

## Rrose Sélavy, Barbarella, Madonna: Cybersublimity after the Orgasmotron.

By Michael Angelo Tata

We do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace, as I will call it, in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism. The newer architecture therefore—like many of the other cultural products I have evoked in the preceding remarks—stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions (Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 38-39).

So in the late 50s I started an affair with my television which has continued to the present, when I play around in my bedroom with as many as four at a time. But I didn't get married until 1964 when I got my first tape recorder. My wife. My tape recorder and I have been married for ten years now. When I say "we," I mean my tape recorder and me. A lot of people don't understand that (Andy Warhol, "Love (Puberty)," *THE Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, 26).

### Some Sums

It is no accident that this essay takes as its point of departure a mosaic comprised of Fredric Jameson lost in the hyperspace of Los Angeles' Westin Bonaventure Hotel in his seminal glance at the cultures of late capitalism, *Postmodernism*, and Andy Warhol wedded to a piece of equipment for capturing, storing and replaying the voices of others in his *THE Philosophy of Andy Warhol*. Nor is it an accident that Jameson, the unacclimated, unfortunate Modern waiting for his body to sprout a new perceptual apparatus which will allow him to process the newly mutated spatialities surrounding and subsuming his subjectivity, and Warhol, the closest thing to a cyborg the artworld has ever produced, will be dumped in turn.<sup>1</sup> Swerving

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<sup>1</sup> Although I am advancing an Orgasmotronic and cyborgian reading of Duchamp's *Le Grand Verre* (1915-1923) and the *État données* (1966), as well as cubist works like *Nu Descendant un Escalier, No. 2* (1912), *La Mariée* (1912) and more representational works like *Broyeuse du Chocolat, No. 2* (1914), I do not identify Duchamp himself as a cyborg. Though automated in a way which prefigured and made possible Warhol, Duchamp himself did not become a man-machine as fully as Warhol did. Gazing toward the servo-mechanistic and the industrial, Duchamp remained apart from technology as its consumer and observer. Obsessed with machines and, in general, with how

from Jameson and Warhol, I offer a second mosaic, this one comprised of the now Retro Madonna of “Ray of Light” and two newcomers, cyborgs themselves, women tuned in, turned on and short-circuited by technodesire: the anonymous “dumped dummy,” as Jean-François Lyotard in *Les Transformateurs Duchamp* refers to her, of Duchamp’s posthumous assemblage *Étant données: 1 la chute d’eau, 2 le gaz d’éclairage* (1966), and the campy space kitten Barbarella from Roger Vadim’s film *Barbarella, Queen of the Galaxy* (1968).

Other cyborgs, art-machines or recyclatrons could have been selected to illustrate the connection between trash and transport—for example, Jeff Koons, with his factory-made, Coney Island souvenir-stand aesthetic horrors such as *Pink Panther*, *Popples* or *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (all 1988), French body-mod performance artist Orlan, with her grotesquely reconstructed body and accompanying videodocumentation of her many surgeries, or the inimitable transsexual performer Amanda Lepore.<sup>2</sup> However, I have chosen my three stars, (1) Duchamp’s Bride, (2) Jane Fonda’s cosmonaut and (3) the “new” (yet of course now “old”) cabbala-correct, ethereal, British Madonna, for the relation they bear to what I will, after *Barbarella*, term the Orgasmotron, or perpetual pleasuring machine, a device which exists only within the cinematic, yet which crystallizes the philosophical complexities of postmodern sublimity, persisting as an operative metaphor at the heart of cyberculture.<sup>3</sup>

As the introductory Warhol quote demonstrates, the sexual pleasure of machines or machine/human interfaces is nothing new. Occurring with gizmos as diverse as television sets (Nam June Paik’s installations, for example *TV Garden*, 1982, or *Pyramid II*, 1997), telephones (Avital Ronell’s *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*), tape recorders (Warhol’s *Philosophy, a*, or *Andy Warhol’s Party Book*) and computers (Donna Haraway’s and Sue-Ellen Case’s theories of the wired body), this pleasure colonizes physically embodied human-human relationships, replacing them with something akin to the pleasure of

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things work, Duchamp never transformed into a mechanism proper—although he did set the stage for such a change to occur (indeed, he made the obviation of the human a mere formality).

<sup>2</sup> Regarding Orlan, the implantation of the Mona Lisa’s brow into her forehead (*Omniprésence*, 1993) allows her to complete (temporarily) the Gioconda series [Da Vinci→Duchamp→Warhol→Orlan]. See Bernard Blistene’s monograph *Orlan* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), as well as the film *Synthetic Pleasures* (Gund, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> The cyberpunk documentary *Synthetic Pleasures* also uses Barbarella’s Orgasmotron as a model for cyberpleasure. In this context, the Orgasmotron both instigates and amplifies whatever sexual pleasure it is that results from the collapse of the body/technology interface. Examining phenomena as disparate as the total environment, the transsexual body and the party drug MDMA, *Synthetic Pleasures* never loses sight of the fact that the mechanized can saturate, rend and reorganize the human body.

