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Paper for New Constellations:
From Theory to Practice and Back Again:
Virtual Sex, Modernity and Social Realism
(A Case Study)

Last year, I co-authored a paper for a panel entitled "From Feminism to Formalism" at the College Art Association conference in Atlanta. "Virtual Sex," written together with Claudia Herbst, a colleague from Pratt Institute, was a paper that analyzed the iconography of mass-market games such as *Lara Croft* or *BloodRayne* in the context of the feminist discourse of Judith Butler. It was subsequently published[1], and to the surprise of both my co-author, our editor and myself, it brought – and as far as I know, still brings - 450 hits a day to an on-line academic journal that had scarcely as many in the several weeks preceding its publication. This was due, I am sure, both to the title of our paper and its erotic illustrations, which caused it to be placed prominently on a Google page where all of the other listings were more overtly pornographic. As opposed to the other Google links, however, the position taken by Professor Herbst and myself was critical both of the erotic gaming iconography that had provided grist for our analytic mill as well as of the culture of high-end technology that had provided it:

> The iconography of the virtual female was a hotly debated topic of the 1990s. Cyberfeminism eagerly took to developing the virtual female, her limits and potential possibilities. In this context, technologically mediated representations of the female gave rise to a presence in the realm of technology that would at last break with the exclusionary practices that male-dominated disciplines such as the sciences and high technology have long been identified with.
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> Critical inquiry into the iconography of the virtual female has, in

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[1] Claudia Hart and Claudia Herbst, *Virtual Sex: The Female Body in Digital Art,* Bad Subjects, 2005, #72, http://bad.eserver.org/issues/2005/72/hartherbst.html

unison with a disenchanted technology economy, all but subsided. Yet, the image of the virtual female continues to inform culturally important arenas, including the arts, sciences, technology, and a never-ending stream of consumer products, with undiminished force.

Calling for an urgent revisiting of the iconography of the virtual female, this joint presentation evokes a historical context that has been investigated by feminist scholars at length although rarely in regards to its implications on women's equal standing in the realm of technology. The history in question is that of the Western Christian church and the power it has consistently exercised in the shaping of technology.[2]

The character *BloodRayne* "poses" for Playboy magazine.

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[2] Claudia Hart and Claudia Herbst, abstract for *Virtual Sex: The Female Body in Digital Art*, <u>CAA Atlanta: Abstracts 2005,</u> College Art Association, NY

It is somehow not surprising that our paper should elicit such lascivious reader response, because our critical stance was developed in the context of the gaming culture in which Professor Herbst and I both function. We teach at a department of Computer Graphics and Interactivity, at Pratt Institute, a New York art school, in which most students are adolescent males – hormonally overactive, I might add - who idealize the contemporary gaming industry and study 3D animation in order to gain entry into it. As women professors, Professor Herbst and I were constantly confronted with youthful students whose design projects consisted of porn-tinged gaming characters resembling the popular *BloodRayne*, a virtual female who has recently had the honor of gracing a <u>Playboy</u> centerfold.[3]

As I researched this critical project, I simultaneously developed the concept for an art piece: *Sleeping Beauty*. *Sleeping Beauty* would be an erotic virtual character that would be sensual rather than pornographic, developed by a woman as opposed to a member of the predominantly virile gaming industry. Like a gaming figure, *Beauty* must be an interactive character, and to achieve this, I invited Michael Ferraro an artist and CG software developer, to join me in her creation. What was significant to me was that *Beauty* should have the same kind of visceral power as her gaming forebears, but that the sexuality she evoke be affirming of rather than diminishing to my gender:

> *Sleeping Beauty* is an interactive odalisque, consisting of a 3D animation that responds to a viewer's presence. Portraying the compressed time and space of painting, *Sleeping Beauty* shows a dreaming character whose slow, drowsy movements articulate all of the minutia of a single moment. This "painting" is life-sized in scale, constructing a representation that is more personae, penetrating a viewer's space and whose actions may awaken her. When awakened, *Beauty* opens her eyes to gaze at the viewer, in a moment of transformation, allowing the object of our gaze to subject us to hers.

> Based loosely on works such as Titian's *Venus* and paintings by the Baroque artist Peter Paul Rubens, *Sleeping Beauty* is meant to introduce direct sensuality into the virtual realm, but employing an idea of beauty defined by a woman rather than men in whom the subject does not express conventional canons of body and facial type. In so doing, *Sleeping Beauty* inverts the typical 3D character-based animations of interactive gaming, not just through her visual language but by also rejecting their violence and aggressive speed.

