayed by the media (as Bradley) and to celebrate Chelsea's reclamation of her body as female. Manning embodies last statements of Holland's *Cyberpussy Manifesto*: "Technology is a reconstructed biology. Biology is a sociotechnological structure. Let cyberspace and meatspace join to form a post-millennial re-embodiment." Like Orlan and Sherman, Manning has chosen to present the culturally mandated form of femininity, reclaiming the female body as a representation of freedom and autonomy. Manning shares the project of cyberfeminists to liberate women from conventional entanglement in hegemonic power structures. Her detractors make the same arguments about Manning's choice of embodiment as they do against women who choose to participate in military or technological industries, that it is "unnatural." But as we know from studying Haraway's cyborg, very little about postmodern life is left to nature, and all cyborgs are post-gender through usage of technology.

Emphasizing the fact that Manning is a hacker hero, she could be compared to the protagonist of "The Matrix" film, Neo. In the sense that he is stubbornly attached to his embodiment, Neo is far from as liberated as Manning, but they have in common their drive to motivate the populace through disseminated information. In the alternate future universe of the film, machines gained sentience and went to war with mankind. During

their struggle, humans blacked out the sky to try to keep the machines from using solar power, but the machines still won the war. This led to the enslavement of mankind as an energy source for the machines and the creation of the Matrix. All humans (except for those rebels living in the subterranean city of Zion) are now grown in vast fields, like factory farmed crops, and kept in womblike sacs. They are physically plugged into the Matrix at birth, by a cord attached to the back of the neck, and spend their lives believing they live in the virtual reality provided to them by the machines, while the machines use them as batteries for their civilization. The Matrix is a simulation of reality in the twenty-first century, represented visually as a computer code, a cascading stream of green numbers, which renders all facets of life, including the bodies of those inside of it. This motif of cascading green numbers is commonly used to signify the Internet and the aesthetic of simulation.

While still inside of the Matrix, Neo meets Morpheus, who is aware of the illusion they live in. In a now-famous monologue, Morpheus says he imagines that Neo must be feeling "like Alice, tumbling down the rabbit hole," a female protagonist trying to grapple with a space whose borders are unknown to her. In this scene he explains the nature of the Matrix:

> The Matrix is everywhere, it is all around us. Even now, in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window, or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the wool that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth… That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind. Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is, you have to see it for yourself… You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.

After Neo takes the red pill, he is plugged into a series of machines and one of Morpheus' crewmembers warns him: "Buckle your seatbelt, Dorothy, because Kansas is going bye-bye," another reference to a female protagonist navigating an unknown space.

When he looks to the mirror, he finds its fragmented surface moving, resealing the cracks that break up his reflection. He reaches out to touch it, and his hand dips into

the surface as though it were a viscous liquid, which sticks to his hand and begins to flow over the surface of his whole body. As it flows into his mouth and forces its way down his throat, his scream is digitized and the image of his real body, in the pod/womb it was grown in by the machines, replaces the image of his simulated body in the Matrix. He is naked, hairless, and has wires plugged into various parts of his torso. Like a baby bird breaking the membrane inside of a shell, he stretches his limbs out to escape the fluid he is encased in. He removes the tubes from his nose and mouth, which were artificially supporting him, and struggles for air. He feels the largest plug, the one connecting him to the Matrix, at the back of his skull, and turns to see rows of interconnected pods, containing other humans. In this scene, the connection between the Matrix of cyberpunk fantasy and the womb is very explicitly stated. When an arachnid-looking robot comes to inspect the breach of his pod, he is completely disconnected from his various umbilical protrusions and flushed down a water slide resembling a sewage tube, less a metaphor for birth than for excretion.

Once he is extracted by Morpheus and the crew of his ship, they rehabilitate his fetal body, his eyes having never been used for sight and his muscles having never achieved locomotion. When he is plugged back into the Matrix, they are able to upload data to his brain such as knowledge of fighting techniques, which he can then employ in his simulated body. Once the "mind over matter" nature of his existence in the Matrix is established, he has superhuman abilities, able to fly and stop bullets. His conception of himself is the only thing that keeps his bodily appearance stable in the various simulations. He goes through costume changes, such as wearing the uniform of a martial arts master, and adopting a black leather trench coat and sunglasses, but his physical embodiment in the Matrix never changes. Perhaps this is due to the stability of Neo's identity, as a cis-gendered white male, despite his acquisition of the freedom to alter his appearance however he wishes. Reimagining the possibilities, however, it would make just as much sense for another actor, or even an actress, to portray Neo in the simulation. The references to Alice in Wonderland and Dorothy of Oz would perhaps take on more significance if Neo were to change sex. Recalling how humans in this society are born cyborgs, and may never fully identify with their "real" bodies, Neo's character could

easily be transgendered within the simulation, or have an entirely different body than the one he imagines in the Matrix.

The ability for someone within the Matrix to switch bodies, changing their gender or their identity, is proved possible twice. The first example is the woman in the red dress. As Morpheus and Neo walk down a street in a simulation of the simulation of the Matrix, a beautiful blonde woman in a red dress passes them by. Morpheus has just been telling Neo how no one in the simulation can be trusted, the civilians aren't ready to be unplugged, and Neo turns his head to watch a living pin-up girl pass them on the street. Morpheus asks, "Are you listening to me, Neo? Or were you looking at the woman in the red dress?" He says, "Look again," and a man in a suit has replaced the woman in the red dress, pointing a gun at Neo's face. He is an agent, a sentient computer program who takes an embodied form in the Matrix to keep the population under control. The corporate aesthetic adopted in the film for the embodiment of these particular characters, and his guise as a sexy, beautiful woman, speaks again to the corporatization of the net and the seduction techniques used to control netizens through advertising and pornography. The woman in the red dress is one of the few recurring female characters in film, besides Trinity, Neo's love interest. In the interest of queering Neo's character, I have mostly excluded her from my analyses, but needless to say the representation of women outside of the context of a love interest or trap, and often both, is lacking.

The second example is that of the Oracle. She is the embodiment of the goddess, an extra-human life form who also lives in the Matrix, but unlike the Architect, who embodies a godlike figure, she is benevolent towards humanity and tries to help Neo on his quest. In the first movie, she is played by Gloria Foster, an actress of stage and screen from Chicago, Illinois. She co-starred in a stage production of "Having Our Say" in 1995 with the actress Mary Alice, who replaces her in the 2003 sequel "The Matrix: Revolutions."[70] When Neo tries to visit the Oracle again in the sequel, she asks him if he can recognize her, and explains vaguely, "Some bets you lose, some bets you keep. I don't yet recognize my face in the mirror, but… I still love candy." She offers him a hard sweet in the same grandmotherly way as she did in the first movie. Although it was

[70] IMDb, Gloria Foster – Biography, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0287825/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm

probably not intended by the writers of the first Matrix movie, because of Gloria Foster's death from diabetes in 2001, the Oracle chooses her embodiment. She understands that if there is going to be a radical change in the world, she must also be subject to change, even in her physical form, unlike Neo. Whether she is being played by Foster or Alice, her ability to be dis-embodied and re-embodied, and retain her memories (a complication of reincarnation which will be discussed in chapter 3) is an ability exercised only by the goddess, and not by Neo, who, despite his godlike powers, never relinquishes his embodied form.

The Matrix network, in the dystopian reality of the movie, is one of oppression and Freudian horror, as the people are stymied by their attachment to the mother machine. As in the preprogrammed flow of code in the Matrix, cyborg bodies are continuous with the space around them, made of the same fabric of data and found parts. Unlike the enslaved residents of the Matrix, however, we have a choice of embodiment. Faith Holland's re-imagining of the matrix of cyberspace as a network of women's bodies plays on the desire for penetration and control of cyberspace by governmental and corporate entities, similar to the fears of humanity's enslavement by technology. Establishing a pornographic space by buying a .xxx address, in which there are no bodies, her Cyberpussy Matrix rejects the idea of the body in cyberspace. Her pornographic performers are disembodied sensations of motion in unbounded space and time. When the borders are removed from the body/space, having moved away from representations of bodies having a 1-to-1 correlation to identities (as in the selfie), the body and identity are free to mutate in many ways. The first option, presented by Claire L. Evans and Netochka Nezvanova, is an alternative dis-embodiment created by fragments of a presence. To carefully reconstruct an identity using fragmented representations, whether, like Sherman, we change the superficial cultural signifiers adorning the physical body, or like Orlan and Chelsea Manning, we go deeper, severing the connection of the flesh from the identity, cyberspace allows representations of embodiment to defy the limitations imposed by the social construction and performance of gender.

Chapter 3: Embodiment Alternatives

Cyborgs in Space

The word "cyborg" originates from a novel combination of the words "cybernetic" and "organism" by the scientist, inventor, and musician Manfred Clynes in the year 1960. Although most of its contemporary representational power comes from fusions of men and machines in science fiction, it was coined to describe a very real predicament: the artificial life-support systems necessary to support human space travel.[71] The human being, equipped to float in space, is umbilically tethered to the mother ship, and completely encased in a virtual reality simulation of Earth's atmosphere complete with pressure, breathable air, water, heat insulation, and communications, among other necessities. It is not surprising that pioneers of cyberspace have also found this term useful for navigating embodied experience online, in Earth-bound virtual realities:

> Five or six hours of being cyborged on-line had incredible effects on my body. When I walked outside into the rain, I felt lighter, not all there. And it was not because my consciousness was still back in that virtual elsewhere in cyberspace where it had just been bumping clumsily (textually) into the other attendees' projections. While talking at once to the simulations from Australia, England, Germany, Puerto Rico, New York, Boston, Seattle, and San Francisco, it became impossible to think of the world as anything other than hanging in space showing one face after another to the sun. Morning in Australia was afternoon in Oregon and late evening in London.[72]

Luckily the physical necessities to simulate the perspective of the cyborg in cyberspace are not as difficult to provide for than space proper, and although it is not currently technologically feasible to smell or taste through computers, the aesthetic of simulation provides more than adequately for the visual and aural senses. The conveyance of touch has been simulated by technologies that transform the body into the cyborg by outfitting

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[71] Chris Hables Gray, *Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age,* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 18
[72] Ibid, 132

it with extra sensors to send and receive data, as in some of Stelarc's cyborg projects (fig 3.1). But it has also metaphorically extended the reach of netizens around the globe to rub elbows, virtually, with each other.