too much information, sensory overload, or cybernetic immersion in the infinite. This pleasure also resonates at the same frequency as Longinus' *hypsos*, Nicolas Boileau's ravishment, Edmund Burke's terror at the threat of annihilation, Immanuel Kant's overheated imagination, and Friedrich Nietzsche's Dionysian frenzies, all formulas for being-overwhelmed: they generate the same Hertz reading, although in a novel atmosphere and perhaps with different coefficients. In company with these purveyors of sublimity, Barbarella, Madonna and Duchamp's dummy, who, for my own perverse aesthetic reasons, I will refer to as his drag persona Rose Sélavy, all respond to the sexual pleasures of technoannihilation—intensities to which they willingly surrender, but which do not necessarily contain or control them (they become the machine's ghost made external, to pervert the expression preferred by the theory of mind).<sup>4</sup>

The difference between the two summations represented by those experiencing sublimity, or **E [Sélavy, Barbarella, Madonna]**, and those expostulating upon what people experience when they experience sublimity, or **E [Longinus...Nietzsche]**, hinges upon the nature of the exact and specific pleasure experienced in the face of an indifferent infinite which changes according to alterations within physical, material reality.<sup>5</sup> For obvious historical reasons, the Orgasmotron cannot arrive as a site of pleasure until a certain technology is in place, making it improbable that Kant could have ever spoken as to its contours—even though, as Ronell points out in her *Crack Wars: Literature Addiction Mania*, the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries viewed the novel as an illicit, orgasm-producing black box (an aphrodisiac simulating a genre), the implication being that the idea of a pleasure-generating aesthetic object did exist prior to its mechanization.

Joseph Tabbi's formulation of technopleasure in *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* posits the self's immersion in potentially infinitized webs of information as generative of a sublimity unique to the postmodern world; sexualizing his version of this dissolution is an objective of this essay. Embodied in and

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<sup>4</sup> While there is no indication in Duchamp's writings that either the bride of *La Mariée* or the corpse of the *Étant Données* are Rose, I treat her as such in order to further volatilize Duchamp's alterego. Construing bride and body as a veritable [Duchamp]' or "Duchamp Prime," I insert the artist into his masterpieces in order to complicate their gender configurations.

enacted by works of literature by novelists Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon, James McElroy and Don DeLillo, as well as by cyberpunk renegades like Kathy Acker and Donna Haraway, Tabbi's postmodern sublime corresponds to the feeling of being swamped or overwhelmed by the vast wash of information characterizing Jean-François Lyotard's "Postmodern Condition." As "metaphor and more than metaphor," the machine at once represents and transcends the postmodern non-individual, whose radical inability to represent "the whole of American technological culture" results in "a complex pleasure derived from the pain of representational insufficiency" (1).

Tabbi's pleasure is the negative pleasure discussed by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* and further elaborated on by Lyotard in his *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* and *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (specifically, the chapters "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" and "After the Sublime, The State of Aesthetics"), the difference being that in Tabbi, there is no ensuing positive pleasure following the infinite's assault on the individual, no triumph of the imagination, which, in Kant and in Lyotard, experiences the highest raptures of its freedom as the paradoxical result of its unfreedom. Detached from human interest, the infinite does not present itself, while simultaneously thwarting and circumventing every attempt at representing it.<sup>6</sup> For Tabbi, as well as for Jameson, the postmodern variety of sublimity consists in the failure of the postmodern, dispersed subject to signify, to transform the world of which it is a part into meaningful discourse. The resulting heteroglossia (Tabbi) or schizophrenia (Lacan via Jameson) of the diasporic subject stammering in the face of the untotalizable, the suprasensible, the swamping, is exactly what gets performed by the writers Tabbi enumerates: they represent the unrepresentability of postmodern hyperspace and its many imbricated yet never fully articulable networks.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I use the Greek symbol Epsilon, or E, to denote summation. Hence E [Sélavy, Barbarella, Madonna] refers to the fictitious series whose sum can be tabulated by "adding" bracketed quantities "Sélavy," "Barbarella" and "Madonna." My use of Epsilon, as my use of other mathemes, is both literal and metaphorical.

<sup>6</sup> In *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991), Lyotard describes the indifference of matter: "Matter does not question the mind, it has no need of it, it exists, or rather *insists*, it sits 'before' questioning and answer, 'outside' them. It is presence as unrepresentable to the mind, always withdrawn from its grasp. It does not offer itself to dialogue and dialectic" (142). In other words, the world does not present itself—it does not care. Radically outside all human interest in re-presenting it, it persists over time without the wish to be known or knowable. Thus all knowledge is excessive.