> By implicating viewers through involving them in the interactive process, *Sleeping Beauty* rejects the voyeurism of the historical odalisque and is sensual rather than pornographic. The agenda of

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[3] <u>Playboy</u>, October 2004.

> *Sleeping Beauty* therefore, is to intentionally redefine cliché, misogynist representations seen in commercial gaming characters like Blood Rayne and Lara Croft.[4]

Claudia Hart and Michael Ferraro, *Sleeping Beauty*, interactive painting*, 2005*

The next step in my developmental process - from theory to practice - was to expand the definition of the virtual female type that had heretofore been defined only by the commercial gaming industry, and also to define it more broadly than my personal art work might do. I had seen many exhibitions about new media art that were formally motivated, that were trying to define the perameters of new media art work ("it" should be interactive or "it" should involve custom software or computer programming done by the artist). What I hadn't seen were exhibitions that appraised the effect of the artwork on a viewing audience. My original research on new media forms emerged from an iconographic study of the contemporary gaming industry. As an art form, however, 3D 'virtual reality' gaming is particularly unevolved. Its forms are fueled primarily by what stimulates sales in its key audience: adolescent boys. Nevertheless, despite many differences, I do share with the gaming industry a populist orientation. I am also quite concerned with audience reception. I therefore felt that any show I would organize should present other artists with similar interests, artists who also wanted to make emotional contact with their audiences. Audience reception is obviously an important factor to most media, not just gaming, but also of significant consideration to film, television and any other medium based on the distribution of multiple editions, for prices much lower than the limited-edition standard of the visual arts. But eliciting an emotional response from an audience,

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[4] Claudia Hart, Press release prepared for *Time's Arrow--> Twelve Random Thoughts on Beauty*, November 17 - December 23, 2005, Rotunda Gallery Brooklyn, NY, curated by Janine Cirincione

had not been a concern I'd noticed often in the more hardware-oriented new media art context. In that context, I'd typically found instead a formalist orientation, equally articulated in new-media critical theory, where hardware-inspired categories were employed as a means to define new-media art.[5]

My attempt to frame a context for alternative constructions of a (potentially amorous) virtual Subject became *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?* - an exhibition and a related College Art Association panel. The title was intentionally simple, a question posed to new media theorists on a CAA panel but ultimately directed not to such insiders but rather to an audience unfamiliar with the slings and arrows of high technology, perhaps a typical College Art Association historian or even the average viewer of a public art exhibition:

> The classical myth of Pygmalion and Galatea runs deep in the history of both art and love. An isolated sculptor creates a beautiful statue mirroring unconscious amorous passions so heated that they ignite her, now endowed with life. In recent art, we begin to witness a parallel phenomenon, attempts to embody rather than just represent a virtual being. In parallel, the unpredictable landscape of human psychology, long considered the terrain of art, has become a significant aspect of cybernetics and artificial intelligence research. In this context, artists create images with astonishing verisimilitude and that may also react and respond to a user, evoking and sometimes employing emerging technologies such as evolutionary robotics, autonomous artificial organisms, and biomorphic engineering to simulate the emotions. In an era when representations are capable not only of reflecting our amorous desires but also of emoting in return, "*Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?"* poses a question to a panel of new media artists, theorists and art historians. It does so not out of a sense of awe in the face of new technologies, but to once more question what it might mean to be human in an age of simulation.[6]

Posing a deceptively simple and intentionally naive question in an academic context possessed a degree of precocity. This was, first, because I felt that, as an artist, I had already answered it with my artwork. Second, by the time I framed the question to a panel of invited critics and theorists, I'd already researched and discovered a group of artists whose work I also felt proposed evocative answers to my question. I invited only ten out of a discovered twenty because of constrictions in space, budget and schedules, proposing the

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[5] *Digital Art* by Christiane Paul. Thames and Hudson, London (2003) and *The Language of New Media* by Lev Manovich, MIT Press, Cambridge (2002) are but two well-known examples of this Structuralist and therefore formalist theoretical position.

[6] Claudia Hart, panel theme abstract for *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?*, CAA Boston: Abstracts 2006, College Art Association, NY.

exhibition to Murray Horne, director of the Wood Street Galleries, a public space in Pittsburgh, PA dedicated to new media art. Horne is also a curator, and one also biased towards work that is sophisticated but also capable of being received by a wide audience. He immediately agreed to *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?* which developed simultaneously as a show and a CAA panel.

