

Faith Holland

TECHNOPHILIA

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Essays by
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TRANSFER

IT CAME FROM HOLLAND

Seth Watter

Everyone knows that psychoanalysis is all about sex—but is it, really? Concrete analysis of the sexual act, as a physical encounter between two or more bodies, is quite rare in the Freudian canon. The most explicit example of which I know is Ferenczi's *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, published in 1924. The book's thesis is a crude one, and can be summarized crudely: sex, ie. coitus, ie. penis-in-vagina, is a consolation prize to the male for the trauma of his birth. Gone are the balmy days in which he still enjoyed that full, pleasant, vegetative existence in the moist comfort of mummy's uterus. Naturally, he would like to go back whence he came; and the entire unconscious life is dedicated to the fulfillment of this impossible wish. The regressive impulse is first manifest in the development of teeth, "implements with the help of which the child would like to bore its way into its mother's womb"; and the penis, in this light, is really only a stand-in for that "more primitive boring element, the tooth." Adult love becomes "genital warfare," in which one army strives to recapture native land, and meets much resistance: "The first attempts at coitus are so to speak only acts of rape in which even blood must flow." More revealing than the scenario's violence, however, is its quality of pastness. A human encounter, occurring in the present, is here devalued into something whose significance is rooted wholly in the past, in primordial catastrophe. And because one can never truly go home again, supreme value is thus placed on a man's ejaculate, which "possesses the prerogative, as representative of the ego and its narcissistic double, the genital, of attaining *in reality* to the womb of the mother." Every real contact is unrealized by fantasy; each pelvic thrust sinks deeper into the past. So deep, in fact, that one reaches prehistoric times: for by entering the womb, the anxious spermatozoon also enters the sea, and so regains the pleasure of an aquatic existence which it had not enjoyed since evolving, millions of years ago,

from a fish to a mammal. In *Thalassa*—a book that even Freud called "fanciful"—sex is increasingly freighted with onto- and phylogenetic baggage until it is no longer sex, but a mental gymnastics, the squirting of one symbol into another. And if the payoff of lovemaking is only, in truth, the bare fact of intromission, why go through with the whole sweaty business at all? As a man of medicine, surely Ferenczi was expert enough with a syringe to place his seed, his spiritual delegate, wherever he so chose. He would at least have spared his wife a lot of bad sex.

Unlike psychoanalysis, which is, more often than not, oriented toward the past, phenomenology has the virtue of giving the present its due. One cannot deny the weight of the past, or its consequences for the present; but one can also value the present for its own sake, as it presents itself to experience. It is not surprising, then, that phenomenology should speak of sex in these terms. Sex "is dependent upon the other, and even commits itself to the other; it does not look ahead, but engages itself in this one and only, suspended moment; it is not aggressive, but *tender*, oriented toward the experience of bodily contact in which the love-desire of both partners manifests itself, and thus toward a dual incarnation... Then orgasm is not a private affair, but a communion, an ecstatic transcendence of one's own limits, an experience of the *other* in one's *own* body" (Linschoten, "Aspects of the Sexual Incarnation"). Even before the moment of contact—the pressing of body against body that turns these bodies into "our bodies"—the fact of arousal is already an attunement to the presence of the other, the awakening of the other's body in the depths of one's own. Every step of the way, a sexual encounter is something that takes place here, now, in a present that is shared. Idle talk, smiles, and other flirtations are the means by which quotidian space first becomes love space. Kissing on the mouth is "one activity by two persons," an egalitarian activity in which each party reveals "a warm inner self" (*ibid*). To kiss and caress are to awaken hidden dimensions of the other that could only emerge under the pressure of this mouth and this hand. One

gives by receiving and receives by giving, until one no longer knows where a sensation begins or ends. Sex is perhaps as close as we come to the mystical *nunc stans*, the “abiding now.” Not only has the past dropped out of the picture; even the future, as a realm of goal-oriented activity, seems to have vanished. Ideally speaking, of course.

But at the end of the day, both psychoanalysis and phenomenology are products of the late nineteenth century, when the automobile was still in its infancy; when our sense of reality was relatively simple; when “male” and “female” were unquestioned categories, and “men” and “women” moved in different “worlds.” While the former can track the peregrinations of the libido, and the latter describes just what it means for a body to be body, these theories are but poor when we ask them to account for desire in an age of screens, an age that heightens our sense of temporal simultaneity while increasing our sense of spatial disparity. Prior to the creation of “teledildonics,” in which one might enjoy “a virtual sexual experience wearing a bodysuit lined with tiny vibrators connected to visual displays and auditory hookups,” where “any number of people separated by thousands of miles could watch computerized visual representations of each others’ bodies in sexual embraces while they communicate via modem, all the while feeling tactile stimulation on their bodies” (Springer, *Electronic Eros*; I note that these passages are underlined in Faith Holland’s copy of the book)—unless this fantasy becomes a reality, sex in the land of intelligent machines will be largely a matter of stroking and clicking, and not, sad to say, of sucking and fucking. Small wonder, then, if the computer were itself to become an object of pleasurable interest. At least it is here, in the present; it can be touched; and it is often reasonably attractive.