<sup>7</sup> In *Postmodernism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1993), Jameson explains what he means by a non-clinical schizophrenia: "When that relationship breaks down, when the links of the signifying chain snap, then we have

Diverging from Tabbi's postmodern or technological sublime, I wish to posit a specific variety of postmodern/technological sublimity, which I term the cybersublime. As I have already elucidated, one specific characteristic of the cybersublime is its inherent Orgasmotronicity: Sélavy, Barbarella and Madonna, in their own respective ways, testify to this fact, as I will demonstrate.<sup>8</sup> For me, there undoubtedly exists the category of the postmodern sublime, but this category is not limited to the epistemological pleasures of unavoidable misrepresentation, or of the self's fatally flawed responses to the Big Other's question, *Che Vuoi?*; rather, this category is inclusive of a vast number of ecstatic postmodern experiences hinging upon dissolution, drifting and being-lost.<sup>9</sup> Revising Tabbi, my postmodern sublime takes the notion of the gross and scandalous proximity of the high to the low within contemporary consumer culture—what Tabbi, quoting Thomas Weiskel's *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*, refers to as the “dangerous proximity” of the high and the low within Romanticism—and turns it into the sublimity of kitsch, a sublime derived from the great voraciousness of trash (15). The self's immersion in a culture of trash elevated to the status of the masterpiece, its subsumption within a neverending stream of junk, is what Warhol theorizes with his introduction of the notion that an infinity of Marilyns, automobile wrecks or Brillo boxes could constitute some uninterrupted field of aesthetic immersion. Hence for me any postmodern sublimity must also include a notion of the transportability of kitsch. In addition, it must also include a notion of the aesthetically immersible; that is, not mere technological immersion, or the self's incorporation by a technology which always exceeds it and which threatens it with annihilation, but the absorption

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schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers. The connection between this kind of linguistic malfunction and the psyche of the schizophrenic may then be grasped by way of a twofold proposition: first, that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present; and, second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time” (26-27).

<sup>8</sup> See my “Orgasmotronicity of the Servo-mechanistic” in the exhibition catalogue *Greater New York* (MOMA/PS1, 2000) for an additional look at the connections between being plugged in and sexed up.

<sup>9</sup> The *glissement* of the self as it moves metonymically from one *méconnaissance* to another in response to the hallucinated demand of the Big Other is explicated by Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Norton, 1989). Žižek's interpretation of Lacan's Graph of Desire makes it clear that, for Lacan, the self is a signifying chain gone horribly awry in its attempt to decipher the desire of the non-existent yet always-already-positing Big Other (the Big Other's voice is no more than an act of ventriloquism).

of the self by various aesthetic networks, such as those provided by cyberpunk and technorave, or by the gymnasiums, steroids and all-night parties of “the circuit.”<sup>10</sup>

For me, the technological sublime begins to be recognized by poets like Hart Crane and artists like the Constructivists, Dadaists and Futurists. It takes as its operative premise the idea that the machine has replaced the body, going on to transfer the Romantic Sublime onto the products and networks of technology (the Alps of William Wordsworth’s *Prelude* give way to the Brooklyn Bridge of Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*). While the cybersublime is a moment within the technological sublime, it is in no way exhausted by it. Instead, the sublimities of late capitalism’s vast informational networks, matrices and cybernetic crystallizations themselves constitute a mutation within the technological, a sort of by-product or *supplément* which has come to engulf industry, or the bridges, smokestacks, skyscrapers and dehumanized urban geographies of classical capitalism.

The excesses of information and the dissolution of the self into the informational networks of cyberculture—indeed, as Haraway intimates, the postmodern self, the self at the end of the Second Christian Millennium, is a cyborg by default—produce a version of sublimity which in popular culture is frequently described and represented in sexual terms. This sexualization is not a great surprise, considering that even for Nicolas Boileau, who in his 1693 translation of Longinus’ *On the Sublime* identified the sublime as rape, there is no sublimity without violation. The cultural products with which this essay is concerned—the *Étant données*, *Barbarella* and “Ray of Light”—each sexualize the cybersublime in kind. Thus Duchamp’s discarded mannequin, exhausted by the pleasure engine of the *Étant données*’ prequel *La Mariée mise a nue par ces Celibataires, même*, lies wasted with only the natural resources of gas and water to accompany her corporeal decomposition (she decays in the shadow of an Industrial Revolution and an industry which no longer need her). *Barbarella*, having out-orgasmed the Orgasmotron, having “turned its wires to faggots,” awaits further sexual torture at the hands of evil scientist and positronic-ray-wielding Duran Duran. Madonna,

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<sup>10</sup> See Elmer DeWitt’s article, “Cyberpunk,” in Maasik and Solomon eds. *Signs of Life in the USA* (Boston: Bedford, 1997). See also the film *Synthetic Pleasures* referred to in n1. Finally, Dirk Shafer’s film *Circuit* (2001) provides a wonderful representation of the queer party circuit. As untotalizable network of parties, substances and sexual encounters, the circuit stands by the side of the rave as cultural form embodying the postmodern experience of epistemic and emotive loss.

having incandesced into whatever atomic particle it would be that could travel in excess of the speed of light, “gets herself a universe,” leaving her alienated consciousness behind, her body along with it, and transcending that body-consciousness system by morphing into a liquidly blissful ray of pure energy, uncontaminated alpha rhythm.<sup>11</sup> These women are all the pleasure victims of technology, the ravished and evacuated corpses who litter the information superfreeway since F.T. Marinetti first theorized the sexiness of the airplane or Fernando Pessoa, the malleability and morphability of personality.<sup>12</sup> Donna Haraway’s formulation of a manifesto for cyborgs in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* and subsequent search for imploded, intergeneric life forms in *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan@\_Meets\_OncoMouse*<sup>TM</sup> is a search for those ontological nexuses of the natural with the cybernetic, for those moments when the human subject is diasporized, overwhelmed, absorbed, overheated. Similarly, Sue-Ellen Case’s search for the body in *The Domain Matrix: Performing Lesbian at the End of Print Culture*, her Osirian quest among the many networks, channels, and loops of communication for embodiment, is a search for Rose Sélavy, Barbarella, and Madonna. Conquered by endorphins, each reduces her body to the minimum weight of a photon. Trashed, and trashing, each recycles energy in turn, demonstrating three of the many ways that the human epidermis can respond to hyperstimulation.