The artists in *Can We Fall in Love* include Jose Carlos Casado, Jean Dubois, Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, Lynn Hershmann, Lynn Hughes and Simon Laroche, Catherine Ikam and Louis Fleris, Thecla Schiphorst, Mary Ellen Strom, Mari Velonaki and myself in collaboration with Michael Ferraro, are all working with the theme of representing a specific identity, one that emerges from the possibilities of virtual media and, as is also necessitated and implied by the creation of such a virtual being, an audience's reception of it. Interestingly, although the original theoretical intention of the paper *Virtual Sex* was a Butlerean feminism, in searching for art for the exhibition *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?*, my curatorial parameters were broader than feminism. I searched for virtual beings, but did not care if the orientation of the artists who produced them were feminist or otherwise. I was interested in digital work that stimulated an emotional exchange with its audience. The group of artists that emerged, however, revealed my feminist orientation. Artists who created such compelling virtual beings seemed to consist either of women or of men working in partnership with a woman, or – in the case of Carols Casado – a gay man whose work investigates, among other themes, gay sexuality and gender. In addition to researching identity – as Lynn Hershman and Catherine Ikam have for 30 years - much of the work included in the show portrays virtual characters that seem to emerge from a somatic state, perhaps evolving towards an awakening consciousness, and included work by Lynn Hughes and Simon Laroche, Jean Dubois, Thecla Shiphorst, Mary Ellen Strom and also my own *Sleeping Beauty*. Or, like the robot wheelchairs that are Mari Velonaki's *Fish-Bird*, they are virtual beings posed on the brink of an evolutionary divide, hovering between animal, machine and conscious Subject.

Exhibited in *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?*: Jean Dubois, *Syntonie*, 2001-2002, interactive video with touch screen.

Exhibited in *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?*: Jose Carlos Casado, *Inside v.04*, 2002, 20 second loop 3D video animation, on computer screen

Exhibited in *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?*: Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, *Subject Hello*, 2002, message in the voice of their character "Victoria," flash animation with synthesized vocalization.

Exhibited in *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?*: Lynn Hershman Leeson, *DiNA,* voice recognition bot 2000-2005, Programming by Colin Klingman, Co Producer: Kyle Stephan,Veepers Pulse 3D software, fabrication: Matt Heckert, Presence Detector: Palle Henckel

Exhibited in *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?*: Lynn Hughes and Simon Laroche, *Perversely Interactive System,* 2003, video projection and wireless biofeedback handset.

Exhibited in *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?*: Catherine Ikam / Louis Fléri, *Oscar,* 2005, a real time interactive portrait

Exhibited in *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?*: Thecla Schiphorst, "Mother and Son in Black Pool" from *Bodymaps: Artifacts of Touch,* 1996-2005, computer interactive sound and video installation

Design, Video: Thecla Schiphorst; Production Director, Programmer: Grant Gregson; Sound, Programmer: Ken Gregory, Norm Jaffe; Sensor System: Infusion Systems Ltd.; Physical Design: Hanif Jan Mohamed; Camera: Carla Elm

Exhibited in *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?*: Mary Ellen Strom, "Nude No. 3, Dillon Paul", 2004, Video Projection, 69" x 48", after "Venus" by Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velazquez (1649-51)

Exhibited in *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?*: Mari Velonaki in collaboration with roboticists David Rye, Steve Scheding and Stefan Williams*, Fish-Bird Circle B - movement C*, 2005, interactive, robotic installation

Women and gay male artists - Others in Western social terms – who create work attempting to (re)define the identity of a (Western) subject is already a well-established phenomenon in the contemporary art milieu. *Identity Art* is one of the accepted art "categories" and a paradigm of contemporary curatorial practice. How virtual identities play out in the context of new media art, however, reflects a broader cultural and political bias. To articulate it, I'd like to propose a dialectic relationship between *Can We Fall in Love With a Machine?* and a seminal new media exhibition that emerged from the broader contemporary art context (rather than the more narrow "new media" one). This show is the *BitStreams* exhibition, curated by Lawrence Rinder with Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz and Debra Singer, staged at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2001.

BitStreams was the first exhibition dedicated to new media art at an established New York City art museum. Accordingly, it also embraced a mainstream modernist/formalist position, articulated here in Rinder's and the Ehrenkranz's lead catalog essay:

> Nothing since the invention of photography has had a greater impact on artistic practice than the emergence of digital technology. While photography revolutionized the arts by superseding painting's claim to represent the "real," digital technology has become the ultimate tool for capturing the nuances of the "unreal." In digital media, all information is reduced to binary code, a series of zeros and ones, creating a dynamic arena in which images and objects can be melded, morphed, or made to disappear. Artists have taken advantage of their unprecedented control over sensation and information to produce works that challenge our everyday perceptions of color, form, sound, space and time….

