

# Pornography, erotica, cyberspace and the work of two female artists

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This article examines pornography and erotica as categories of representation, in which cultural and societal constructions and constrictions define the female body as passive and 'other' in relation to the male body. It briefly examines traditional forms of pornography, then contrasts these with the practice of certain contemporary female artists, who use pornography and cyberpornography to subvert these constrictions and to suggest more liberating representations of the female gender and sexuality. It argues that cyberspace and virtual reality, in enabling the construction of dematerialised bodies, might offer a means for female artists to liberate their bodies from cultural stereotypes in their production of erotic art.

**Key words:** pornography, the erotic, cyberpornography, virtual body, gender, sexuality, female artists

Hierdie artikel ondersoek pornografie en die erotiek binne 'n kategorie van representasie wat kulturele en sosiale konstruksies en konstriksies van die vroue liggaam definieer as die 'ander' of passief teenoor die manlike liggaam. Kortliks ondersoek die artikel tradisionele vorme van pornografie en kontrasteer dit dan met die werk van sekere vroue kunstenaars wat pornografie en 'cyber'-pornografie gebruik om hierdie beperkinge te bevraagteken teen doel om 'n meer vrystellende representasie van vroulike seksualiteit en geslag te suggereer. Dit ondersoek die moontlikhede wat die virtuele vroue liggaam aan erotise vroue kunstenaars gee om hulle liggame vry te stel van die bestaande kulturele stereotipes.

**Sleutelwoorde:** pornografie, die erotisek, 'cyber'-pornografie, virtuele liggaam, geslag, seksualiteit, vroue kunstenaars

Certain discourses, for example, feminism and aspects of post-humanism, argue that the human body, in terms of its gender and sexuality, are a result of society's hierarchical and cultural constructions and constrictions. The body is thus a carrier of meanings and a signifier of gender and sexual identity. The female body, in particular, is often a submissive body and its gender and sexuality are secondary to those of the male; it is the 'other' to the male body.<sup>1</sup> Foucault (1978:89) shows how the body is regulated by mechanisms of power which reinforce stereotypes and processes of normalisation and control. These processes stipulate the paradigms of the body. This is the central assumption of this article.

One such 'bodily' paradigm is pornography.<sup>2</sup> This has traditionally been the preserve of male dominance, and the female body exists therein in compliance with notions of masculine dominance. However, with the explosion of information and communication technologies in contemporary western society, together with a great change in attitudes to what individuals in this society can think, say and do, there is a potentially new approach to pornography and to pornography in cyberspace, or what we shall term 'cyberpornography', which is used by selected female artists as a means of undermining or challenging the constrictions to the female body, in acts that can thus be seen as moving from the pornographic towards the erotic, and in this process liberating the female body. This article aims to define and examine pornography, erotica and cyberpornography and analyse works by selected female artists to support this argument.

## The female body and pornography

According to Williams (1999:145), the original source of gendered difference lies in obvious male and female sexual differences. Although sex is a biological and natural category, the gender system around which it is centred is entirely social and confines individuals to perform gender roles and sexualities corresponding with cultural expectations. Butler (1997:402) defines *gender* as an identity instituted through the stylisation of the body and the stylised repetition of acts.

So, through routine bodily gestures, movements and enactments, an illusion is created of an abiding, gendered self. This points to "...a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief". As a result, the body exists as a set of possibilities that signify its appearance, not in the way of an interior essence, but in the taking up - and reproduction of - a specific set of historical and social possibilities (Butler 1997:403). For the female, this would compel her to induce her body to become the cultural sign of 'woman' (Butler, 1997:405).

But woman, as the 'other' to the male norm, assumes the sign of difference. According to Irigaray (1985:13), men construct the discourse about women: "The enigma that *is* woman will therefore constitute the *target*, the *object*, the *stake*, of a masculine discourse, of a debate among men, which would not consult her, would not concern her". Her body is appropriated thus in art, fashion, popular culture and pornography. Pornography is defined as "dealing with the obscene; ... expressing or suggesting unchaste or lustful ideas, impure, indecent" (*The Oxford English dictionary*, 1978: vol 7, 26, 1131). This is related to the 'erotic', which can be defined as "of or pertaining to the passion of love; amatory; ... pertaining to sexual love". Both pornography and erotica can be seen as performative, but in different ways, for example, pornography would generally imply the sexual, patriarchal subordination of women, whereas erotica might be said to suggest more equal power relations between the participants. However, Berger's statement could apply to both categories: "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger, 1977:47). This applies not only to traditional western painting, as Berger intended, but arguably to pornography and erotica. "You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure" (Berger, 1977:51). When investigating pornography and erotica, it is evident that these genres conform to the performance of gender roles as established by such cultural ideals (Kipnis, 1999:viii). Images of women are thus generally created and fashioned according to masculine stereotypical fantasies.