### Impossible Integrations

If Sélavy, Barbarella or Madonna were to pursue calculus, if they were to quantify their experiences as short-circuited cybersluts, how would they represent those experiences in the

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<sup>11</sup> Such is my interpretation of Madonna’s current New-Age-meets-Jewish-Mysticism-in-the-House-of-Gaultier look and attitude. Transcending her previous images, the majority of which are intensely corporeal and lusty, the Spiritual Girl leaves her shopping bags behind to enter a world of gleaming surfaces and beaming rays. In *Cyborgs, Simians and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), Donna Haraway describes the dematerialization effected by the machines of post-industry: “Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum, and these machines are eminently portable, mobile—a matte of immense human pain in Detroit and Singapore” (“A Cyborg Manifesto,” 153).

<sup>12</sup> Since I am trucking in popular images in this essay, I offer the cover of 80s electronic group Berlin’s EP *Pleasure Victim* (1982) as yet another representation of screens, women and orgasm. Victimized by pleasure, lead singer Terri Nunn performs ecstasy on a TV monitor for an arrested male pervert looking to get off on her getting off. The film *Videodrome* (Cronenberg, 1983) presents a similar paradigm of techno-sexual exhaustion.

impersonal symbolization of mathematics? In *Part Two: Semantics of Modest Witness*, Haraway presents a cheeky mathematical formulation encapsulating their respective situations:

$$\begin{array}{l} \infty \infty \Omega \\ \int \int \int \text{NATURE}^{\text{TM}} \text{CULTURE}^{\text{TM}} \text{dN dC dt} = \text{NEW WORLD ORDER, INC.} \\ 0 \quad 0 \quad 1945 \end{array}$$

Urging that the modest witness, or unbiased observer, of millennial scientific advances/mutations performs a triple integration on a trademarked nature, culture and time (not trademarked), Haraway traces the derivative (NATURE<sup>TM</sup> CULTURE<sup>TM</sup> dN dC dt) back to the master-function NEW WORLD ORDER, Inc.; in other words, she solves the problem of what mathematical function a trademarked nature and culture correspond to by offering the solution that they are traceable to the equation  $f(x) = \text{NWO}$ . Ultimately, the trademarking of nature and culture represented by transgenic creatures like DuPont's emblematic OncoMouse<sup>TM</sup> are the result of a new world order in which nature and culture, the raw and the cooked, the given and the constructed, implode. Throughout *Modest\_Witness*, Haraway is obsessed with what she terms transuranic elements and transgenic species. Using the periodic chart developed by chemist Dmitri Mendeleev in 1869 as a point of inception, Haraway casts her gaze toward the scientific fabrication of elements with atomic numbers greater than 92, or the atomic number assigned to uranium, the naturally occurring element with the greatest atomic number—for example, plutonium (<sup>244</sup>Pu<sub>94</sub> and its explosive isotope, <sup>244</sup>Pu<sub>94</sub>) is lab-fabricated, and hence transuranic (its atomic number is 94). Elements such as plutonium represent an implosion of nature and culture, both of which collapse into and onto one another such that questions of the naturalness or constructedness of plutonium become moot, or, if we use the language of the Pragmatists, less interesting.<sup>13</sup> An insuperable amalgam of nature and culture, plutonium is a

<sup>13</sup> I mention the Pragmatists in an effort to fold William James and Richard Rorty into the mix: James, for his belletrist performance of truth in essays like “The Present Dilemma of Philosophy,” “What Pragmatism Means,” and “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth” in the collection *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), and Rorty for his attention to incommensurability (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*) and vocabularic plasticity (*Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*). Their innovations (James’ idea of truth as what-works;



cyborg element born in the human race to develop nuclear technology (hence the significance of the date 1945 in Haraway's triple integraton):

Two things stand out simultaneously in the presence of the transuranic elements: First, they are ordinary, natural offspring of the experimental way of life, whose place in the periodic table was waiting for them. They fit right in. Second, they are earthshaking artificial productions of technoscience whose status as aliens on earth, and indeed in the entire solar system, has changed who we are fundamentally and permanently. Nothing changed and too much changed when plutonium joined the terran family. The transuranic elements—embedded in the semiotic, technical, political, economic, and social apparatus that produces and sustains them on earth—are among the chief instruments that have remade the third planet from the sun into a global system (55).