> …Composite computer images show no trace of the seams that once separated elements in collage, montage and assemblage. These manipulations are not limited to two dimensions….Animated imagery has become increasingly versatile and complex as light, color, form and speed can be digitally manipulated down to the level of the pixel. The control of these elements presents compelling possibilities for the development of the kind of pictorial abstraction set in motion by painters in the twentieth century…While some artists employ solely digital tools, such as Flash or related animation programs others create hybrid forms that exploit the intersection of digital technology with analog film, video photography and installation. [7]

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[7] Lawrence Rinder, Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz, *Art in the Digital Age*, BitStreams exhibition website, http://www.whitney.org/bitstreams/#, 2001.

Within the modernist canon, the social function of an artwork and its reception by its intended audience is of small importance. And within this modernist discourse, works are often read hermetically. Perhaps this bias explains why Lynn Hershman, whose work developed first in the context of Conceptual art, is politically motivated, concerned with the feminist politics of identity and who is also credited with creating the first interactive digital artwork followed by a series of digital (robotic) personae, may have been excluded from *BitStreams*. Also not seen in *BitStreams* were works that might be considered literary, cinematic, or concerned with the representation of a Subject, such as all of those represented in *Can We Fall in Love With a Machine?*
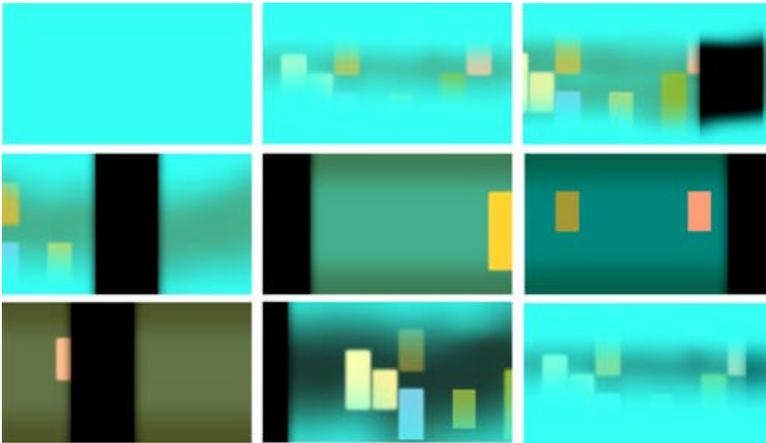
Exhibited in *Bitstreams*: Jeremy Blake, *Station to Station*, 2000-2001, Five digitally animated DVDs with Sound, Courtesy Feigen Contemporary, NY, Sound Production, Neil Landstrumm of Scandinavian Records
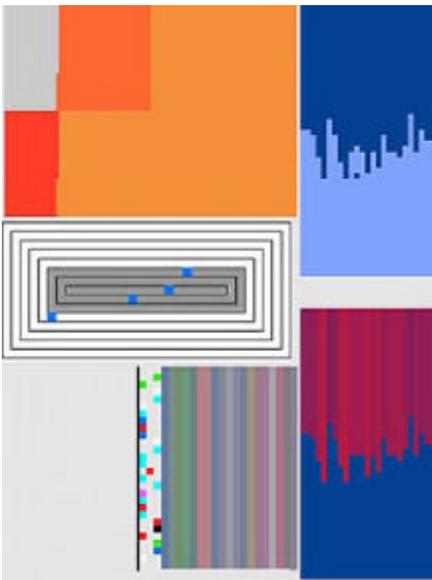
Exhibited in *Bitstreams*: John Simon Jr., *Color Panel, v. 1.5, CPU 1.5,* 1999-2000, Software, Apple Powerbook G3, Pioneer gas plasma screen, 28 ½ x 48"

A modernist formalist position was expressed by the primarily abstract and formalist work seen in *BitStreams.* This theoretical position however is also not an appropriate one from which to think about the creation of a virtual (or any) Subject, the subject of psychological, social and literary discourse. The relationship between *BitStreams* and *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?* therefore can be thought of as another version of the already familiar dialectic between formalist modernism and a politically motivated social realism:

> (The) fiction of the twentieth century aimed to challenge assumptions about the content of literary representation and its confidence in reproducing the "real." The twentieth-century novel experienced three major movements: the high modernism of the 1920s; the return to social realism and documentary projects as a reaction to modernism in the 1930s; and the postmodern movement, which can only be adequately expressed as *postmodernisms*, since the movement emphasizes the fictional claims of various realisms, including regional, gay, postcolonial, urban, etc. All trends in fiction, whatever the reactionary aims of a movement, continue to demonstrate the legacy of modernism with its self-consciousness about language, form, and meaning.[8]