Sitting in front of a computer, the user has a similar awareness vis-à-vis the machine, as they do in relation to a painting: the window, although flat, is also immersive. Figural techniques, such as classic Renaissance perspective, position the viewer very specifically in relation to the scene. Art historian and media theoretician Oliver Grau makes the comparison with virtual reality, asserting that:

> the idea of installing an observer in a hermetically closed-off image space of illusion did not make its first appearance with the technical invention of computer-aided virtual realities. On the contrary, virtual reality forms part of the core of the relationship of humans to images. It is grounded in art traditions, which have received scant attention up to now, that, in the course of history, suffered ruptures and discontinuities, were subject to the specific media of their epoch, and used to transport content of a highly disparate nature. Yet the idea goes back at least as far as the classical world, and it now reappears in the immersion strategies of present-day virtual art.[73]

The immersive quality of a perspectival painting is generated by altering the viewer's perception of their relationship to the painted space. Within the spaces established in the painting, they feel as though their body is situated at a certain point, as though the space depicted were to extend beyond the boundaries of the canvas and envelop them. This sense of the projection of the body into figural spaces, and extension of figural space to create a virtual reality, is echoed by David Joselit:

> These are the symptoms of a new spatial order: a space in which the virtual and the physical are absolutely coextensive, allowing a person to travel in one direction through sound or image while proceeding elsewhere physically. Imaginative projection is as old as the histories of art, theater, and literature -- in other words, as old as humanity itself -- but virtuality suggests the sensation of inhabiting such projections bodily… The experience of straddling two or more locations simultaneously has caused the negotiation of both physical and virtual worlds to become increasingly disembodied, and, as with

[73] Bernadette Weigenstein, *Getting Under The Skin: Body and Media Theory*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 70

> any cultural shift, this transformation has produced new opportunities for art.[74]

While Joselit argues that the sensation of being both within a virtual space and physically situated elsewhere is to be "disembodied," these simultaneous embodiment phenomena do not cancel each other out to produce a disembodied state, but a sense of multiple presence. Scholarship on cyberspace has sought to reconcile these technologically mediated extrasensory phenomena using the terms, "post-human" or "trans-human." The post-human is "neither male nor female, neither human nor machine, neither dead nor alive. Indeed, mutation is central to the notion of the post-human, describing a human identity which is caught between the idea that the self is becoming 'other' than itself, and the image of that self which is being mediated by the very technology that determines it."[75] Cultural theorist Joanna Zylinski separates "post-" from "trans-" human, by pointing out that the latter prefix "implies a process and evidence of a connection. The notion of the trans-human points to a gentle transition, or even a subtle interaction between two objects, neither of which is made obsolete in the process."[76] The post-human construction implies that when both qualities of gender, or life, are evident, the object is neither one nor the other. The trans-human construction allows for a nondualistic and many-pointed perspective. This broader perspective, whether it comes from global interconnectivity through telecommunications technologies, or the simultaneous embodiment in virtual and physical space is, to borrow another portmanteau from Gail Weiss, "intercorporeal." She describes embodiment as intercorporeality, "to emphasize that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies."[77] To emphasize the intercorporeality of cyberspace's spatiotemporal interactions acknowledges that actions online do not exist in a vacuum, and affect the lives of users in meatspace as well.

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[74] David Joselit, "Navigating the New Territory: Art, Avatars, and the Contemporary Mediascape," in *Artforum International* 43 (Summer, 2005)
[75] Joanna Zylinski, *Cyborg Experiments: The Extensions of the Body in the Media Age*, (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2002), 33
[76] Ibid, 34
[77] Weigenstein, 31

Cyberspatial interactions, as described by Gray, were global in potential scale, but limited to textual description, as he describes his discourse with global citizens in Internet chat rooms. Through advancements in virtual reality technologies, these interactions are made visible by the representation of embodied experience in avatar bodies, which, like the astronaut's suit, allow for navigation, translation, and support of the body in online space.

Avatar Relations

Joselit calls the technology of the avatar a "sentient cursor,"[78] due to its function as a projection of agency and mobility in virtually constructed space. While the cursor is the most basic technology for interacting with a computer, the avatar deserves to be elevated from the status of mere tool. The word comes from Sanskrit, and traditionally refers to a manifestation of Hindu deities or souls in bodily form. Avatars have been used in cyberculture to describe any representation of an embodied identity.[79] The representations that fall under this category range from small format static icons to three-dimensional, fully articulated bodies with seemingly autonomous animated breathing, walking, and talking styles. While it is possible for multiple people to control a single avatar (as in the case of Netochka Nezvanova's collective identity/authorship), the avatar represents a single identity with what new media theorist Jay David Bolter calls "identificatory mobility," which enables the avatar to "inhabit the point of view of any person, animal, or object."[80] The converse is also true, and extremely common: one person often controls multiple different avatars.

The perspective from which avatars are operated has been broken down into a five point system of action/identification/subject positioning by Mary Flanagan, in her analysis of the popular video game protagonist Lara Croft (fig 3.2). Croft's body, created

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[78] Joselit, 3
[79] New Oxford American Dictionary, Second Edition (Oxford University Press, 2005)
[80] Thomas Foster, "'The Postproduction of the Human Heart': Desire, Identification, and Virtual Embodiment in Feminist Narratives of Cyberspace," *Reload: rethinking women + cyberculture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 482

by the media consumptive habits of the predominant demographic of video game players, namely teenaged boys, is not only notoriously over-sexualized, but forces its typically male players to identify with a female-bodied character. The first perspective Flanagan describes is the omniscient perspective from which they control the character's actions and observe the world, unlimited by the perspective of the avatar. The second perspective is described when the character acts independently, breathing or performing other automatic animations out of the user's control. The third perspective is the second-person perspective, in which users feel as if they are acting next to the character, co-adventuring alongside her. Fourth, players take the position of spectator, in which they relinquish control of the character and do not experience her world firsthand, taking a third-person position as though watching a film. The fifth and final perspective is when they act through the character and identify themselves as the avatar.[81]

Flanagan argues that the aesthetics of the avatar body are excessive, and hyperreal, as opposed to realistic:

> ...the intent is not merely to create something real; it is to create the hyperreal, a chimera. Bodies are overly dimensioned, practically bursting, and these bodies become fashioned as artists' ideal fantasy girls or figures from nightmares. These constructions of 3-D worlds, by the assumptions designed into the technology through context, authorship, and use, work to reinforce traditional tenets of mainstream Western epistemology that contain both knowledge and gender assumptions.[82]

In the case of many 3-D game platforms, Flanagan is correct. In mass-produced and massively multiplayer role-playing games such as Blizzard's World of Warcraft, avatars are provided in stock and stereotypical fighting forms. Descending from analog role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons, users only have the choice of their gender, race, and class. In the context of these fantasy games, race includes the options of elves and dwarves, and class refers not to one's socioeconomic standing, but one's classification of specialities in magic or fighting, such as wizard or paladin classes.

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[81] Mary Flanagan, "Hyperbodies, Hyperknowledge: Women in Games, Women in Cyberpunk, and Strategies of Resistance," *Reload: rethinking women + cyberculture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 432

[82] Ibid, 430

Gender remains a hot topic in the male-dominated environs of online gaming, as there is a statistically high possibility that the operator of a female avatar is in fact biologically male. Nick Yee, a researcher of gamers' behaviors for Ubisoft, created The Daedalus Project, a long-running survey of massive multiplayer online gamers, which analyzed many facets of play such as demographics, motivations, relationship formation, and "gender-bending." According to his demographic analyses, 85% of players are male, and male players are three to five times more likely to play as a character of the opposite gender. As a result, he concludes, there is an approximately 50% chance that any female character encountered in the game is being operated by a male player.[83]

Yee offers a number of explanations for this behavior, claiming a pragmatic advantage: female avatars receive more offers for help and companionship. The social stratification of women as weaker and less capable than men bleeds over into the world of online games, but is considered an advantage of playing a female character, not a subjugation of women in general. Yee refers to another pragmatic consideration for men playing female avatars: if they are going to devote hours, even years of their lives to these games, they may prefer the scopophilic perspective. He calls this "Laura [sic] Croft Syndrome - the appeal of being able to view and, more importantly, control a female body that is sexy but deadly."[84] He argues that this is a technique of domination, giving men the ability to control a powerful female body. Flanagan's analysis of the complicated perspectival relationship between avatars and their operators does include the voyeuristic and omniscient control of the character that Yee claims is sought by gender-bending gamers, but it is also a necessity for users to identify with their characters in the first person, to accompany their characters from a second person perspective, and even to believe that the character is acting autonomously (usually when they've done something to lose a fight or game).