Refashioning planet earth into a global reactor, plutonium and its sister actinides are among the host of technological intrusions into the chemical and physical to have indelibly marked human consciousness. However, standing apart from other nature/culture meldings produced through the modest witnessing of “the experimental life” introduced by the seventeenth-century chemist Robert Boyle, these elements, themselves freaks, commodities, and fetishes, catapult the postmodern subject into a universe of radical implosion in which the human and the mechanized are interfaced so completely that separation is impossible: this fusion constitutes sublimity.<sup>14</sup>

If the introduction of transuranic elements represents one feature of the New World Order or, as it is referred to in other passages, the Second Christian Millennium, then it is the even more traumatizing, exhilarating introduction of transgenic species into the lifeworld which puts the finishing touches on a way of life based on the opposition of nature and culture to one another (the experimental way of life championed by naturalist Robert Boyle represents one

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Rorty's description of knowledge-claims as incommensurable with one another and personality as incommensurable with itself) all apply to the cybersublime and also to the postmodern sublime in both Tabbi's and my senses.

<sup>14</sup> With his development of the air pump, a device supposedly permitting neutral, objective, world-disclosing observations of nature, Boyle set up a new paradigm for interpreting and living the world. Inventions such as the air pump allowed him to create and study vacuums, culminating in Boyle's law,  $pV = C$  (the pressure times the volume of a gas is constant for a given mass at a constant temperature). Haraway's point is that Boyle introduced a new type of living, one through which the human subject separates itself from the world and is thereby able to deduce its axioms and laws. A mere witness or spectator, Boyle's subject observes phenomena from a distance (just like, within philosophy, Hegel will emerge as history's spectator).

such N/C Node). Haraway takes the very real example of the world's first trademarked creature, DuPont Laboratories' Superstar OncoMouse™, as evidence of the fact that, for postmodernity, nature and culture have imploded so fully that it is no longer possible to resist the diaspora of selfhood which results when the oppositions around which selfhood has formed in the West (supereminent among these being anthropology's nature/culture) are obliterated in favor of an oppositionless and desublimated network of synthetic pleasures. Accompanying OncoMouse™ is a more fictive hybrid, FemaleMan©, OncoMouse™'s "Elder Sibling" (69). Taking her cue from Joanna Russ' 1975 science fiction novel *The Female Man*, Haraway proposes a copyrighted and spliced-together "FemaleMan©" as brother/sister to OncoMouse™:

I have made a tiny little typographical amendment to Joanna Russ's version of the oxymoronic hominid: I write it "FemaleMan" to highlight this being's unexpected kinship to other socioeconomically—genetically/historically—manipulated creatures, such as OncoMouse. Like OncoMouse™, the FemaleMan© lives after the implosion of informatics, biologics, and economics. If we date the implosion from the first successful genetic engineering experiments in the early 1970s, Russ's Female Man lived at the flash point of that momentous collapse of organisms, information, and the commodity form of life (70).

For Haraway, the FemaleMan© is precisely the sexless, ungendered figure of the cyborg as it is described in her "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century": "The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity" (*Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 150). Rejecting the origin-narratives of Hegel, Marx, Freud and Lacan, all of whom posit a secondary split which must always haunt the subject with the lack it introduces into psychic life, impelling that subject to spend its time healing its split via a circular and impossible return to its origins, the cyborg is not a part of the gendered world. Imploding gender, conjoining female with male in a unity that is not at all a sublation, the cyborg, imaginative counterpart to DuPont's cancer-infused mouse, represents the liberatory fantasy of a world rendered fully cybernetic.

Applying these ideas about transuranic elements and transgenic species to the book's rather cryptic title yields the following scenario: at the end of the Second Christian Millennium, in the midst of a technoaesthetical mutation, the Modest Witness of Boyle's experimental and Baconian way of life—that is, the de-masculinized, presumably humble, objective witness to the physical phenomena of the world embodied in the historical person of Robert Boyle—confronts the trademarked OncoMouse<sup>TM</sup> and the copyrighted FemaleMan© through information received at its e-mail address, the book's title.<sup>15</sup> As “the sender and receiver of messages in (Haraway's) e-mail address,” the modest witness exists at the interface of the informational secretions of the FemaleMan© and the OncoMouse<sup>TM</sup>. Their informational blips and bleeps reconfigure that witness such that she is no longer modest in the Boylean sense. Instead of merely witnessing the external events of mechanistic science, as the Oculist Witnesses inhabiting the upper pane of *Le Grand Verre* merely observe the potential sexual interaction of Bride with her Bachelor Machine, Haraway's new witness “works to *refigure* the subjects, objects and communicative commerce of technoscience into different kinds of knots” (23). Drawing on the literary tradition of figuration, Haraway proposes a chiliastic, parousial reading of the characters populating her drama: “Signs and wonder bring us to the next contaminated practice suffusing my book and built into the title *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan©\_Meets\_OncoMouse<sup>TM</sup>*: that is, figuration. In my book, entities such as the modest witness of the Scientific Revolution, the FemaleMan© of commodified transnational feminism, and OncoMouse<sup>TM</sup> of the biotechnical war on cancer are all figures in secular technoscientific salvation stories full of promise” (8). The apocalyptic and comical result of Haraway's figuration is such that the Book of Revelations, with its fantastic, phantasmagorical Second Coming of Christ, is replaced with a secularized and technological equivalent, a pastiche in which two eminent and paradigmatic cyborgs make the “man” of science blush with prurience (he, too, is a whore).