In relation to social realism, most virtual reality games such as *Bloodrayne* and *Lara Croft* can even be thought of as Soviet-style versions of it. Even more literal illustrations are those games*,* produced by or in collaboration with the American military. *America's Army* is one, even self-consciously released on the Fourth of July in 2002 by the US military for public consumption. A battle simulator, requiring participants to complete various stages of training before engagement, the game was distributed free on the Internet and was intended as a seduction to army recruitment. Within months, it averaged 1.2 million hits per second, vastly exceeding expectations and requiring the army to add supplementary servers to meet excessive demands. *Americas Army* is only one example of the popular virtual-reality, "first-person-shooter" type of game. Others, such as *Full Spectrum Warrior*, a joint venture developed by Microsoft for its X-box gaming system this time in collaboration with the military, has lead new media theorist Alexander Galloway to call shooter games "thinly-veiled propaganda"[9] and to develop a theory of interactive simulation-gaming as social realism, not just in political agenda but also in its social construction of the "real."

Galloway's categorical theory of shooter games is supported by the actual history of virtual reality technology. As indicated by the above examples, gaming is but one high-tech product of an evolving relationship between the American military and the entertainment industry. From its inception thirty years ago, 3D graphics and virtual reality technology developed from early flight simulators used for

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[8] *The Twentieth Century: Topics,* The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Norton Topics Online, http://www.wwnorton.com/nael/20century/review/summary.htm, 2003 – 2005, W.W. Norton and Company
[9] Alexander R. Galloway, *Social Realism in Gaming*, Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research, Volume 4, Issue 1, November, 2004.

strategic, and more significantly, psychologically engaging enactments, for the purposes of military training. The culture of computer gaming in fact evolved from military culture, with early commercial game developers often receiving their first training in the military to later become significant entrepreneurs of businesses that both sell and develop new technologies. Following the end of the Cold War, during a period in the late nineties, government policy shifted to reorient research spending to serve not only national defense but to cull from and therefore stimulate the development occurring in the commercial sector. At that time, the video game industry exploded, and the military lost some of its domination. Commercial games went on to pioneer the "first-person shooter" style of action because players viewed the action from an individual combatant's perspective, necessarily enforcing a subjective, and therefore emotional narrative easily accessible to a wide audience. As a result of this historical trajectory, a contemporary "military-entertainment complex" [10] has evolved, gaming culture being but one byproduct of a symbiotic relationship that cultivates not just technology but also social ideology.

In the context of such gaming, I conceived of *Sleeping Beauty* as an antidote to the Soviet-style government propaganda that much contemporary computer games are an expression of. She was to be sensual in the face of a regressive and pornographic construction of the feminine I perceived as characterizing most shooter games. It was also important to me, therefore, that she be accessed viscerally and directly as mass culture. She was, to me, a kind of social realism in the Brechtian sense, espousing a critical agenda. I conceived of *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?* in the same light. I hope that the work in it functions similarly. The artists who make art that might answer this question produce work that is emotionally accessible and physically direct - what I consider to be aspects of a social realist tradition.

To create closure then, and to coordinate with the title I've given to this paper, returning back to a theory which for this author emerged from a theory inspired, emotional artistic practice, I would like to conclude with a brief summing up of the papers written by those invited to respond to *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine?* on the College Art Association panel. I invited Andrea Ackerman, a psychiatrist, artist and critic to write a catalog essay about all of the proceedings along with eight other experts: Michael Century, new media critic and music historian; Dr. Beth Coleman, artist and theorist; Lynn Hershmann Leeson, artist, filmmaker and theorist; Ellen Levy, artist, theorist and president of the CAA; Dr. Judith Rodenbeck, art historian; Dr. James H. Rubin, art historian; Dr. Sherry Turkle, psychologist, sociologist and director, MIT Initiative on Technology and Self, Program in Science, Technology and Society; Dr. Mari Velonaki, artist and

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[10] Tim Lenoir, chair of the department of the philosophy of science at Stanford has written extensively on the relation between the military and computer gaming, most specifically in *All but War is Simulation: The Military Entertainment Complex*, Configurations: A Journal of Literature, Science and Technology, 8.3, Fall, 2000, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/configurations/toc/con8.3.html

researcher at the Australian Center For Field Robotics. The panel papers primarily refer to texts and bodies of research outside of the traditional canons of art - or even of literature (in any of its versions) for that matter. Most reflect on biological, behavioral, social and psychological models of life or of mind and many are also politically charged. And to me, at least, that is the heart of the matter.