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[83] Nick Yee, "The Norrathian Scrolls: A Study of EverQuest – (MMORPG Research, Cyberculture, MMORPG Psychology, Demographics, Statistics, Psychology, Charts, Addiction, Gender Differences, Gender Bending, Relationships, Romance, Guilds, Download)" http://www.nickyee.com/eqt/genderbend.html#5

[84] Nick Yee, "Gender-Bending in MMORPGs," The Daedalus Gateway, http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/gateway_genderbend.html

The games already listed - Lara Croft's *Tomb Raider* series and World of Warcraft - are programmed with narratives for completing the game. In the *Tomb Raider* games, Lara must be guided by the user through a series of dungeons and other treacherous environments in order to collect items and achieve objectives to complete the game. The quest system of World of Warcraft functions similarly, but nonlinearly. It is up to the player's discretion as to the order in which quests are completed, and while there are certain objectives necessary to move forward in the game, there is no endpoint, no completion. The World stretches out before the user full of possibilities to forge their own path and achieve their own objectives, such as gaining levels, prestige in fighting other players, or acquiring rare items by defeating monsters. The environment proscribes the narrative of the game and the players' role-playing desires, but remains combat-oriented. Some of the most populated role-playing virtual reality "games" are not considered games at all, such as Second Life by Linden Lab. These games are more like massive multiplayer online art projects, as the game consists of designing the virtual environment and the avatars inhabiting it.

Second Life

In the massive multiplayer virtual reality of Second Life, the narrative and objectives of the game are completely up to the players' discretion. Tom Boellstorff, an anthropologist who was studying sexuality in Indonesia, simultaneously performed an ethnographic study within the virtual reality of Second Life by conducting fieldwork online from 2004 to 2007, using an avatar he called Tom Bukowski.[85] He describes the geography of the virtual reality platform:

> During my fieldwork Second Life appeared as a series of square 'sims' (simulators) 256 meters on a side, linked onto a 'mainland' of several continents, surrounded by thousands of single-sim islands. Some of these islands touched each other, forming medium-sized landmasses. Linden Lab terraformed new land, providing rivers, bays, rolling hills, even mountain regions with a snowy theme. However, the most popular land often had a low-lying, beachfront feel to it. Land was continually added as new residents joined

[85] Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 7

> Second Life; as there is no way to increase the amount of land on the planet earth, such a capability represents a distinguishing feature of virtual worlds and complicates the scarcity presupposed by actual-world theories of property.[86]

Without probing too deeply into the economic realities of virtual land ownership, he brings across the facts that Second Life's virtual environment is purchasable and customizable. Linden Lab advertises it as "imagined, created, and owned by its residents."[87] Within the territory of "sims," users manipulate "prims," or primitive shapes, to create elaborate architectural structures or naturalistic landscape features. The addition of textures and programmed animations allows users to customize the environment of their virtual home, with limitations set by the Lindens as to number of prims allowed per meter of land owned, based on bandwidth restrictions.[88] Many players in Second Life were drawn to this virtual reality because of the creative potential it allows them. Talented programmers are able to create any environment, and a commodity market trading in computer images supports the economy of the virtual world. A promotional video imploring users to "connect, shop, work, love, explore, be different, free yourself, free your mind, change your looks, love your looks, love your life,"[89] touts the benefits of creative expression in virtual reality.

Net artist Jon Rafman has familiarized himself with the environment of Second Life in order to lead guided tours, showing off the most interesting user-generated sights and sounds. In an interview for Bad at Sports, a contemporary art podcast, he explains, "Second Life is the ultimate tourist destination. It's an endless expanse where different symbols float around together equally and free from the weight of history. It's turbo-charged Las Vegas and Dubai combined. It's where every possibility and every combination of landscape and architecture can exist."[90] Although players have the ability to walk, run, or fly over the entire virtual world, it is so large and is constantly expanding so rapidly that finding landmarks, locations, and even other players can be difficult. As a

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[86] Ibid, 94
[87] Ibid, 96
[88] Ibid, 98
[89] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology And Less From Each Other*, (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 192
[90] An Interview with Jon Rafman, via http://koolaidmaninsecondlife.com/

tour guide, Rafman takes on the avatar of "Kool-Aid Man," an anthropomorphized red pitcher with arms, legs, and a smiling face recognizable as a corporate mascot for Kraft Foods' Kool-Aid. In a 2009 promotional video for his tours, Kool-Aid man visits many of the most popular different types of environments. In the style of Las Vegas, many real-world places are simulated: Kool-Aid man sits on a rug in a Persian palace with a dancing girl in front of him, he does a jig atop a Mayan ruin, wades through a flooded hallway of the Titanic, and sits in a bar in a city covered with Japanese signage. He shows scenes of beautifully rendered nature, where Kool-Aid Man is seen standing on a small wooden bridge next to an idyllic waterfall. He passes by lighthouses, walks piers extending over tropical beaches, and sits atop isolated towers in mountainous environments with conifers. He is shown sitting up in a bare tree in the middle of a road with a power line and row of fields running next to it, dancing in an autumnal forest with deer, walking on the bottom of an ocean with sharks, manta rays and octopi, and floating in space among nebulae, asteroids and planets. He visits grungy, dark urban spaces lit with neon, underwater cities, Martian cities with pyramids, and contemporary-style houses next to medieval castles. He flies in a personal zeppelin floating under an ornate bridge, takes a chairlift up a snowy mountain, and plays on a child's water slide, before the video begins to show the darker side of Second Life. He stands shocked looking upon dismembered avatars strung up on trees and lying in pools of blood on another beach. He visits a swingers' club where avatars in various states of undress perform sexual animations programmed into the furniture, and a sex garden with fully nude avatars behaving graphically, as well as a club with advertisements for avatar enhancement and pornography tiling the walls. For the last portion of the video, he visits a virtual strip club, he line dances in sync with other avatars, visits a goth club called "Sadistic" with industrial techno music, a "deluxe gay male tropical nude resort" with gigantic phallus sculptures everywhere, and breakdances with furries (a type of avatar with hybrid features of humans and animals). In the last scene of the video, he dances with two other avatars in a slum covered in graffiti and trash, complete with a burning oil drum in the corner. These are not even close to all of the examples of virtual spaces in Second Life where avatars can meet, play, and explore, and they provide examples of the most transcendent and viscerally stimulating environments. Not only are users freed from the

spatiotemporal limitations of their physical environment, but from the limitations of their bodies as well, exploiting this freedom to participate in virtual tourism to serene natural environments and physically impossible sexual scenarios.

The aesthetics of the avatar body are determined by the sophistication of the representational tools available in various virtual reality platforms, and is otherwise at the discretion of the creator/operator of the avatar. Second Life's avatars are three-dimensional and very sophisticated, with a high degree of customizability, especially for those with programming skills. The freedom of self-representation allowed by these avatar bodies often tempts users to project an idealized version of themselves. Tom Boellstorff's avatar, Tom Bukowski, was a very similar looking, but slightly younger and more muscular version of himself (fig 3.3). He retained his first name, his profession, and his glasses in his Second Life identity, but added tattoos and a hipster haircut to his performance of embodiment. Like Neo, he is secure enough in his identity that he does not need to do more than accessorize his online embodiment. Sherry Turkle, who also inhabited an avatar in order to conduct a study on the cybersocial space of Second Life, describes a talented programmer named Joel, who became known on Second Life as an artist for his proficiency at building and programming virtual architecture:

> While many in Second Life build an avatar that is sexy, chic, and buff - a physical embodiment of a certain kind of ideal self - Joel goes in a different direction. He builds a fantasy version of how he sees himself, warts and all. He makes his avatar a pint-sized elephant named Rashi, a mix of floppy-eared sweetness and down-to-earth practicality. On Second Life, Rashi has a winsome side but is respected as an artist and programmer. That is, Joel creates beautiful buildings and virtual sculptures by programming at his keyboard; his avatar Rashi gets the credit in Second Life. More than being an artist, Joel (as Rashi) also takes charge of things. He organizes virtual building projects and gallery installations. Rashi is the kind of manager Joel wants to be: strict but always calm and nonthreatening. Although an elephant, Rashi offers many possibilities for identity exploration for a man trying to bring together his artistic and managerial talents.[91]

In her latest book, Turkle explores many cases of people using their avatars to work through psychological problems in their real lives. She differentiates between those who

[91] Turkle, 2011, 213-214

are acting out their issues, repeating the traumas of their daily lives, with those who are working through their issues, practicing experiences they would like to some day accomplish offline. The identificatory mobility provided by virtual reality, to use Bolter's term again, allows users to take subject positions wildly divergent from their daily experience, to change species, race, and gender, and perform in ways that would be physically impossible or inconceivably difficult offline. Turkle is one of the more optimistic researchers of identity development and performance in cyberspace. Many others, even the seemingly optimistic Chris Hables Gray who was quoted earlier expounding the sublime feelings elicited by global interconnection and cyborgization, quote Sandy Stone, who points out, "No refigured virtual body, no matter how beautiful, will slow the death of a cyberpunk with AIDS."[92]

Many feminist writers like Stone have pointed out that the ability to alter one's identity is most appealing to those who are already in a position of power, namely technologically literate white males, who can afford to masquerade as "Other," for a short time before retreating to their privileged position. This argument reveals the ways that social privilege is transferred to cyberspace, notably in the performance of race and gender. Lisa Nakamura, writing on the digitization of race, indicts those who engage in "race play":

> Rather than 'honoring diversity,' their performances online used race and gender as amusing prostheses that could be donned and shed without 'real-life' consequences. Like tourists who become convinced that their travels have shown them real 'native' life, these identity tourists often took their virtual experiences as other-gendered and other-raced avatars as a kind of lived truth.[93]

Nakamura cites the prevalence of white male users embodying "exotic samurai and horny geishas"[94] as perpetuating harmful stereotypes of Asians. As another example, the men playing female characters on World of Warcraft, who consider their female embodiment to be advantageous, perpetuate the stereotype of women as less capable than men. Although one wouldn't be able to tell from Rafman's video, which features avatars of all

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[92] Gray, 133
[93] Lisa Nakamura, "After/Images of Identity: Gender, Technology, and Identity Politics," *Reload: rethinking women + cyberculture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 323
[94] Ibid, 325

genders, races, and species, Boellstorff admits that Second Life has some problematic policies regarding racialization of avatars' skin tone, facial and other body features, and hair. Specifically, "That Second Life's default embodiment was white reflected how 'the power value of whiteness resides above all in its instabilities and apparent neutrality'... Many residents who designed skins for sale worked to create a range of skin tones, but white or near-white skins predominated and persons seeking darker skins complained of the difficulty in finding them. Some residents who tried wearing nonwhite skins reported racist responses, including friends who stopped answering ims and statements that nonwhite persons were invading Second Life."[95] In the same chapter, Boellstorff also mentions communities that work actively to diversify Second Life and the censorship of racist speech by Linden Labs.