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<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 1 of *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan<sup>C</sup>\_Meets\_OncoMouse<sup>TM</sup>* (New York: Routledge, 1997) for a description of what it means for the modern scientist to be an impassionate witness to the workings of nature: “The world of subjects and objects was in place, and scientists were on the side of the objects. Acting as objects' transparent spokesmen, the scientists had the most powerful allies. As men whose only visible trait was their limpid modesty, they inhabited the culture of no culture” (25). See also Haraway's description of how the modest witness modified male virility such that the traditionally female qualities of modesty and humility became desirable masculine virtues (33).

Revising Haraway's original integration, I, in my attempt to locate the cybersublime in Haraway's ideas about the pleasures of implosion, provide the following substitute:

**E Transgenic Species, Transuranic Elements, Vampires,  
Technofetuses, OncoMice™, Flavr Savr Tomatoes,  
SimCity, SimEarth, SimLife, SimSim...**

In offering an “epsilonic” alternative to Haraway's integration, my intention is to emphasize the sublimity of implosion, the fact that the many hybridized, cyborgian creatures gleefully enumerated by Haraway throughout the many dazzling pages of *Modest\_Witness* are in their sheer effulgence sublime. In my reformulation of the integration as summed series, I make no attempt to trace back these hybrids to some originary curve, some fictive  $f(x)$ . Diverging from Haraway, I do not provide a solution to an integration, for the very reason that it is an important feature of cybersublimity that such hybrids, implosions and nexuses are in no way traceable to any master equation: they can only be added together. While Haraway will posit the New World Order as the solution to the triple integration of nature, culture and time, my interest in sublimity leads me to frustrate integration by leaving it indeterminate: I am not the conspiracy theorist that Haraway is, and thus refrain from attributing any unity to the tangle of wires and genes that define current technological configurations. For the pleasure of the cybersublime, the bang with which Rose Sélavy expires, with which Barbarella's Orgasmotron pops, and with which Madonna passes from particle to wave, is a result of the postmodern fusion represented by hybrids such as these. Immersed in an incomprehensible and unrepresentable technological infrastructure, Jameson's lost hotel sojourner and Tabbi's ambivalently integrated auteur cannot solve for  $f(x)$  except to get the equation wrong. While there exists technology, biology and power, and while these three do experience some implosion, overlap or palimpsesting, it is not necessary that the three congeal into the Foucauldian force of technobiopower posited by Haraway; in fact, the cybersublime's charge results from there being no one entity to which the products and organisms of late capitalism can be ontologically regressed.

### Special Cases

Haraway's diasporic postmodern subject is matched by a similarly dispersed subjectivity in Sue-Ellen Case, whose spectacular mess, *The Domain Matrix*, is also preoccupied with the nature/culture interface represented by the cyborg.<sup>16</sup> Searching for the body in a culture that has fulfilled Marshall McLuhan's wishes in *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* and transcended print, Case supplies our three heroines, Sélavy, Barbarella and Madonna, with two models which provide answers to their mysterious disappearances: (1) voodoo and (2) sadomasochism. Case's concerns are similar to Jameson's. The confusion, anxiety and bewilderment with which Jameson confronts the architectural space of the Westin Bonaventure and his consequent prognosis that, somehow, the human subject of high modernism has lost pace with the mutations of technology and is no longer able to process sensory data received from the world of that technology's making, is no more than Case's articulation of a "new organization of space" that relocates the functions of "nation, screening, sexuality and the body" within the networks and new spatialities of cyberspace (3). Case compares the postmodern and high modern subject's respective relation to space. Using Guy Debord and his fellow *Situationistes Internationales'* idea of a "unitary urbanism," Walter Benjamin's notion of the flâneur, and Michel de Certeau's plan for "walking in the city" to "describe the relation between reader and hypertext" in the modern milieu, Case posits two types of wandering, one effected in the space of the city, the other in the suburbs of cybereality.

For Case, surfing the Net, navigating its many corridors and wormholes, is a version of that very Barthesian textual encounter, cruising. The International Situationist, the flâneur-dandy and the streetwalker all partake of the same activity, that of imbuing a certain geography with meaning. The urban matrix, a prefigurement of the cybernetic matrix, presents the observing, experiencing, locomoting subject with the technological sublime of Hart Crane, the Constructivists, the Futurists and the Dadaists. The transition from urban matrix (grid of buildings, people and situations: New York City) to *suburban matrix* (sprawl of wires, wash of

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<sup>16</sup> Case's project has to fail: print culture cannot mime cyberculture, which it must always approximate. Although Case gives it her best shot, her book, with its "optical" and hypertextual organization, is nowhere near as exciting as the experience of surfing the Net. Furthermore, the gross excess of information crammed into its pages is wearying and unsexy, the product of what she terms "the dowdy dyke" (versus the trendy and commodified "dildo dyke"). Rose Sélavy, Barbarella and Madonna would never achieve orgasm with this particular wash of information: there is no dumped dummy, no Queen of the Galaxy, no ray of light, but this absence is important, emblamating the otherness of the Net from print culture, their radical discontinuity and heterogeneity.