Throughout history, pornography generally captures the male sexual fantasies that are stereotypically consistent with the gender roles that the target audience of a specific era wishes to look at. Irigaray (1985:28), with reference to Freud, refers to his insistence that "sexual pleasure known as masculine is the paradigm of all sexual pleasure, to which all representations of pleasure can but defer in reference, support, and submission." This is reflected in pornographic representations of the female body. A brief analysis of the different eras in Western film pornography follows with the purpose of indicating how pornography mirrors the cultural construction of gendered bodies which demonstrate gendered difference. According to Koch (1993:27),

...in the course of time, settings, stereotypes and characters change even in pornographic cinema to conform to newer fashions, especially about what is considered sexy. Early pornography, for example, attempted to please well-to-do clientele by presenting erotic scenes involving servant girls and masters...

The earliest form of film pornography is the *stag* film: a silent, one-reel film which was illegally produced and exhibited in brothels for male audiences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Williams, 1999:58). Titles include *A free ride* (1915), *The casting couch* (1924) and *Wonders of the unseen world* (1927). The stag film is predominantly addressed to men, and the male performers in the films act as 'surrogates' for the male viewers (Williams, 1999:59). An atmosphere of male bonding dominates the room where the film is exhibited while viewers scrutinise the difference of the female body. According to Williams (1999:81), "...the viewer proves his masculinity either by bonding with the other male spectators in the scrutiny of female difference or by penetrating the female 'wonders' vicariously." The stag film investigates the

female body with brief attempts at voyeuristic narratives which apply close-up shots of bodies in sexual acts. Stag films present authentic male fantasies which often involve powerful men and vulnerable women. The stag film occupies itself with the investigation of woman without concern for *her* pleasure (Williams 1999:92). The era of the stag film reflects a misogynist tradition in which the point of view and identification in pornographic film is aligned with the male spectator's fantasies and centred on exaggerated images of female bodily and gendered difference.

The nineteen fifties and sixties are characterised by the *exploitation* film, a cheaply and quickly produced film which features full-length narratives exhibited in legitimate, although not respectable, theatres (Williams 1999:96). *The immoral Mr. Teas* (1959) and *I am curious – yellow* (1968) are examples of exploitation films. The exploitation film still allows for the objectification of the female body - it mainly addressed a male audience. The fully developed narrative excludes the direct address to the camera, as with the stag film, but produces an improved ability to see more of the female body with a documentary-like quality that investigates her bodily and gendered difference.

Since the late 1960s, pornography has become part of the contemporary scene and by the 1970s pornography was commonly exhibited in public theatres (Williams 1999:296). With more women becoming part of the audience, pornography's narratives were revised. Pornography of the 1970s presents a diversity of sexual acts to attract a heterogeneous audience. Film titles include *Beach blanket bango* (1975), *Flesh Gordon* (1978) and *Dracula sucks* (1979). Pornography of the period obsessively attempts phallic visual representations of sexual pleasure and primarily focuses on the externally ejaculating penis, that "master signifier" (Irigaray 1985:50). Pornography of this era tries to include every aspect of sexual pleasure under the male sign of the phallus and both male and female characters perform towards this goal. The male phallus assumes the primary position and this era establishes the female body as a submissive body which conforms to the phallic perspective about gendered difference.

By the early 1980s, pornography became more available to the public when the videocassette was introduced and it gained popularity with more general audiences (Williams 1999:120-121). Examples of eighties' pornography include *Insatiable* (Godfrey Daniels, 1980), *Talk dirty to me* (Anthony Spinelli, 1980) and *Loose ends* (Bruce Seven, 1984). Where pornography of the seventies ascribes male *and* female pleasure to the visible phallus, the eighties represents female pleasure with sound. Female orgasms are dubbed-over with dramatic sounds of pleasure which feature in the absence of more visible verifications. Eighties' pornography brings the problem of gendered difference to the fore, especially the problem of visibly representing female pleasure, but is still unable to escape masculine assumptions about the female body. In all the forms of pornography mentioned above, one sees the "Phallus's mastery of the sexual economy" (Irigaray 1985:72).