Both Stone's aging cyberpunk and performers of other genders and races use technology to have experiences that their physical embodiment will not allow. In the most utopian post-identity discourses, avatarization can allow users to feel empathy for, even if they are not accurately replicating, the experience of the Other. Nakamura makes the point multiple times that online, users do not face physically debilitating discrimination, such as denial of jobs or housing. However, in an online gender-bending scenario, it may come as a shock to the man playing a female avatar to be barraged with sexually harassing messages from his peers, leading to a deeper, though still superficial, understanding of women's experience. The same could be said for those who wish to portray themselves as other races experiencing discrimination, or being called out by other users as perpetuating harmful stereotypes. In the most optimistic scenarios, these situations raise awareness of social issues in those who, due to their privilege, may have been blind to them otherwise. Bernadette Weigenstein succinctly describes the privileged position of those who can afford these avatarized explorations, by pointing out the minority of users with Internet access:

> If one really wanted to "change patterns," one would have to turn pragmatically to a "reality" in which, for example, only 10 percent of the world population is using computers.[96]

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[95] Boellstorff, 144-145
[96] Weigenstein, 348

Nakamura describes the plight of those who cannot access the Internet, and have more pressing issues to deal with in their real bodies, without the complications of the virtual:

> In the end, despite academic and commercial postidentitarian discourses, it does come down to bodies: bodies with or without access to the Internet, telecommunications, and computers, and the cultural capital necessary to use them; bodies with or without access to basic healthcare, let alone high-tech pharmaceuticals or expensive forms of elective surgery.[97]

Avatars Offline

Artists like Orlan and Cindy Sherman have been shown to use their bodies in their artistic practice as customizable and changeable in identity as avatars. Theresa M. Senft criticizes Orlan's series of *Hybridations* as racial appropriation. She describes the way in which Orlan uses 3-D modeling techniques to explore "pre-Columbian ideas of beauty," and takes issue with Orlan's pairing of her racialized body performance with the following quotation by Lacanian psychoanalyst Eugenie Lemoine-Luccioni:

> I have the skin of an angel, but I am a jackal… the skin of a crocodile, but I am a puppy, the skin of a black person, but I am white, the skin of a woman, but I am a man; I never have the skin of what I am. There is no exception to the rule because I am never what I have.[98]

Senft's critique takes issue with Orlan's embodiment of this quotation, writing that "it doesn't take a postcolonial scholar to figure out," that the appropriation of black masks by those with white skin is not a "seemingly harmless experimentation with the primitive," and highlights Orlan's privilege as "a special sort of postmodern citizen." [99] The privilege of the postmodern citizen to avatarize themselves or perform other identities is exercised not only through digital media and embodiment on online platforms, but, as Orlan has done, by taking on costumes and other bodily alterations

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[97] Nakamura, 326
[98] Theresa M. Senft, "Shockingly Tech-splicit: The Performance Politics of Orlan and Other Cyborgs," *Reload: rethinking women + cyberculture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 541
[99] Ibid, 542

(including surgeries) with culturally appropriative significance. As Senft points out, it becomes problematic for artists to appropriate other cultures, and especially other bodies, when they are in the colonialist's position of power. Representing other races inauthentically is seen as equally disrespectful and subjugative as refusing to represent them at all.

Nancy Burson is one of few artists who have been seen to constructively problematize the social construction of race with the avatarization of physical bodies. Her Human Race Machine, originally developed in 2000 for London's Millenium Dome, evolved into a travelling exhibit that has been traversing the United States visiting colleges and universities since 2003. Interest in the project has been documented on television programs as diverse as CNN and Fuji TV News, and publications from Scientific American to the New York Times.[100] Inspired and supported by the science of the Human Genome Project, Burson states in her documentation of the Human Race Machine: "We are, in fact, all 99.9% alike. The Human Race Machine gives us the opportunity to have a unique personal experience of being other than what we are, allowing us to move beyond our differences. We are all one race, the human one; one nationality called humanity. We are all the different hues of man."[101] The Machine uses the digital technologies of a video mirror and edge-detection mapping to recognize the contours and features of the viewer's face. When they so choose, the viewer can press a button to see how different they would look if they had the features attributed to Asian, Black, Hispanic, Indian, Middle Eastern, and White people. The project has been described as an "art game," which contributes to social understanding of the political narratives surrounding race.[102] As the Machine merges the viewer's identity, signified by the facial features that remain constant, with the superficial characterizations of race, it allows them to see explicitly how superficial these characterizations are. As the viewer ruminates on their own digitally altered reflection, they are not performing or appropriating racialized features; they inhabit them temporarily, and observe that bodies

[100] Nancy Burson, "The Human Race Machine," via http://nancyburson.com/human-race-machine/
[101] Ibid
[102] Graham and Elizabeth Coulter-Smith, "Art games: Interactivity and the embodied gaze," in *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research* Vol. 4 Issue 3, (2006), 180

of all shapes, sizes, and colors are only temporary vehicles for the same human consciousness.

The avatarization of physical bodies for purposes of community-building and consciousness-raising can also be seen in a net art project entitled *World of Female Avatars* by artists and programmers Evelin Stermitz, Jure Kodzoman, Ljiljana Perkovic, and Loritz Zbigniew, in association with the Slovenian collective ArtNetLab, which seeks to encourage collaboration between the arts and sciences. Stermitz explains that the alienation of women from their bodies due to social and cultural doctrines of appearance and behavior make them "living avatars as well, since we are able to create our self different through fashion and beauty surgeries, to change our sex to queer, and are also able to choose and change our identity in the virtual reality." [103] Stermitz and her collaborators created the site females.mur.at, and encouraged submissions from women all over the world. They asked for images and text submissions expressing women's relationships with their bodies, and created a digital collage with the material they received. The website was designed with some aspects of cyberfeminist aesthetics, including a black background to all of the pages with bright pink, yellow, purple, and green text popping off. The front page and navigation of the site feature a repeated graphic of a doll, with the requisite features of femininity: styled hair, painted eyebrows, large eyes with long lashes, a button nose, and a smiling mouth. This doll becomes a subversive figure from the way she is posed. Only her head, neck and arms are visible, and her arms are wrapped around her own shoulders in a gesture physically impossible for a plastic figure. By eliminating the visibility of her body, and combining this human gesture of self-love with the frozen face of an artificial representation of femininity, the doll encapsulates the spirit of the project, encouraging the affirmation of women's embodied experience.

The World of the digital collage is a borderless and frameless space, with a background noise of digital pulsation. The noise is similar to the sound made by the military technology of radar, suggesting the location of something in a large, external, undifferentiated space. The sound could also be compared to a heart monitor's electronic

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[103] Evelin Stermitz, "World of Female Avatars: An Artistic Online Survey In Times of Virtual Reality," Leonardo, 2008, Vol. 41, Issue 5, 539

pulsing noises, which adds the connotation of internal bodily space as well. Within the page, pink dots of varied sizes and transparencies fall like snow. Clicking on these dots reveals the images and texts submitted by the public, reflecting on the relationships between their bodies and the expectations of society:

> "My body is part of my identity. It sets of values, attitudes, ways of expression, symbols and signs. My body, like others, is measurable, it's defined by me but is constantly pressured by culture. If I don't 'play according' to the cultural normatives I get segregated by specific social groups, but I find others that share my values, so it's OK."
>
> "Only after I discovered that beauty wasn't necessary did I realize that I am, after all, beautiful."
>
> "a female body . . . . became more and more an object than something human ... how should a body look like? and why don´t we give a damn about what others think, our body should look like? are we so much self-inconfident? where is our strength? I am fed up with trying to be perfect and to have the perfect figure, just always this disgusting pressure . . . . I really came to a conclusion I swear, from now on I will always follow this one: I JUST LOVE"
>
> "My body is just a visible object covered by fashion industry."
>
> "Let me pay for dinner once or twice or every time. Don't loan me money. Don't worry about me so much. I may have curves. I may bleed once a month. I may bat my eyes and swish my hips. But I'm not that fragile. I'm not that weak. Hold my hand and say you love me. But let me be me and let me be independent."[104]