electronic-libidinal impulses, alienation with simultaneous hyperconnection via mobile technologies: Los Angeles) is the selfsame move from the modern sublime to its postmodern cousin.<sup>17</sup> Examining the various spatial configurations of cybertechnology and its many products, Case hits on the two metaphors mentioned early on in this present paragraph; namely, voodoo and sadomasochism. These two interpretations of what transpires when the POMO cybernaut dives headfirst into a world of layered screens and virtual egos tie the “Domain-Matrix” of the Net to two fundamental spatial configurations: (1) magic, conjuration, incantation, performative utterance, and (2) the sexual *tableau vivant* of the master and servant, Venus in Furs and Severin, as they are configured in their proper positions with respect to one another in the sexual theatre. Seeking as her project a reclamation of the lesbian body, a body resuscitated by Monique Wittig in *Les Guérillères* and *The Lesbian Body*, yet subsequently lost to that great dissolver of bodies, the Internet, Case searches for performance: both performative utterances in J.L. Austin’s sense of the expression in *How to Do Things with Words*, and “performance” in the more banal sense of some discrete, physical, corporeal, located body doing something in the space of the world.

While Haraway promulgates the view that the postmodern subject is a diasporic, “electrophoresed” separation of what in other eras had been unified under the pronoun “I,” in Case “diaspora” carries with it a self-conscious reference to those other atomized bodies of postmodernism, the postcolonial selves whose emigrations and immigrations have brought them into and out of America’s cities and whose cultural practices have become intertwined with established American practices which they in turn influence and alter via a principle of syncretism. Positing voodoo as one potential metaphor for explaining what goes on when the postmodern “I” taps some mysterious code onto a keyboard and is instantaneously transported into a scenic omniverse of detached and disembodied paraperformances, Case literalizes Haraway’s metaphor of the diasporic. Referring to a character in William Gibson’s *Count Zero*

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<sup>17</sup> It is of utmost importance that Case’s book ends with a chapter called “Los Angeles: A Topography of Scenic Properties,” since it is the radical suburbanism of Los Angeles, city of Jameson’s clueless wonderment, which is most amenable to the postmodern sublime as it is found in technoimmersiveness and in the idea of the cyberflâneur. The succession of cities—from Paris to New York City for the moderns, from New York City to Los Angeles for the postmoderns—presents one model for interpreting the move from a technological sublime to a cybersublime. Within this schema, Madonna’s own artistic move toward cabbalism stands out as emblematic of a larger cultural trend: she, too, leaves the city for the suburbs. See the collection *Madonna’s Drowned Worlds: New Approaches to Her*

who equates the immediacy of cybertechnology (“getting things done”) with the immediacy of *le voodoo*, Case explains her post-colonial appropriation of Hatian ritual:

Gibson’s character perceives voodoo as the language of doing, of functions, not of abstract concepts. Voodoo is used by the outsiders who hack into this net that would transcend their miscreant spaces to represent a belief system that thinks by doing. Like the street, voodoo is a system which takes found objects, the trash or litter that the transcendent system leaves behind, and redeploys them in a useful, hopeful manner. Voodoo vessels, for example, on the altars, are empty bottles reworked with sequins and ribbons to aid in involving the loas, or spirits, who work on various problems the petitioner submits. Online, Gibson’s character takes the old computer parts or software functions to grab some online time—the unit of value (52).

Case goes on to link the cyberpunk deployment of junk with the practice of bricolage found in the Afrofuturism of films like John Sayles’ *The Brother from Another Planet* and Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames*, in Sun Ra’s Omniverse Arkestra, in black comic books such as *Static* and *Icon*, and in graffiti art.<sup>18</sup> For Case, the radicality of these cultural practices lies in the “complex signification of space” which they embody. Opposed to the Eurocentric rationality which in the West (and East: Japan) has culminated in the stunning technological advances making cyberspace possible, the bricolages and pastiches of Afrofuturism are evocative of the religious, aesthetic and social practice of voodoo—indeed, of all other systems dismissed as “superstition” with the emergence of Haraway’s Modest Witness in the person of Robert Boyle—making Futurism a looking forward which is also a looking back (futurism becomes technoprimitivism). Deterritorializing rather than colonizing, the practice of voodoo as it belongs to its Hatian believers or to its diasporized adherents in, for example, New Orleans, to the Afrofuturists, or to an Italo-American cybertraveler like Madonna, liberates the West from

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*Cultural Transformations, 1983-2003* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2004) for further analyses of what Los Angeles means to the new Madonna.

<sup>18</sup> For a better discussion of the postmodern significance of graffiti art, see Case’s discussion of Chicano decorative practices in Southern California in “Performing City: Chicano Chariots of Fire and Drive-By Art” in her *Domain-Matrix: Performing Lesbian at the End of Print Culture* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, 227-231).

