Romancing the Anti-body: Lust and Longing in (Cyber)space (1994)

by Lynn Heshman Leeson

A precondition to electronic access is to simultaneously create not one but several identities. In his book *The Virtual Community*, *Homesteading On The Electronic Frontier,* Howard Rheingold notes that people 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, which becomes a signature, a thumbprint, and a means of recognition. 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 "Virtual Reality" is that people can only recognize each other when they are electronically disguised. Truth is precisely based on the inauthentic. Masks become part of the grammar. 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.

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 body less internetting, a disembodied body language.

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 a few incidents worth noting.

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. 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] Questions of ethics and behavior ensued so as to avoid further incidents of net sleazing 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. It is a kind of harassment that people logging on as men or animals did 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 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]. 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 were 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; an inbred vampiristic progeny, an unrestrained strain.

Have we been breeding body-less sex in an Anti-Body ecosystem for co evolution cultured in the digital pool? 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 Rrose Selavy, the intent and body of the artist are *the sine qua non* of artistic practice. Rrose was an entity 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.

To describe 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 **B**efore **C**omputers and **Af**ter **D**igital. 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 Malcolm 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 audiotape 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!

Early B.C. non-body works

From 1960-70, I created various wax masks that both talked to viewers through audiotapes, or dissolved, extinguished by fire. A few years later, in 1972, I created my first non-body work in an actual hotel room in The Dante Hotel. The objects that surrounded her taste and background defined the identity of the occupant. In painting, it would be called negative space. Books, glasses, cosmetics and clothing were selected to reflect the education, personality and socioeconomic background of the provisional identities. Pink and yellow light bulbs cast shadows and audiotapes of breathing emitted a persistent counterpoint to the local news playing on the radio. Thus my path to interactivity began, not with technology, but with installations and performances. Visitors entered the hotel, signed in at the desk, and received keys to the rooms. Residents of the transient hotel became "curators" and cared for the exhibition. I intended to keep the room permanently accessible, gathering dust and being naturally changed through the shifting flow of viewers. But "real life" intervened. Nine months after the opening, a man named Owen Moore came to see the room at 3 a.m. and phoned the police. They came to the hotel, confiscated the elements and took them to central headquarters where they are still waiting to be claimed. It was, I thought, an appropriate narrative closure. The identities of the non-bodies inside were formed by what was absent. Inside the Dante Hotel room # 47 was "essence" of an identity. When the room closed, it seemed important to liberate the essence of the person who might have lived there, to flesh out experience through real life.

This led to a near decade long project, *ROBERTA BREITMORE*, which was a private performance of a simulated persona. In an era of alternatives, she became an objectified non-bodied alternative personality. Roberta's manipulated reality became a model for a private system of interactive performances. Instead of being kept on a disc or hardware, her records were stored as photographs and texts that could be viewed without predetermined sequences. This allowed viewers to become voyeurs into Roberta's history. Their interpretations shifted, depending on the perspective and order of the sequences. In her fifth year of life, Roberta's adventures became so archetypically victimized that multiples were created. Even with four different characters assuming her identity, the pattern of her interactions remained constant and negative. After zipping themselves into Roberta's clothing, each multiple began to also have Roberta-like experiences. They were, perhaps like Tom Ray's computer viruses that filled the RAM space of real life, taking with them the genetic codes of Roberta's non- embodiment.

For the past decade I have been creating a series of photographs known as *Phantom Limbs*. These each articulate references to the mutation of the female body through the seduction of media. Reproductive

technological parts sprout from the image of the female, creating a cyborgian reformation as parts of the real body disappear.

While video was like a reflection that did not talk back, interactive works were like a trick, two-way mirror that allowed you to have a dialogue with the other side. I found this deeply subversive!

Birth of the Anti- Body

At this writing, the work in which I engaged is the creation of a fictional persona, designed navigating through the Internet. Surveillance, capture and tracking are the DNA of her inherently digital anatomy. They form the underpinning of her portrait.

I refer to her as an anti-body because of the way she was cultured. Normally antibodies produce systems of immunity from toxins in their environment. This will function as a benevolent virus that will roam the breathing form of the Internet, randomly accessing itself into uncertain home sites. Interestingly enough, terms for new technologies have ramifications in the language and times of AIDS. In reaction to an unhealthy natural environment, it rejects what exists and in order to survive, forms an other environment. This Internet's, plugged in anti-body is a transitory construction of time, circumstances and technology, a newly issued prescription of earlier impulses. She has chosen to negate the self hood into which she was born. Instead she shows a marked preference for the artifice of technology. Like Botticelli's " Venus" she is forward looking and seductive. But she is also optimistic and cyborgian. A pure bred Anti-body of the 90's, she moves through time, and electronic geographies of space, discreetly challenging privacy, voyeurism and surveillance in her own imitatable, mutatable and inauthentic revolutionary fashion.

Voyeurism and surveillance tactics have become extensions of our "I". Cameras have become both eye cons and contact lenses. Once we used the words persona, robots or actors. Now the terminology for counterfeit representation in the life of digital bodies includes avatar, cyborg or synthespians. These pixilated essences of virtual identity link into an archeology of networks. This in turn creates 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 post human essence, a new curve in our evolving cyborg 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 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?

NOTE:

The Dante Hotel was created with Eleanor Coppola

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 Control*, Addison Wesley Publishing, California 1994, pages 286-288.

5. Black, Wayne, unpublished essay "We Are All Roberta Breitmore, A Post Mortem on Modernism, 1994.