By the 1990s, pornographic computer games became available on CR-ROM, allowing the viewer to view and interact with sexual objects or to achieve interaction with sexually performing bodies. *Virtual vixens* (Pixus Interactive, 1994) is an example of such a pornographic computer game. The game narrates a male character's undertaking to sexually satisfy as many virtual women as possible, but it still conforms to masculine ideas of how this is achieved. It is designed for a male subject to play with a virtual female object, although anyone can play. This means that if a woman should choose to play this game, the phallus would again simulate her pleasure. Many of these interactive computer games are designed for male consumers and depict stereotyped masculine fantasies of women which uphold male speculations about female gendered difference.

So, the female body in pornography has throughout history been constructed almost exclusively according to masculine fantasies and stereotypical standards to portray gendered difference. The female body in pornography conforms to the performance of the correct gender roles and significantly represents culture's ability to construct and regulate gendered bodies and gendered difference. But since the eighties, different varieties of pornography have become available, such as sadomasochistic, fetish, lesbian, transvestite, transgender and fat women pornography. As the 'deviant' to the general male heterosexual norm, these sub-genres of pornography speak in different voices about gendered difference.

Beginning in the 1970s, more women participated in the pornographic scene as readers, viewers and active participants in the pornographic conversation (Williams 1999:230). Thus, women became potentially enabled in spite of the fact, according to Freud, that it is difficult, if not impossible, for the little girl, mother or woman to find symbols for female sexuality, for this state of "nothing to be seen" (Freud in Irigaray 1985:49). According to Williams, women pornographers' main focus should be to transform themselves from sexual objects into sexual subjects and to actively speak their unique sexual pleasure. Since the early seventies and in the era of growing feminism, certain areas of pornography correspond with the feminist challenge to male power and focus on destabilising the privileged viewpoint of the phallus (Williams 1999:268). Modern pornography's proliferation among the discourses on sexuality expands the discourse of sex since it includes female observers and theorists with their own speculations about sexuality and sexual pleasure (Williams 1999:275). The different discourses on pornography and the difference between these discourses increase the diversity of dialogue within the various discourses on sexuality. The speaking of sex becomes more diverse and allows women to have a voice. Within modern pornography, women's sexuality is addressed as different from men's, and as active subject rather than passive object. It provides women with the opportunity to cultivate and explore specifically female sexual identities to produce new interpretations of power and pleasure. Contemporary, and often avant-garde, artists have begun to explore this area of representation.

An example of the above is the work of Annie Sprinkle, who commenced her career as a masseuse and soon became a prostitute. She subsequently became a performer on live sex shows, a writer for sex magazines and a performer in pornographic films, after which she entered the venues of avant-garde performance spaces as a performance artist. The basis for Sprinkle's performance art is organised around gendered and sexed bodies. Sprinkle's art and thought occurs through her body and throughout her various sexual performance pieces (figure 1) Sprinkle blurs the boundaries between art and pornography (Williams 1997:361). Because speaking about sexual pleasure and sexuality are becoming more important in contemporary culture, the line between obscenity and acceptability is no longer clear, thus one might say that the line between pornography and erotica is blurred. Explicit sexual representations in contemporary culture are moving "...from a place off/scene (ob/scene) to a new prominence on/scene" (Williams 1992:234). On/scenity<sup>4</sup> signifies the controversy and scandal of sexual representations and the fact that they have become available to the public at large. The proliferation of explicitly sexual representations is defying mainstream representations presented as the norm. Pornography breaks through all public/private barriers to present the hidden as the explicit. According to Williams (1999:283), the new explicitness of on/scenity is the new honesty and truth about sexual matters. Sex can no longer claim to be a private matter because the mechanisms of power and knowledge intensify the pattern of confessions about the explicit details of sexual life. Speaking about sex is becoming an everyday familiarity and, accordingly, so is the compulsion to confess and speak sexual truths, even in the art sphere.