Most of the images accompanying the text flash in and out of visibility with the pulsating background noise. Many are women's submitted pictures of their own bodies, but others are representations of women as female archetypes. Because these stereotypical images were submitted by women themselves, they represent the incorporation of societal ideals with women's self-images, and acknowledge the struggle against internalizing misogyny. By advertising the virtual reality of a world of female avatars, the project illustrates and calls attention to the ways that women's bodies are separated from their subjectivity, due to the demands of feminine performance. The embodied experiences of women that lead

[104] World of Female Avatars, via http://females.mur.at/avatars.html

to this alienation from their own bodies are emblematic of the crisis of the fragmented, multifaceted postmodern woman: she who must perform the essential roles of femininity on top of autonomously constructing her own identity. As the artist Eva Hesse wrote, in January 1964: "I cannot be so many things. I cannot be something for everyone… Woman, beautiful, artist, wife, housekeeper, cook, saleslady, all these things. I cannot even be myself or know what I am"[105]

Virtual Anatomy, an e-zine by Alla Mitrofanova and Olga Suslova, explores the postmodern and post-structuralist theories of the body. Sharing servers in St. Petersberg with the Cyber-Femin-Club, a collective of over 30 artists concerned with the cultural and social programs of women's interaction with technology, "the e-zine, in English, experiments with different formats, blinking graphics, running headers, moving images to present, question and contextualise ideas related to Deleuze & Guattari, Irigaray and Kristeva amongst others."[106] In an interview by Josephine Bosma with the cofounders, Mitrofanova made a powerful statement about women's power of self-determination and self-definition:

> AM: When you direct your subjectivity and body in many different directions, you should leave something inside your body that could renovate your existential ability. You cannot learn it from the European tradition. The European tradition prescribed us to have a body which is totally agonized through language, through medicine, through politics etcetera. So you have to go somewhere else and for example steal something from eastern tradition and you should build a kind of uncultural or unconceptual, but also culturally open space to set up your personal existence, to keep your body. I cannot say subjectivity because subjectivity is a concept that is very much based on social and cognitive representations in the European tradition. Body as a concept is a more productive mixture. If your body as an operative system is too heavy, it does not work. So you have to build an alternative model to centralized your body without being conceptually organized, you should learn to live in an (conceptually) empty stream. Your personal existence should be your energetic motor… Identity is a lost concept for me, because identity should be an open operative system akin subjectivity, body. Identity is a temporal assemblage of concepts, it should be diffrent in any event.

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[105] Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1981), 155

[106] n. paradoxa vol. 1, 1998 via http://www.ktpress.co.uk/pdf/vol1npara91_93_womenonline.pdf

> With flexible this identity we have a lot of freedom now, for example in the internet identity is a game. Identity is not given, but a freely chosen representation mode. Identity could be seen as a data base of possible representations, which you could easily remix as you like. I don't see problems anymore here. The problem goes deeper: how to make your existential operative system more independent and more useful. How to survive being an individual body in a multitude of identities.[107]

Sherry Turkle also attempted to describe the reconciliation of multiple identities in her book *Life on the Screen* through the metaphor of "cycling through." In the time between 1995, when *Life on the Screen* was published, and the publication of her next book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology And Less From Each Other* in 2011, technology had advanced dramatically, due to the development of mobile devices with Internet connectivity. Turkle revised her metaphor, saying that "now, with mobile technology, cycling through has accelerated into the mash-up of a life mix. Rapid cycling stabilizes into a sense of continual copresence."[108] Turkle's metaphor describing the cyclical, and yet simultaneous nature of technologically mediated performance of multiple identities, combined with the spiritual origins of the avatar and the virtual reality of Second Life, have lead me to theorize about doing what Mitrofanova suggests, incorporating a non-Western framework of embodied experience.

The Bardo of Cyberspace

Bardos

The system of *bardos* is described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead; or, The After-Death Experiences on the Bardo Plane, according to Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup's English Rendering*. This first English translation of the book was compiled and edited by W. Y. Evans-Wentz in 1927.[109] Evans-Wentz's publication was in the midst of the rise of

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[107] Alla Mitrofanova & Olga Suslova interview by Josephine Bosma, June 15, 1997 via http://www.obn.org/reading_room/interviews/html/alla.html
[108] Turkle, 2011, 161
[109] Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 4

American Spritualism, and with the backing of the American Theosophical Society. Donald Lopez's history of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* explains that its cultural relationship with *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* caused Evans-Wentz to choose the English title.[110] The book is a Tibetan Buddhist text regarding the process of reincarnation. The original text was assembled from many different books and appendices, and provides a comprehensive guide to Buddhist cosmography. Studying this text would help the living understand how they would be able to reincarnate as Buddhas.

A *bardo*, translated as "the between," refers in the book to three key structures classifying all experience. First, its most basic sense refers to the whole period between death and rebirth. More technically, it refers to six realms in between the cycle of lives and deaths: the life, the dream, meditation, death-point, reality, and existence betweens. A bardo, in the sense of "phase of a between," is the experience of a particular period in one of these six states. [111] The bardo of existence encompasses all experience, including the after-death realms. Reality and all the others are contained within the bardo of experience, and the bardos of death-point, meditation, and dreaming are contained within the bardo of life. The book contains prayers to be read in order to comprehend and master the experience of consciousness while travelling through each bardo.

The bardo between death and rebirth, which the consciousness of humans travels through after death, contains many realms with different features. They are the other life realms besides our Earth that the consciousness may enter and inhabit, and the choice of realm depends on the individual's karma they have accumulated from previous reincarnations through moral and immoral actions.[112] Embodiment takes place in the hell realms, which are full of suffering beings, the hungry ghost realms, which are full of beings who cannot escape their desires, and the human and animal realms, which are similar to human and animal life on Earth. The three god realms are the desire, the pure form, and the formless realms. Embodiment takes place in the desire realms, which are similar to the Christian heaven, but in the pure form and formless realms, consciousness

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[110] Ibid, 102
[111] Robert A. Thurman, trans., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Liberation Through Understanding In The Between*, (Bantam Books, 1994), 246
[112] Ibid, 28

exists as pure energy.[113] These six realms are depicted throughout Tibet and elsewhere in the Buddhist world as the "wheel of life."[114] By studying the Tibetan book of the dead and practicing karmically good actions in the conscious realms, beings hope to achieve enlightenment and become Buddhas. Buddhas and bodhisattvas' consciousness can travel through any realm, and sometimes more than one at a time. A bodhisattva is a deity who remains embodied after achieving enlightenment, instead of passing into nirvana and abandoning their body like the Buddha did. They remain on the wheel of life voluntarily participating in reincarnation in order to enlighten other beings.

Cyborgs and Goddesses

Japanese artist Mariko Mori depicted a bodhisattva by avatarizing her own body in the installation *Nirvana*, exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 1998. Mori, who grew up in Japan and studied fashion design there, also studied art in London and New York. Jean M. Ippolito writes, "Her experience in the multicultural environment of New York heightened her awareness of the uniqueness of Japan's spiritual culture, and this had a great impact on the content of her work."[115] Mori's earlier works reflect her background as a model, and later in her artistic career she introduces more concepts from Japanese Buddhist thought and the Shinto tradition.

In *Oneness*, a catolog of her work published in 2007, Mori groups together her works *Subway*, *Warrior*, and *Play with Me* (fig 3.4). She writes that before 1994 her focus was on the contrast between reality and non reality, but after 1994, it became located in "a hyper real world within non reality." All three photographs were shot in the real world, where Mori appears costumed as a cyber-woman serving various functions. *Warrior* is arguably the least realistic of these, if they are to be compared on the basis of photographic manipulation, as the arcade in which Mori poses is inhabited by semi-transparent gamers whose bodies overlap moving around her. Guessing that she used a long exposure photograph and digital manipulation to achieve this effect, it gives the

[113] Ibid, 29-31
[114] Ibid, 32
[115] Jean M. Ippolito, "Words, Images and Avatars: Explorations of Physical Place and Virtual Space by Japanese Electronic Media Artists," Leonardo, 2009, Vol. 42, 423

photograph a sense of the motion of the space, which offsets her static battle-ready pose. She is framed by the gazes of two ghostly gamers and foregrounded by the only other fully solid figure, a spectacled youth seated at an arcade machine. He could easily be controlling an avatar resembling Mori's character, in a silver body suit accessorized with a black helmet, gun, gloves, pads, and boots. It is almost as if she has materialized from out of the game to appear behind him. Although she is not moving, her pose is dynamic. With her gun drawn to her side, twisted torso and feet spread wide apart, she is frozen in the middle of a combat maneuver and stares directly at the camera. Her youthful features and heavy makeup contrast with her body language and attire in a way that is not uncommon in animated games where beautiful women perform combat.

Comparing Mori's attire in these three works, *Warrior* stands out as not revealing Mori's femininity (or her body at all, for that matter) in any way but her face. Her *Subway* costume is more of a style that could be called retro-futuristic. Elements of this style are expressed in a silver material that looks like aluminum or chrome covering her body in several places. Her femininity is revealed by the usage of this material as a skirt and as a collar that covers her neck, shoulders, and upper chest, but reveals the lower portion of her breasts. Her upper arms and middle torso are encased in a white skin-tight material beneath a layer of what seems to be transparent plastic, which connects the collar to her skirt and technologically augmented arm guards. Her gaze is tilted upward towards her own left ear and she seems to be receiving some kind of transmission on a headset as she presses a button on her left arm. Perhaps she is a cyber-police woman, or some kind of futuristic corporate agent. No one else on the subway acknowledges the strangeness of her appearance, and her isolation is enhanced by the use of a reverse fisheye lense wrapping the background away from her.