We have no theory adequate for any of this. Critical language always lags behind its time. Which is why it is the province of speculative fiction and speculative artmaking to figure the contemporary, or even to prophesy new modes of existence. Having our options laid out before us, in all their charm and eccentricity, we can ask if they are options we would like to pursue—or if they are something we would like to become.



#digital feels

Nora O' Murchú

There is a tendency to devalue the digital. To consider it separate to our #irl lives. To treat it as immaterial, cold, algorithmic and foreign—devoid of human touch, emotion and sensibilities. But yet, we fill our day to day with sharing, creating and connecting through online platforms, on computers, tablets, and mobile devices that allow us to communicate and connect in spite of geography and time. These actions, part of our daily routines, connect us to others who reside beyond our physical bodily reach. Hardware to hardware. Interface to interface. Our dematerialized thoughts and desires materialized on our screens.

We live in a curious time of flux, where we can no longer state that our interactions online do not connect to the economic, social structures and cultural production of our “real physical world.” The internet is not, nor ever was, a free anonymous space disconnected from our bodies and environment. Screens, a ubiquitous presence in the contemporary condition that makes up our day-to-day, form part of the experiences of our relationships and desires, conditioning our human experiences and perceptions [1]. It is within these

spaces that we maintain, update and adjust our relationships, their logistics and our emotional intimacies.

Where we continuously become and perform ourselves, our genders and

identities, we reconfigure ourselves through technologies and with one another. If

the interface is now ubiquitous and pervasive, so too are the liminal conditions [2] that open up new territories for exploration, participation and exploitation. Our digital landscape is cluttered with bodies of all kinds, both predictable and unimaginable: glossy bodies we look at obsessively; photoshopped images that perpetuate excessive or unrealistic standards, and videos that claim the fantastical. All of which is accessible at any time we desire by means of a networked connection through sites in which the agency of representing that which is unrepresentable is becoming a contemporary norm.

Today, filters and photoshop constitute integral parts of image-making, while social platforms and comments shape our

understanding of them. In a new world that is constantly renewed by the click of a key or the swipe of a finger in real time, how do we make sense of interfaces, media and the political and social infrastructures they are embedded in? In August 2013 in Ireland, an image of a 17 year old girl giving oral sex in public was taken at a concert at Slane Castle. Instantly she was branded slut and the image—along with links to her Twitter and Instagram—went viral. And the boy? A hero. A legend. Technology is often spoken of as democratic, but does it really liberate us from our understanding of gender in society or does it just reinforce the divisions that we currently live with? What does it mean to offer criticism of our present situation? How do we provoke critical awareness and agency through sexuality, body and technology? Do we still need to speak about bodies, or should we also critique and address the political and social infrastructures that we live in and the increasing ubiquity and pervasiveness of the interface that we live with?

In “A Cyborg Manifesto”, Haraway attempts to create “an ironic political myth” combining postmodernism with socialist feminism. Central to this myth is the image of the cyborg, “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.” For Haraway, the cyborg is both a metaphor for the political play of identity as well as the lived experience of technology. She states “I am making an argument for the cyborg as a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings” [3]. The use of irony in the myth of the cyborg, though, cannot be ignored nor overlooked. For Haraway it implies a sense of agency in the world around us: “Acknowledging the agency of the world in knowledge makes room for some unsettling possibilities, including a sense of the world’s independent sense of humor. [It] makes room for surprises and ironies at the heart of all knowledge production” [3]. Haraway’s cyborg stands for shifting political and physical boundaries, which in its interactions with us and the world around us often speculate and confront us with unfamiliar narratives. Haraway imagines new, situated subjectivities that are mediated by technology. By challenging the established norms of society, she argues that the cyborg becomes a tool of empowerment that “confronts the basic modernistic and oppressive socio-cultural dualistic

assumptions” of our times.

But what does it mean to speak about the cyborg as situated subjectivity today? What are the new practices and interventions that artists imagine as agency and critiques of power structures? How do we engage in a reflection between technology, pleasure, sexuality, and politics? It is within these contexts that Holland operates, reflecting on society, aiming to dismantle power structures by creating unexpected interventions, often based on the deconstruction of the image and technology, and by using playfulness and provocation as tactics. Holland questions how the organization of our lives through screens and interfaces affects individuals, their bodies, their social interactions and sexual relationships. She intentionally disrupts the expected flow of continuous imagery and attempts to speculate on the subjectivity of the interface—the site where human meets machine and flesh meets metal. In rendering this familiar site strange, she reimagines the screen to not only raise questions about the replacement of the real flesh-and-blood human lover with a machine or other kind of artefact but also the mechanization of the process of love, and the values that underlie such ideas and developments. In her work she meditates—intensively and extensively—on the methods by which we might access this speculation, and by doing so she offers us a number of provocations. Firstly, she queries the augmentation and entanglement of devices and interfaces with our human relationships. Secondly, she directly questions the representations of gender online and elsewhere. Finally she offers a speculative examination of our relationship to technology that returns the conversation to being about our bodies and identities. Her work here in Technophilia makes us pause and rethink what such boundaries and connections can produce, while simultaneously interrogating the long-standing presumptions and the links between the self, the body and technology.

1. Galloway, Alexander R. The interface effect. Polity, 2012.
2. Lyotard, Jean François. (1984). The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
3. Haraway, Donna J. (1990). Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. New York: Routledge.

<http://www.faithholland.com>
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