Sprinkle's performance persona includes the sex educator, sex therapist, sexual fairy godmother and sex goddess (Williams 1997:375). Sprinkle deems herself as a *legitimate* sex educator since she possesses the knowledge of the truth of sexual desire and pleasure obtained through her career as a sex worker. While still a pornographer, Sprinkle wrote and directed the film *Deep inside Annie Sprinkle* (1981), which focuses on the showing and telling of sexual secrets of women's pleasure. The film is produced in an educative way and recounts the discourse of a prostitute. The protagonist, Annie, played by Sprinkle herself, addresses the viewer of the film directly and brings elements into the narrative that disrupt the active male/passive female notion of conventional pornography (Williams 1997: 369). Sprinkle takes on the role of active female, demonstrating her distinct sexuality and sexual pleasure. She provides an original testimony of female sexual pleasure by displaying an array of sexual performances which challenge the customs of who gives pleasure to whom and how.



Figure 1  
Annie Sprinkle, *A public cervix announcement*, Performance (Sprinkle, S.a.).

During the 1980s, Sprinkle performed her one-woman show *Post-porn modernist* around the world. In one part of the performance, *A public cervix announcement*, she invited the audience to shine a flashlight at her cervix through a speculum. This performance exposes Western culture's obsession with looking at the female organ and seeing its difference with maximum visibility. It also emphasises pornography's quest to find the truth about women's sexual pleasure. By showing herself in a pornographic way Sprinkle allows for the exploration of gendered and sexual difference. When Sprinkle invites the audience to look at her cervix, she encourages them to try to find a visual equivalent to the male sign of sexual pleasure, confirming that such visible evidence does not exist. Pornography as a metaphor in art allows women to explore their sexual identity according to feminine interpretations and consequently provides a platform for women to question masculine sexual norms.

### Cyberspace and cyberpornography

'Cyberspace' is a term popularised by a 1984 science fiction novel, *Neuromancer*, written by William Gibson. It generally refers to a space considered to exist within computers or

computing networks and is imagined to exist in parallel to the real world. Giannachi (2004:4) defines cyberspace as an information and communication space that is made accessible through the global interconnection of computers and computer memories. So, cyberspace refers to countless billions of bits stored at the nodes of a worldwide computer network, which establish an immeasurable, complex structure of sites, addresses, linkages and virtual environments (Mitchell, 1999: 127). The term cyberspace represents a public, non-physical space which emerges at multiple locations at once and allows for interaction and/or communication between a number of people at any geographical site. Cyberspace is a space which is brought about by its users and their interactivity and does not require physical or bodily co-presence. Examples of cyberspace which appear in popular culture include the television show *Digimon* and the films *The Matrix* and *Tron*.

Modern culture's information and computer technologies manipulate the body's relationship to the electronic space and influence aspects of human embodiment corresponding to the technological environment. How the human-technology relationship is described exposes political, philosophical and psychological assumptions about the physicality of the human body. Through the development of information and computer technologies, the apparent disappearance of materiality becomes a feature of everyday life, for example money as informational patterns on a computer, informational genetic patterns which determine parenthood, DNA linking criminals to crime scenes, automated factories controlled by programmes and production schedules as the flow of information (Hayles, 1996: 260). In this technological age it is logical that the human body will follow suit and seem to disappear. Subsequent to the disappearance of the physical body, the cyber-body evolves. The cyber-body is a body which, through information and computer technologies, exists solely in cyberspace. The cyber-body becomes a medium for discussion about how information and computer technologies can change the perception of the human body. It is the contention of many post-human theorists that the experience of cyberspace, along with other advanced technologies, is actually changing the human both psychologically and in his or her experience of the body.<sup>3</sup>

According to Hayles (1999: 4), the cybernetic elimination of physicality leads to the emergence of the posthuman. Posthuman theory embraces the possibilities of information and computer technologies and encourages the union of human with intelligent machine. In general, posthuman theory envisions the alteration of humans as they interact more closely with intelligent machines (Hayles 1999: 283). Posthumanism does not mean that humans as a species have died out, but that humans as a concept are being replaced by an evolutionary heir (Hayles 1995: 321). In contemporary culture, posthumanism offers the potential means to think in a more sophisticated way about the technologies which facilitate the enhancement of human survival. The human body's limitations have been increasingly put into question since the development of information and computer technologies in the post-world war II era. Posthumanism presents an approach towards dealing with the limitations of the human body and offers the possibility to move beyond the body's limits by means of technology. But, according to Cavallaro (2000: 83), current technology cannot erase the body's materiality, but problematises it by underscoring its involvement with information-, computer- and biotechnologies, which generate simulated bodies, synthetic organisms and personality constructs.

