

Romancing the Anti-body: Lust and Longing in (Cyber)space

(an excerpt)

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Prior to this decade, there has been no media available to dissolve the boundaries between art and life as effectively and as instantly as cyberspace which can not only erase social boundaries but irrevocably alter the idea of what comprises identity .

A precondition to electronic access is to simultaneously be one or even several other people. There are many reasons for this. In his book *The Virtual Community, Homesteading On The Electronic Frontier*, Howard Rheingold notes that people seem to need to use depersonalized modes of communication in order to get personal with each other—it is a way to connect.

Plugging into cyberspace requires the creation of a personal mask. It becomes a signature, a thumbprint, a shadow, and a means of recognition. Primitive tribes also use coverings. Masks camouflage the body and in doing so liberate and give voice to virtual selves. As personal truth is released, the fragile and tenuous face of vulnerability is protected.

One of the more diabolical elements of entering CMC or Virtual Reality is that people can only recognize each other when they are electronically disguised. Truth is precisely based on the inauthentic!

Masks and self-disclosures are part of the grammar of cyberspace. It is the syntax of the culture of computer-mediated identity which, by the

way, can include simultaneous multiple identities, or identities that abridge and dislocate gender and age.

Identity is the first thing you create when you log on to a computer service. By defining yourself in some way, whether it is through your name, a personal profile, an icon or mask, you also define your audience, space and territory. In the architecture of networks, geography shifts as readily as time. Communities are defined by software and hardware access. Anatomy can be readily reconstituted.

Masking through computer mediated communication is read differently than in real life. You can be anything you can imagine, instantly, with very few props or prompts. Self-created alternate identities become guides with which to navigate deeper access of internetting. You do not need a body to do this.

Not only do you not need a body, but entering cyber space encourages a disembodied body language. Posing and emoting are some of the terms for phantom gestures that can be read through words, or seen in special video programs through simple movements such as waves. Codes of gestures can be read by attachments on the computer that articulates hidden meanings of voiceless and mute speech.

Actions are constantly under surveillance, tracked, traced, digitized and stored. Icons as masks are of particular importance because the disguises used today may determine an archetype of the present that will eventually reflect the ephemeral nature of a society geared towards image manipulation and self recreation.

In the search for contact, Computer Mediated Communications solicit two way dialogues. These require mutual narrative s(t)imulations. While often subliminally fulfilling and inherently filled with amorous potential there have been some recent incidents that have caused disturbances.

Let me describe three famous case studies in the cyber world annals.

Case # 1

A classic example is related in "The Strange Case of The Electronic Lover" by Linsy Van Gelder, which was published in *Ms.* magazine in October 1985. Van Gelder met "Joan" on CompuServe, and began to chat. It was learned that Joan was a neuropsychologist in her late twenties, living in New York who had been disfigured—crippled in fact and left mute by an automobile accident at the hands of a drunken driver. Joan's mentor, so the story went, had given her a computer, modem and subscription to Compu-Serve where Joan blossomed into a celebrity. Her wit and warmth extended to many people.

Eventually, however, Joan was unmasked...defrocked (so to speak) and it was discovered that she was not disabled, disfigured, mute or female. Joan was in real life a New York psychiatrist, Alex, who had become obsessed with his own experiments in being treated as a female.

Shock in the electronic world has a higher voltage than anywhere else. The assault of this discovery was coupled by the fact that Joan had achieved an intimacy with many people who trusted her. Joan's very skeleton was based on pure deception. Van Gelder is quoted as saying that "through this experience, those who knew Joan lost their innocence."²

In the real world, it could be thought of as a kind of rape—a deep penetration by a masked stranger. Questions of ethics and behavior ensued so as to avoid further incidents of netsleazing and other repulsive forms of bad etiquette.

Alex had cleverly called upon the icons and codes of a society that has learned to fantasize media produced females in a particular way. He chose to be a woman, a gender marginalized in technology.

Most people logging on are men. When Joan logged in it was 1986, and women chatting was unusual. It still is so unusual, in fact, that even today whenever someone logs on as a woman there is a barrage of questions in order to determine whether it really is a woman, or someone just trying on a new sex for size.

It is a kind of harassment that people logging on as men or animals do not experience. Furthermore, Alex chose to make Joan the epitome of vulnerability. Perhaps whetting desires even more by making her paralyzed and mute. The fictional presumption was that in real life she had lost her body, yet she could still be seductive. In fact she could even lure her responders, like the Sirens calling Odysseus, into lustful responses to her non-body.

Case # 2

In February 1993, a housewife signed up for a computer service to access information and make friends. She found she was able to form on line relationships that quickly became intense. She could form close connections that were hard to make in the busy world of real life. However, very quickly "she found herself the target of an invisible high-tech predator who threatened to become an all-too-real menace to her children".³.

She began to have vile, unsolicited messages from someone known as Vito. She had no idea if Vito was a man or woman, a friend of her children and family or a psychotic maniac. Vito was able to tap into all of her messages, get a bit by bit profile of her and post wider messages to all Internetters. The targeted woman complained that it was like "rape". Again without a body.

She sought out a computer crimes detective. Vito became well known, even infamous. Many people claimed to be him, just as many people claim to have committed the crimes of Ted Bundy.

When a suspect was finally arrested, the District Attorney was forced to release him because of "insufficient evidence". Which brings up the question of how to bring law and order to the information superhighway, a place where villains are invisible and users become unwitting victims in crimes of the non-body.

The Electronic Frontier is attempting to do this and have been enormously effective since their creation. A self-sponsored group, they are

like Ralph Nader was to ecology; a hacker posse who round up, capture and hold virtual vigilantes accountable. These not only include hackers. They have also questioned the computer and privacy invasions launched by the United States Government. New users are forming the largest immigration in history. What happens to this population's non-body is of critical importance.