The character she portrays in *Play With Me* visually combines elements of both previously discussed costumes. Her hair is covered by a long blue wig styled in high pigtails like Sailor Moon, and her entire body is covered from the neck down. Instead of obscuring her feminine features, or revealing them through a transparency, this costume enhances them, with a blue bustier resembling body armor and a short metallic pleated skirt. The silhouette of this costume is much like the magical girls of anime, matching her blue breast and shoulder plate to her shin guards and her metallic skirt to a pair of elbow-

length gloves. Her neck, upper arms, waist, thighs, and boots are all encased in a shiny vinyl-looking material, with the effect that perhaps her character is not wearing a costume at all, but was manufactured in it. The way her joints are articulated and the angle of her head give her a doll-like appearance, as does her makeup, done in a much more playful style. This effect is clearly intended, given the title of the photograph, and her position standing next to a sidewalk SEGA arcade machine. The men sharing the foreground with her pay her no notice, nor does anyone inside of the convenience mart in the background. Surrounded by flashy, colorful signage, she is clearly also an item of commerce, but what she is selling is unclear.

After 1994, Mori explored other media and began incorporating Buddhist themes and imagery. In the catalog entry for her 1999 installation *Dream Temple*, Mori explains that her video sequences were partially intended to emulate her transcendent experiences achieved through studies of meditation and the sutras. She writes that she found it difficult to convey phenomena like the movement of rain, bubbles, and clouds through static, traditional media. Producing them by the use of digital imaging enabled her, "not only to give the viewer my experience but also to allow the viewer to travel through their own inner world." Mori was also inspired to construct the Dream Temple by the experience of her own death and rebirth of consciousness. This was achieved without physical crisis, and was evidenced by a change in her visual perceptions, a flood of memories from her distant past, and a five or six hour period of complete darkness. After some struggle, she regained her knowledge of self as a living being, and a gradual remembrance of her human history, claiming to have experienced rebirth in the same body.

In *Nirvana* (fig 3.5), she combines costuming with digital imaging to portray herself as a bodhisattva. Her costume is a softly colored traditional kimono resembling the description of flying immortals, most notably due to her silk scarves. The scarf refers to the tale of an angel who flies around the earth for millions of years, stroking a stone with her scarf as she touches down to help suffering beings so many times that the stone is gradually worn away but will never entirely disappear. Her elaborate golden crown indicates high status in the Buddhist pantheon, and the elaborate style of her long hair indicates a continued attachment and presence in the world as a bodhisattva. One of the

signifiers of the Buddha body she has included is the image of a dharma wheel inscribed onto her palms. The gaze of an enlightened person is also evident through the use of light-reflective contact lenses, or potentially digital manipulation. Her pupils seem to lack darkness, and she reflects or emanates light from her eyes to represent an enlightened mind.

On the topic of her skillful combinations of ancient wisdom and modern technology, she says, "I'm not interested in using ancient things; rather I want to connect them with contemporary life through the technology we have now. On the surface it appears high tech but looking into it one feels the genesis of traditional matters."[116] Her work as a whole, from her early career as a model and photographer, to her large-scale installations featuring Buddhist aesthetics and digital technology, represents a multifaceted identity as both a cyborg and goddess (in this case, a goddess type specific to Buddhism, the bodhisattva). Within the videos and images of *Nirvana*, she is both simultaneously.

The Bardo of Cyberspace

Conceptualizing the body and subjectivity or consciousness within a non-dualistic Buddhist framework, one could say that cyberspace is another bardo within the bardo of life, within the bardo of reality, within the bardo of experience. Much like the bardo of dreaming, it allows us to travel through unimaginable destinations, inhabit different embodiments than in waking life, and effect changes in our consciousness. Much like the after death realms, choosing our environments, embodiments and interactions reflects how we are living our current lives. The system of karma, or merit accumulated from good and bad deeds, still applies to our experiences online. Sherry Turkle likens the practice of conscious self-improvement in psychoanalytical terms, but also references Buddhist practices such as meditation and study of books like *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*:

> Buddhists speak of their practice as a raft to get to the other shore, liberation. But the raft, like an analytic treatment, is thought of as a tool that must be set aside, even though the process of crossing the

[116] Ibid, 423

> river is conceived of as never-ending... Virtuality need not be a prison. It can be the raft, the ladder, the transitional space, the moratorium, that is discarded after reaching greater freedom. We don't have to reject life on the screen, but we don't have to treat it as an alternative life either. We can use it as a space for growth.[117]

In other words, exploring the worlds and identities we create within the bardo of cyberspace helps us to reflect on the conditions of the worlds that produce them. Living in-between reality and virtuality need not be detrimental to the conditions of either one, if the conscious experience of their simultaneity is directed towards positive improvement of both. Like Mori, we are able through technological mediation to experience multiple lives, to be reborn, but still retain our individual experiences on multiple planes of existence.

[117] Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 262-263

Conclusion

To reconsider online experiences through a Buddhist framework of reincarnation helps to move discussion away from the identification of the physical self with an individual's identity. The Western framework of technological re-embodiment seeks to abandon the physical body, making flesh obsolescent, but this framework elevates non-physical experience to the same level instead of relegating the flesh to obsoletion. In this way, incorporeal experience can be reconsidered alongside embodiment, without degrading or erasing embodied experiences. Reconsidering both online and offline experience within the same framework adds another layer to how we understand embodiment itself. This distinction is especially important when the aspect of embodiment under scrutiny is gender, because it is biologically and culturally established in equal measure (and online, the biological can be hidden or denied). The cyborg is a useful metaphor for the hybridization of nature and culture, but is defined by a physical relationship with technology. The cyborg merges with the goddess when technology allows it to be freed from physical constraints of the human body. Like the bodhisattva, the cyborg goddess retains an Earthly embodiment, but is simultaneously able to travel through other experiential planes of existence, the bardos of cyberspace.

The bardos created thus far on the Internet reflect the most diverse human desires, from perversity to utopia. They also reflect embodied experience, as it becomes necessary to construct online bodily representations to navigate cyberspace. How, where, and why these representations have been created illustrate historical cultural shifts in political and social conditions for women; the wholesale denial of female subjectivity online begets the cyberfeminist movement. Specific to the female body, it is clear that a rebellion is taking place in new media against the assault on women by traditional media to conform to a certain image. This rebellion takes place through regurgitation of the commoditized image of women, as simply as acknowledging the pressures on women in society as in the *World of Female Avatars* and Jennifer Chan's brutally honest video art. Another form of this rebellion takes place in a hyperbolized acceptance of beauty standards, as in Orlan's work, where the extremity of her performance of beauty and femininity goes too

far, entering the territory of monstrosity and exposing the ridiculousness of said standards. The reclamation of the signifiers of femininity need not go to this length, as the cyberfeminists illustrate by pointedly embracing a typically feminine aesthetic, exaggerating their female embodiment in pursuit of women's empowerment and representation online. Making the body hyper-visible or invisible both serve the function of destabilizing problematic representations codified by a history of art complicit with misogynist, capitalist patriarchal structures. Female artists, including the thousands of young women authoring their own representations via selfies, expose the effects these structures have on the representations of the women who inhabit them, and make space for a dialogue of images to evolve beyond human limitation, in the realm of cyborg goddesses.