Cyberspace attracts many art practitioners since it not only provides a space for freedom of speech, but it is also a space which is accessible to many viewers. Cyberspace permits artists to construct new agendas which eliminate the boundaries of traditional art such as painting and sculpture. The earliest cyber-artists include Eduardo Kac, Douglas Davis, Jeffery Shaw, Masaki Fujihata and Robin Oppenheimer, to name only a few. In contemporary culture, there are many art practices which take place on and through the Net and which explore the human-

computer interface. For example, *jodi.org* is a collective of two artists, Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans, who create artworks on the Internet. *jodi.org*'s works seem inaccessible and impenetrable, appearing to make the user's computer run amok. For example, their 1995 work <http://wwwwwwwwwwww.jodi.org/> appears as a chaotic mix of HTML source characters across the computer screen. When the user clicks on the characters, he/she is taken to a link containing more chaotic, meaningless text. Their art incorporates the user's actions to produce chaos in cyberspace. This particular artwork signifies the manifestation of an endless web of information which comprises cyberspace. It highlights that it is only through the user's participation that the hypertextual space as an element of cyberspace manifests.

When the human body is in a relation to this virtual or hypertextual space, the feeling many users of the technology have is that a reconfiguration of the body as a hypertextual body is possible. The hypertextual body then transcends the limits of its existence and underlines the new emerging interface between the body and technology and becomes part of the discourse about the body. The hypertextual space provides for the transformation of the reality and materiality of the body. New debates about representations of the body are provoked. The possibility is present for people to reconceptualise the human body and its representations in terms of the hypertextual body, eliminating normative ideals as constructed through societal inscriptions. Through this process of reconceptualisation and reconfiguration, the body seems to transcend its own limits of a fixed identity. Haraway (1991: 166) shows how this insight is a fresh source of powerful arguments which can be used to destabilise cultural constructions, as these virtual environments change the way people think about gender, sexuality and identity.

The pornographic female body is culturally significant because it conforms to the prescribed image of femininity which culture imposes on it. But, in cyberspace, there is a means to transcend the material body which corresponds to cultural objectives. According to Reid (1998: 35), the information of the material body is changed when it is assimilated into cyberspace and this subsequently dissolves the socio-cultural context of traditional representations of the body. Where the material body represents social issues of gender, sexuality, class and race, cyberspace exists as a means to transcend one's body and leave behind the 'flesh' imprinted by the defining characteristics of social existence. According to Balsamo (1996: 127-131), the cyber-body is not imprinted by the dominant narratives of Western culture and it does not embody traditional patriarchal ideals. It rather offers a vision of a body-free universe with the possibility of transcending the physical body and its social meanings. Cyberspace presents the possibility for the pornographic body to transcend its material issues and appear to offer the freedom to transform its cultural and social connotations.

According to Hayles (1996: 268), physical forms recover a faultless purity by being reconstructed as informational patterns in a multidimensional computer space. The cyber-body is free from cultural disciplinary and normalising processes which determine the inscriptions onto its surface. Hence, the cyber-body is not imprinted by cultural characteristics. The body in cyberspace comes to exist as a new central theme for the emancipation of the body from its cultural limitations and allows for new experiences and expressions of embodiment and body-based identities.

For the female body in cyberpornography, this would suggest the possibility to transcend all cultural and social connotations of gendered and sexual difference and identity as determined by masculine ideals. As an ambiguous body determined by computer codes, the cyberpornographic body cannot be categorised according to masculine objectives since such notions are insignificant in cyberspace. The female cyberpornographic body transcends the physical feminine body inscribed with gendered and sexual difference and assumes control over female gender identity and sexuality. It is also significant that the female cyberpornographic



body can transform traditional notions of gender and sexuality into an ambiguous display of computer codes. The restructuring of the pornographic body into cyberspace allows women to use a new procedure for telling the feminine truth about gender, sexual identity and sexual pleasure. The cyberpornographic body surpasses the pornographic body's physical limitations and connotations and is better able to liberate the female pornographic body from its cultural confines.