Case # 3

About 1990, Tom Ray created a virtual computer that had evolved creatures. As Kevin Kelly notes, in his book *Out of Control*, "Beginning with a single creature, programmed by hand, this 80 byte creature began to reproduce by finding empty RAM blocks 80 bytes big and then copying itself. Within minutes, the RAM was saturated with replicas. By allowing his program to occasionally scramble digital bits during copying, some had priority. This introduced the idea of variation and death and natural selection, and an ecology of new creatures with computer life cycles emerged. The bodies of these creatures consisted of program memory and space. A parasite, this creature could borrow what it needed in the RAM to survive.⁴

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Furthermore, to everyone's astonishment, these creatures very quickly created their version of sex—even without programming! Sometimes in "Terra" (which is what Ray called this system) a parasite would be in the middle of asexual reproduction (genetic recombination), but if the host was killed midway, the parasite would assimilate not only that creature's space but also part of the dead creature's interrupted reproduction function. The resultant junior mutant was a wild, new recombination created without deliberate mutation; A kind of inbred vampiristic progeny, an unrestrained strain.

Body-less sex In an Anti-Body ecosystem for co evolution. Cultured in the Digital Pool! What could be more appealing?

Getting back to the rational non-reality we have learned - to love and trust—or, in other words, the real world, it becomes all too clear that much that is considered ground breaking is not really new. And that each perspective we have today derives from a point originally placed many years earlier.

Consider, for example, the rules for one point perspective, written by Alberti five hundred thousand years ago. His mathematical metaphor was first applied to painting and drawing and promulgated an age of exquisite illusionism. Artists who used his theories could paint windows onto imagined vistas with such precision that viewers were impressively deceived.

Was this ethical? What implications did it have? Did Donatello or Vermeer question the vistas of voyeurism their windows would invite?

In an effort to eschew illusion, Marcel Duchamp investigated the essentials of art production, including selfhood and the uncontrolled idiosyncratic inner impulses. The *sine qua non* of art, according to Marcel Duchamp, is not some essence or quality residing in the final work, but rather an infinitely subtle shifting of the intent of the artist. In works of Duchamp such as *Rose Selavy*, the intent and body of the artist are *the sine qua non* of artistic practice. *Rose* was a non-body through which Duchamp could escape fixed identity, becoming an "other" in the process. Otherness refers in this case to something defined by what it is not.

There is a relationship between Duchamp and his contemporary, Heisenberg. The irrationality of Heisenberg's theories of the observer affecting what is observed in Quantum Mechanics found at the interior of

extreme physics metaphorically reflects Duchamp's "experiments" regarding randomness and chance.⁵ They were traveling to the same place, but on different roads. Both were looking for the path not taken.

—Don't byte off more than you can eschew

This pre(r)amble has been leading up to the development of my own body of non-body and anti-body work produced in the past three decades.

I divide my work in two categories, B.C. and A.D., or Before Computers and After Digital. I will begin with the first. In the 1960's, I lived quite literally in B.C. or, Berkeley, California. Ideals of community, alternative, reprocessed media, free speech and civil rights were constantly in the air. I could hear amplified speeches of radical heroes, such as Malcom X through my open windows. In those volatile years, art and life fused, political performances took place in the streets. I didn't realize until a decade later that the attitude of that era was to form the basis of my psychological armature, the framework for all the work that followed that time.

Consistently, my most relevant ideas occur on the cusp of some disaster. In 1972, The University Art Museum in Berkeley, closed an exhibition of mine because I used audio tape and sound in a sculpture titled *Self Portrait as Another Person*. The museum curators claimed that electronic media was not art and most certainly did not belong in a museum. This closure opened a second phase in my work and inspired my first radical act!

Voyeurism and surveillance tactics have become extensions of our "I". Cameras have become both eyecons and contact lenses. Once we used the words persona, robots or actors. Now the terminology for the counterfeit representation of life of digital anti bodies include avatar, cyborg or synthespians.

These pixilated essences of virtual identity link into an archeology of networks that in turn create a collective connective ethnography of information.

Like computer viruses, they escape extinction through their ability to morph and to survive, exist in perpetual motion, navigating parallel conditions of time and memory. The data is itself a representation of the ubiquitous virtual posthuman essence, a new curve in our evolving cyborgian posture.

If human beings are imperfect, their networks are even more so. Before long, we may be forced to confront the Faustian reflections of power that have been absorbed into our real world myth.

Perhaps what we need is an ideology that embraces our own transience and obsolescence. For this, we need to rely on the deepest resources of human creativity to accept temporality and reformat our dreams so that they incorporate an evolution where life becomes an unfolding nexus of interlinked transformative experiences . If humans have become the interface to the larger communicative body can soulful automatons be far behind?

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NOTE:

The Dante Hotel was created with Eleanor Coppola

Deep Contact was created in collaboration with Sara Roberts and Jim Crutchfield.

Room of One's Own was created in collaboration with Sara Roberts and Palle Henchel.

America's Finest was created in collaboration with Paul Tompkins and Mat Heckert

1. Rheingold, Howard *Virtual Communities, Homesteading On The Electronic Frontier*, Harpers Perennials, New York 1994, page 165.
2. Ibid
3. Gill, Mark Stuart, "Terror On Line" *Vogue Magazine*, January 1995, pages 163-165.
4. Kelley, Kevin, *Out of Contro*, Addison Wesley Publishing, California 1994, pages 286-288.
5. Black, Wayne, unpublished essay "We Are All Roberta Breitmore, A Post Mortem on Modernism, 1994.