Figures

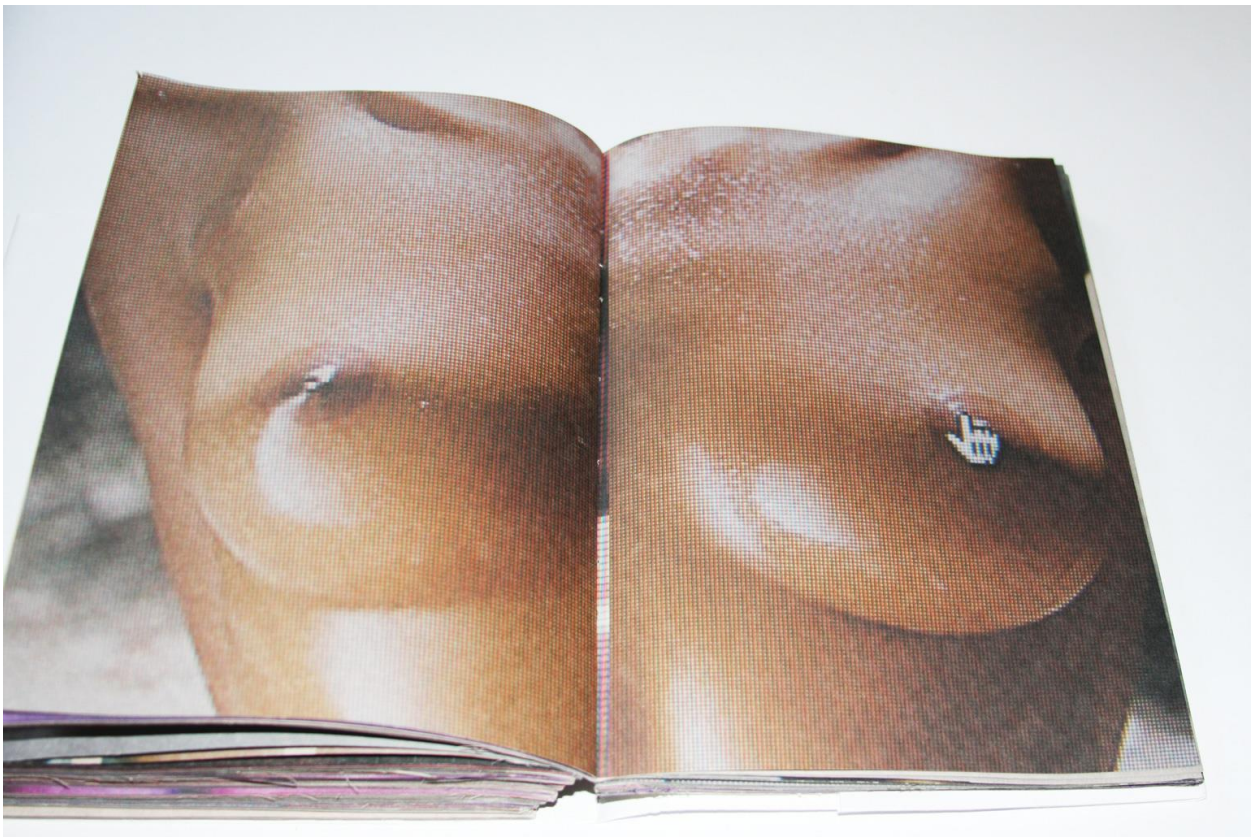

Figure 1.1 Megan Forsyth, *Virtuality,* 2009

via http://meghanforsyth.com/Virtuality.html

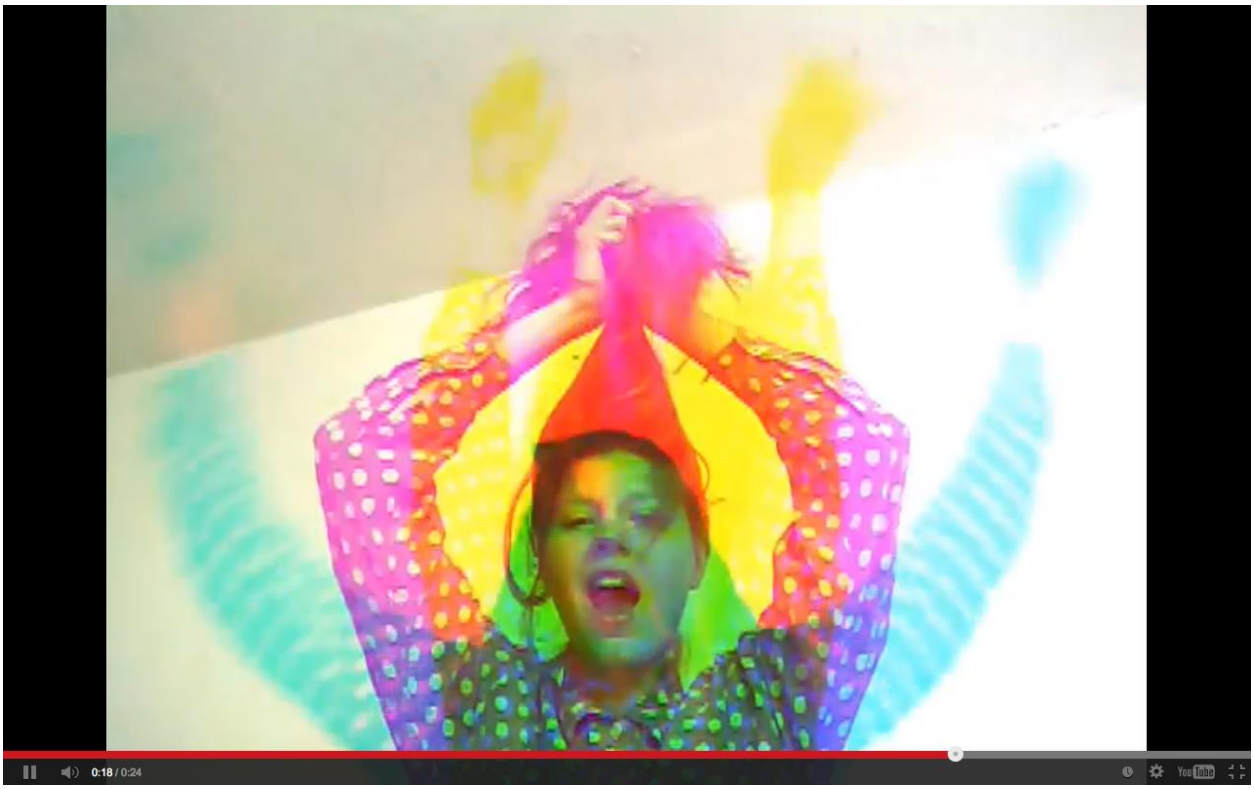

Figure 1.2 Petra Cortright, *RGB, D-LAY* screen capture, 2011

via http://www.petracortright.com/rgbdlay.html

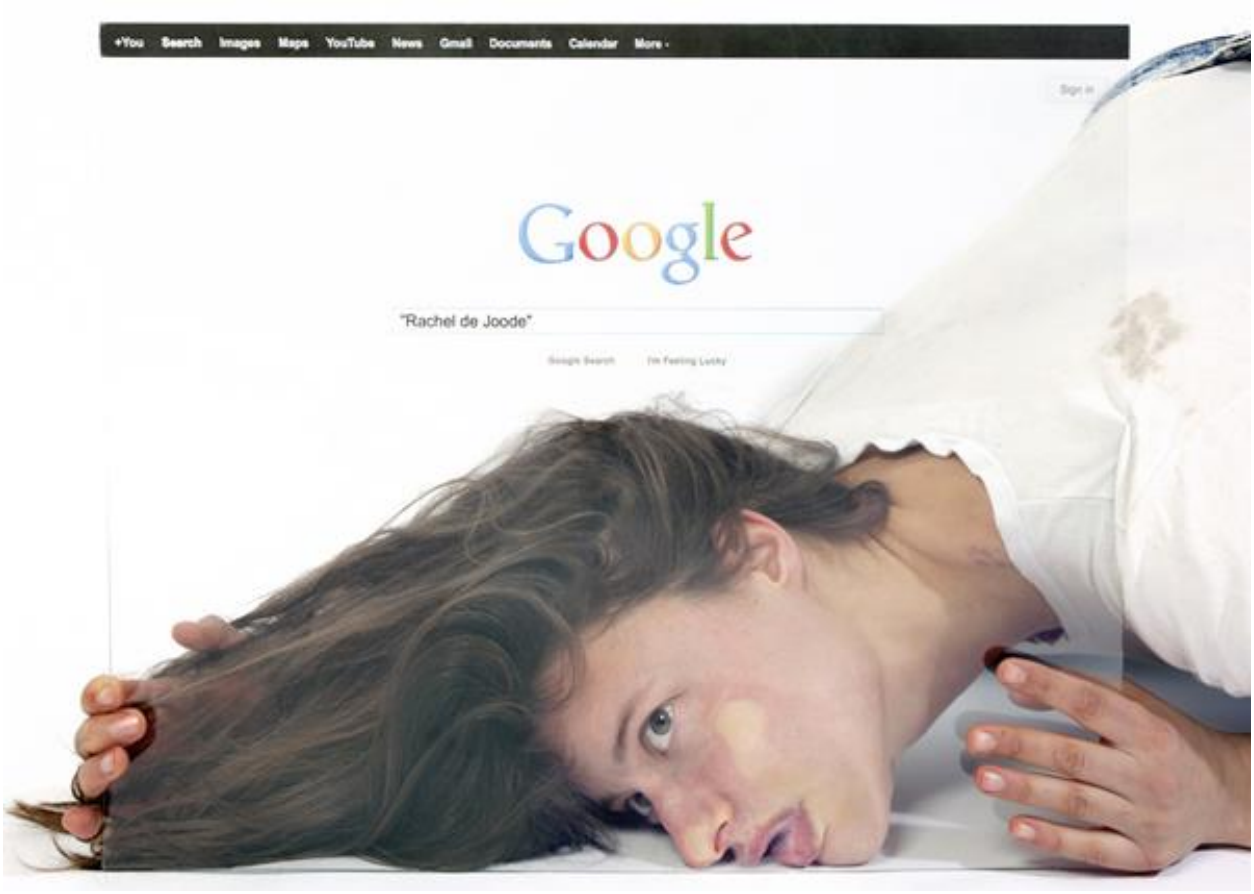

Figure 1.3 Rachel de Joode, *The Imaginary Order*, 2012
via http://www.racheldejoode.com

Figure 1.4 Jennifer Chan **A Total Jizzfest** screen capture, 2012
via http://www.jennifer-chan.com/extra.html