An example of such a cyberpornographic work is Juliet Martin's artwork entitled *Hyperbody: could this be blood?* (figure 2).<sup>5</sup> This artwork by Martin is a hypertextual poetic narrative and loops around a series of images. The images and texts are interlinked with each other and take the form of a hypertextual narrative in cyberspace. The images are of naked parts of the female body enmeshed with elements of nature such as trees, leaves and the ocean. The text is written in a lyrical style and is a pastiche of poetic styles. The melodramatic and indulgent 'stream of consciousness' tone of the poem belongs to the genre of 'modern poetry'.<sup>6</sup> The artwork contains hyperlinks to other pages of the narrative. Martin uses the hypertextual narrative to construct a pornographic body in cyberspace which she addresses in the language of a lover.

Her own splitting of herself as artist and hypertextual body, a cyberpornographic body, are ironically juxtaposed to make fun of cultural constructions of gender and sexuality, to make female sexuality as explicit as possible in a highly nuanced way and to successfully thumb her nose at any man who might have abrogated the pornographic gaze to himself.

Martin opens her multi-levelled work with an ironic question addressed both to herself as a hybrid, a cyborg, and to her viewers as readers, *Hyperbody: could this be blood?* The contrast between the machine she is working with and her real body is underlined by the absurdity of a hyperbody having real, material blood as a manifestation of its 'bodiliness'. Throughout the work there is a continuous shift between the vocabulary of an embodied sexuality and the disembodied hyperbody or illusory body. An example of the words suggesting the real body are *blood, lungs, hair, footprint, thighs, legs, heart, eyes, tears, lips, sweat and tongue*. Phrases which are pornographic in their intent to provoke sexual desire, such as *luscious thighs, cunt, vaginal lips* and *vaginal caverns*, are emphasised by images of the female body. Martin does not depict the pornographic body directly, but rather applies pornographic metaphors and hyperspace, which nevertheless represent what she has created and made available for others.

Martin uses ideas related to the cyborg, the technological hybrid of human and machine, to compel her readers to move away from traditional thinking about the human body as a material entity. The cyborg fundamentally relies on underlying information pathways to connect organic to inorganic, the inorganic component, in this instance, represented by the hypertextual space and the organic component represented by the textual references to human characteristics, and these are synthesised in the imagination. This artwork is a reflection on the construction of a hybrid – what is it between the essence of the human and the computational technology that is comparable? Phrases such as *[o]h cyborg soul of mine, infallible legs* and *flawlessly failing heart* all reflect both characteristics of a machine and a human body. The imagery placed beside the text represents another combination of organic

and inorganic. But what is characteristic of Martin is her irony: her 'lingering' soul which needs blood to embody it, is nevertheless addressed in lover's language, as 'soul of mine'. The cyborg is expressly referred to in the title, *Hyperbody*, where *hyper-* refers to the computational component and *body* refers to the human component. The irony inherent in the opening question – how can a machine have blood like a human does - shows Martin's



strategy of distancing herself from text as a living construction assimilated within the computational element, cyberspace, and at the same time describing the act of masturbation for the voyeur's pleasure as if she were deeply engaged in it.



XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

blood

run

breath

lungs

tears

cry

blood

run

lips

lungs

tears

x

buds

teeth

Bring me to climax or I will give up. I bite into my apple's eye. I bite into your luscious lips. I bite until I taste the red that makes my elliptical eyes water. This lurid fluid fills me. This lurid fluid brings me closer to a convoluted yet creative climax. If I bite again will the red seep over my teeth and run over the vivacious veins of my gums. I want to feel the warmth in order to enjoy the pleasure. You must be a part of this. You must be blood. Please do your part.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

**Figure 2**

**Juliet Martin, 2001, *Hyperbody: could this be blood?* ( <http://www.julietmartin.com/hyperbody/>).**

The metaphor of the reader/viewer as the pornographic hunter moving through the images and texts in an increasing state of arousal is made bathetic by the artist. She sets up the work so that the hypertextual body seems to experience sexual pleasure when the reader/viewer moves through the text, and at the same time only an immaterial body can be imagined as doing so. Most significantly, the sense of pleasure can only be experienced by the consciousness of that pleasure – the very thing the computer generated body does not have, a consciousness or mind. Martin has set the audience up for a bit of satirical fun. She invites the reader/viewer to investigate different aspects of her sexual pleasure and to explore her sexuality by moving through the hyperlinks. With phrases such as *I am trying to be brought to my peak* and *I cannot moan if you stop me in my tracks*, the hypertextual body confesses how she is brought to experience orgasm by the reader/viewer moving along the narrative and expresses her sexual pleasure. The hypertextual body has become an object to be used and, like a text, rifled through for the pleasure of the reader. An illusory, hypertextual construction is perhaps speaking the truth about her sexual pleasure as a female hypertextual body. But the onus remains on the creator of the body to accomplish the construction of a fresh representation of female sexual