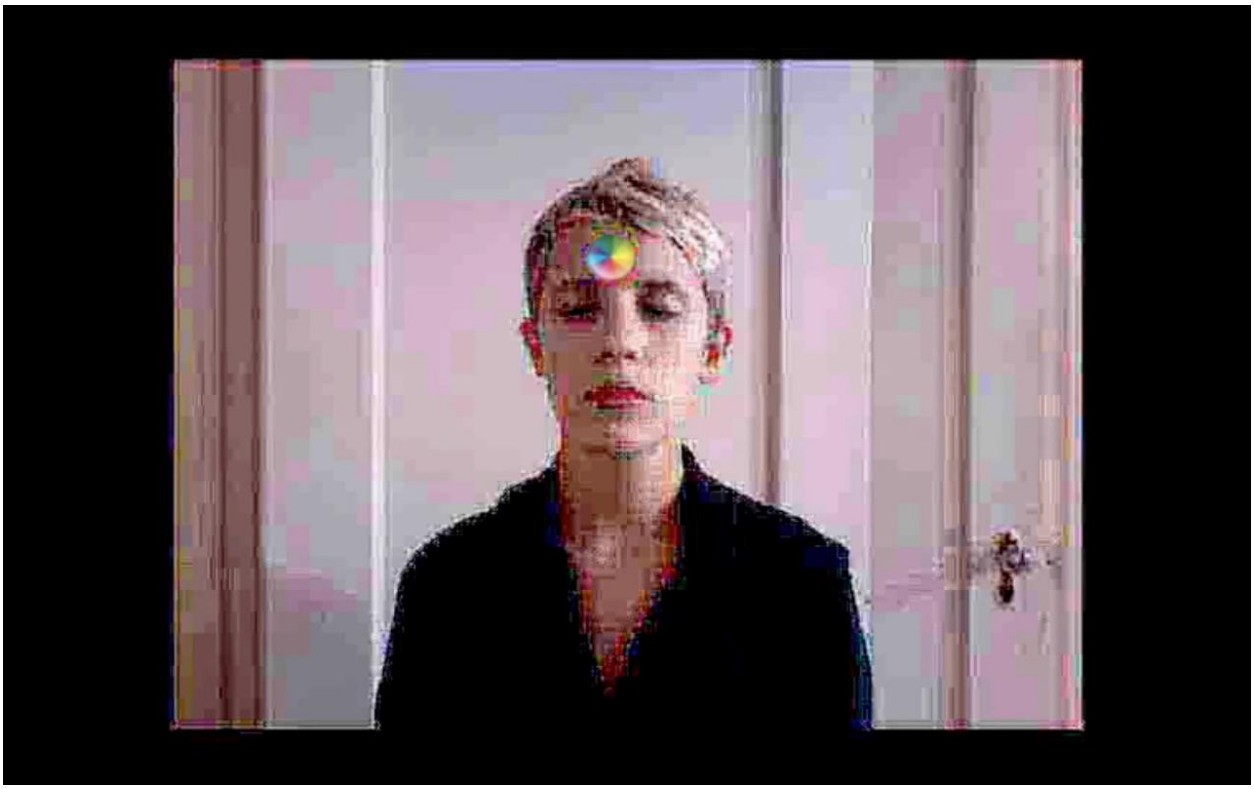

Figure 1.5 Claire L. Evans, *Digital Decay: Meditation/Disintegration* screen capture, 2011

via http://www.clairelevans.com/?cat=7#digital-decay-meditationdisintegration-2011

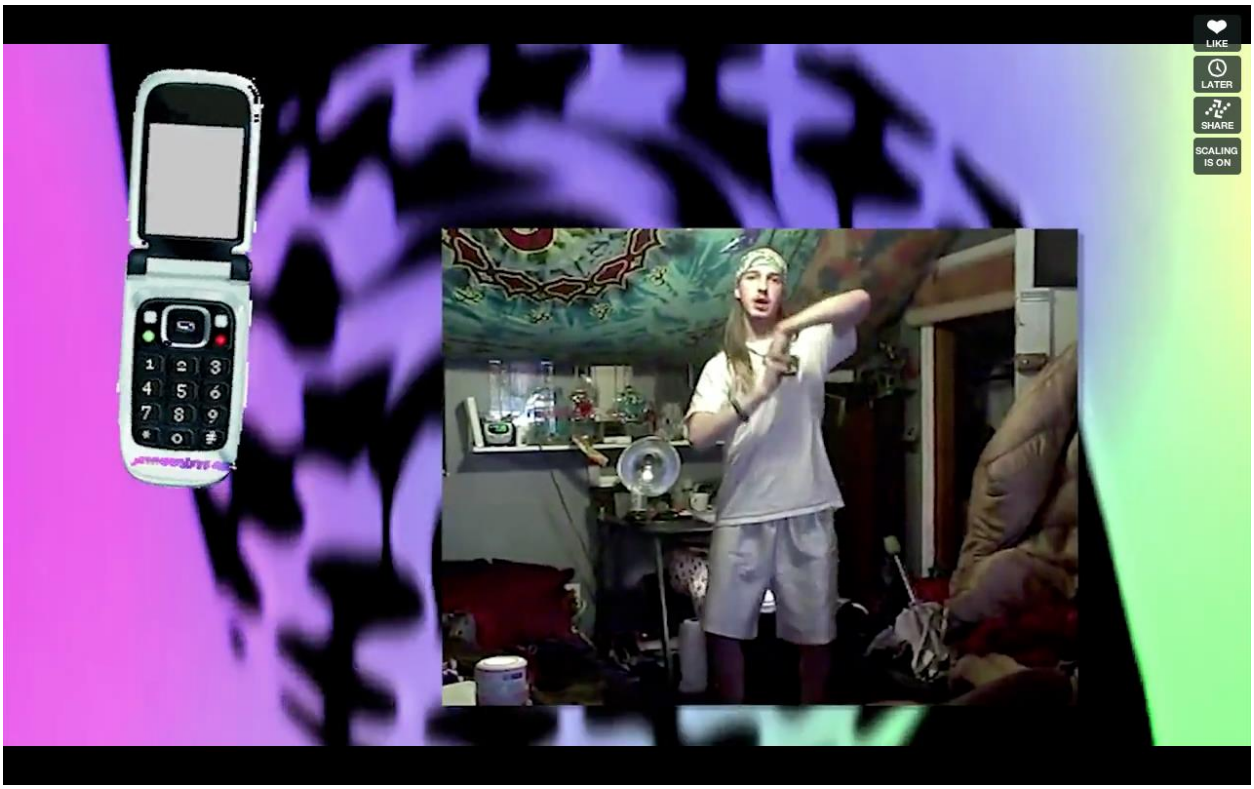

Figure 1.6 Jennifer Chan, *Deep Thoughts* screen capture, 2013
via http://vimeo.com/61152459

Figure 1.7 Jennifer Chan, *Grey Matter* screen capture, 2012
via http://jennifer-chan.com/index.php?/video/grey-matter/

Figure 2.1 Elyasaf Kowner, portrait of Orlan, 1998

via http://www.kowner.com/portraits/orlan.php

Figure 2.2, Faith Holland, *Chelsea Manning Fan Art 2*, 2013
via http://www.faithholland.com/chelsea-manning/chelsea-manning-fan-art-2

Figure 2.3 Faith Holland, *Chelsea Manning Fan Art 8*, 2013
via http://www.faithholland.com/chelsea-manning/chelsea-manning-fan-art-8

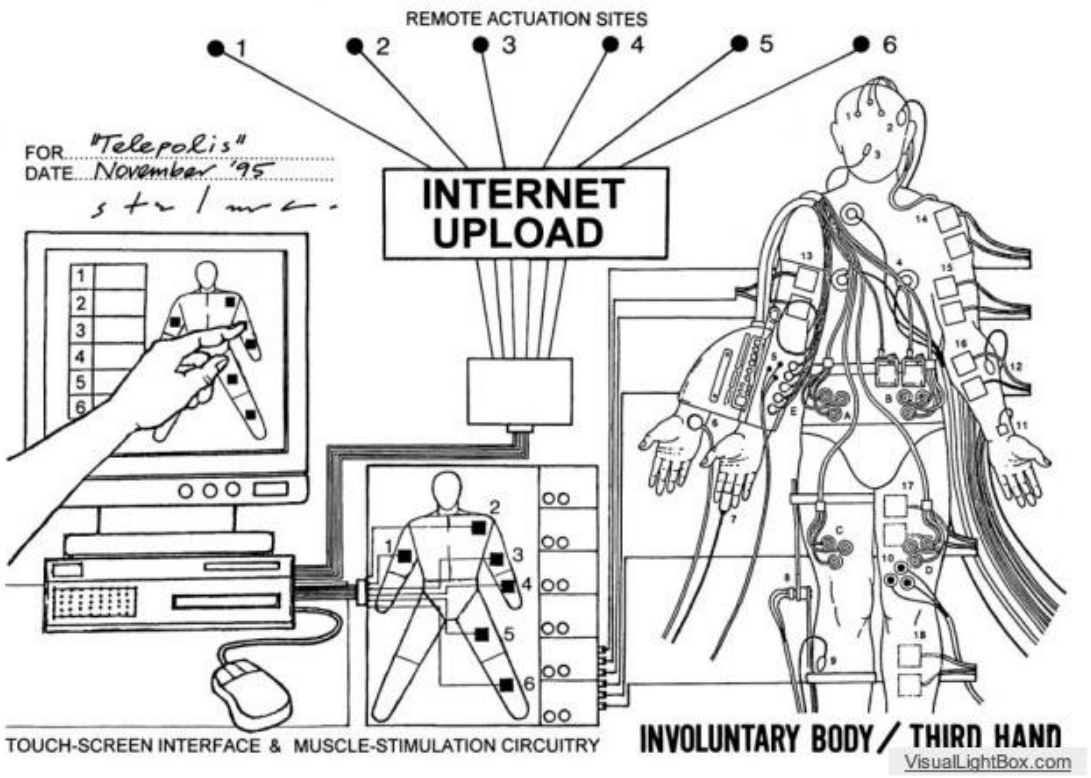

Figure 3.1 Stelarc, *Fractal Flesh*,

via http://stelarc.org/?catID=20290

Figure 3.2 Gamechup, Evolution of Lara Croft's model, 2013
via http://www.gamechup.com/evolution-of-lara-crofts-model-first-game-to-the-reboot/

Figure 3.3 Tom Boellstorff, *Tom Bukowski*, 2008,
via http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v455/n7209/full/455032a.html

Figure 3.4 Mariko Mori, *Play With Me*, 1994

via http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/play-with-me/

Figure 3.5 Mariko Mori, *Nirvana*, 1997

via http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/nirvana/

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