pleasure. Martin does this by gentle mockery, irony and by luring the expectant reader into her game. In this way the hypertextual body as a cyberpornographic body mocks dominant sexual identities dictated by Western culture and achieves sexual autonomy by taking control of her body, which consequently disrupts the active male/passive female dichotomy.

Martin's hypertextual body does not speak of her sexual pleasure according to masculine parameters as generally occurs in traditional film pornography, although in a sense by giving her artwork up to an active viewer/reader and submitting passively to those attentions, Martin still participates in the pornographic. However, by incorporating the female pornographic body into cyberspace, Martin moves beyond the genre of pornography's prescriptive parameters and power structures. She rather constructs an autonomous female sexual identity that is not dependant on the visible/invisible parameters of sexual pleasure determined by masculine standards. In this particular artwork, the perspective of the phallus is ignored and female sexuality and sexual pleasure are conceptualised outside the masculine determined parameters. *Hyperbody: could this be blood?* operates as the presentation of distinctive sexual truths about female sexuality and sexual pleasure. The hypertextual body as a cyberpornographic body destabilises the cultural control over the female body, her gender and sexuality.

Other examples of cyberpornography include *Bindigirl* by Prema Murthy,<sup>7</sup> which features a prostitute-like character or avatar, and *I.K.U* by Shu Lea Cheang,<sup>8</sup> which is a science fiction pornographic film. All the examples investigate the restructuring of gender and sexuality as information patterns in cyberspace which consequently allow the cultural implications of gender and sexuality to be transcended.

## Conclusion

This article does not attempt to determine whether a work can simultaneously be both pornography and art, or whether virtual experiences and dematerialised bodies can be liberating in any real sense. However, the artists discussed above, by re-imaging and re-imagining the female body, are by definition moving beyond pornography and can be seen as artists of the erotic.

The article argues that the female body, which is so often constricted and constrained by societal norms, can be liberated in a metaphoric or representational sense by certain, somewhat marginal practices such as pornography and cyberpornography, especially when these are reconstructed by female artists. This is supported by the two artworks discussed above, in which female artists use the genres to violate or question traditional stereotypes of female gender and sexuality. They break free from genres determined by masculine visual signs of sexual pleasure and suggest another 'truth' about female sexuality, thereby constructing an autonomous sexual identity. Thus, the pornographic, the erotic and the cyberpornographic body can be seen to serve as potentially liberating bodies.

## Notes

1. The term 'the other' generally refers to the status which women assume in relation to men in a patriarchal society. This is the case only because in patriarchal society women are considered less important, submissive and alien in relation to the men of the same society.
2. Pornography, from the Greek word '*pornographia*', literally means the writing about – or drawing of – harlots (Williams 1999: 9). In a modern sense, it is the representation of the human body or human sexual behaviour with the goal of provoking sexual arousal in the spectator.
3. One might, from the viewpoint of a traditionalist, question how 'virtual' reality can change, or indeed have any effect upon, reality. Post-human theorists such as Haraway

and Hayle, amongst others, argue that such interactions can and do take place in our technologically advanced world. Simple behavioural change, such as the use by many of cell phones and Facebook, is an obvious example.

4. On/scenity means that images and pleasures that have been previously designated as ob(off)scene, are brought into cultural view (Williams 1999:282).
5. It is difficult to represent this layered work with an illustration. The artwork is available online

from <http://www.julietmartin.com/hyperbody/>.

6. James Joyce the Irish novelist was famous for 'stream of consciousness' writing. His most famous novel 'Ulysses' is extremely ribald and typically includes an endless series of voyeuristic and, for the period, pornographic descriptions of women.
7. This artwork is available online from <http://www.medialounge.net/lounge/workspace/crashhtml/es/12.htm>.
8. This is available on DVD.

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