Euclidian space, allowing it to perceive a new interrelatedness and immediacy which, for those Haitian women gluing sequins onto bottles, is no more than an old immanence.<sup>19</sup>

For Case, the real glue which bonds voodoo with cyberpunk is the relationship that each practice bears to the abject. As means of salvaging the garbage, junk, detritus, trash and refuse produced by the human organism, both voodoo and cyberpunk, themselves marginal practices, appropriate the discarded, the wasted, the junked, reworking it, redeeming it, remixing it into something that is decidedly not-trash. The scandalous proximity of the high and low to one another in the Romantic Sublime comes to mind, as does Duchamp's assemblage of bricks, mannequins and one large, abandoned portal in *L'Étant données*. Case makes her most beautiful evocation of this sublimity, that of the most abject piece of filth being associated with the highest transports of the soul, in her discussion of the voodoo vever for Legba, loa of the crossroads:

The vever is a figure drawn to chart the particular course through space that the need of the moment would employ to evoke the appropriate spirit. The veverers are drawn with various materials, most importantly, again, with materials produced as “leftovers” from other functions. For example, the black markings within the white lines of a vever may be made with coffee grounds (54).

Case continues to explain that the vever, displayed via waste products like coffee grounds, becomes the doorway through which one gains access to a loa, or “window of space” akin to the windows one passes through on the Net: for Case, the spatiality of voodoo is precisely the Net, or hypertextual, visual, immediate mess of intersections, sites and paths through whose tangles information clots and circulates (like the space of post-Euclidian geometry, it is curved, hyperbolic). The theory of the leftover which Andy Warhol puts forth in the chapter from his *Philosophy* entitled “Work” is eerily present in Case's yearning for the abject, raising the question of what relation the respective bricolages of voodoo and cyberpunk bear to camp, that

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<sup>19</sup> Beginning with the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the existence of a post-Euclidian geometry made itself known. Revising Euclid's famous “fifth postulate” from his *Elements* (roughly, that for each line there exists only one parallel), post-Euclidian geometry redefines physical space by formulating alternatives to the one-parallel-per-line axiom. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this geometry influenced chaos theory, fractal theory, and theories of self-organization, such as autopoiesis. See Leonard Mlodinow's *Euclid's Window: The Story*



other great employment of leftovers which has absorbed artists, writers, performers from Esther Newton's communities of drag queens in *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* to the current mania for all things white trash (see, for example, Jerry Springer's *Too Hot for TV*).<sup>20</sup> Representative of the sublime uses of trash, voodoo and cyberpunk attack from the margins, using the undesirable, the wasted, the jettisoned in meaningful, empowering, aesthetically innovative ways: and so the cybernaut achieves identity with the diasporic, seizing upon a historically older mode of thought as a model for interpreting its own current activity in the same way that the scientist of Quantum Physics eschews Newtonian mechanics for holistic models of particle-systems in tune with discarded Western practices such as alchemy and with the religious thought of the East, specifically Zen Buddhism.<sup>21</sup> While these equations often come off as facile and condescending—"Oh! They really did get it right! Those crazy Hatians!"—it is immensely important to note their presence in theories of artistic, religious and scientific production at the end of the Second Christian Millennium and to ask why it is suddenly so important, so urgent, for the cybertheorist to connect the immediate present with the remote, devalued past.

Abjection provides one way of symbolizing cybertechnology and the sublime; sadomasochism provides a second. It is this second metaphor, the Domain-Matrix, which Rose Sélavy, Barbarella and Madonna speak to in their respective raptures (and captures). Their different responses to what Haraway terms "the informatics of domination" ("Manifesto," 161), or new networks of power marked by simulation and surface, are made in the presence of the Domain-Matrix as she overheats the devotee of pleasure. Case's relationship to her screenic universe, to the cybersimulacra she confronts in her electronic-libidinal travels through the vast

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*of Geometry from Parallel Lines to Hyperspace* (New York: Free Press, 2002) for a deeper analysis of the history of Euclidian and post-Euclidian geometries.

<sup>20</sup> "I always like to work on leftovers, doing the leftover things. Things that were discarded, that everybody knew were no good, I always thought had a great potential to be funny. It was like recycling work. I always thought there was a lot of humor in leftovers. When I see an old Esther Williams movie and a hundred girls are jumping off their swings, I think if what the auditions must have been like and all the takes where maybe one girl didn't have the nerve to jump when she was supposed to, and I think about her leftover on the swing. So that take of the scene was a leftover on the editing room floor—an out-take—and the girl was probably a leftover at that point—she was probably fired—so the whole scene is much funnier than the real scene where everything went right, and the girl who didn't jump is the star of the out-take" (*Philosophy*, 93).

<sup>21</sup> See Maurice Berman's *The Reenchantment of the World* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), as well as Karl Jung's work on alchemy and the collective unconscious in "Individual Dream Symbolism in Relation to Alchemy" in *The Portable Jung* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).

domain and boundless terrain of the information matrix, is one of domination, humiliation, subjection, enslavement, subordination: technology makes her its servant and she derives sexual pleasure from it, metaphorically and literally. Bottom to the Internet's top, Case performs accordingly:

Hanging onto my crucial amulets, I enter the scenario with the "Domain-Matrix." I am disciplined by her, but I maintain my role; I am ignorant of her plan, but capable of improvising within it; I beg her to recognize my body, to bind me, to seduce me, while performing in the anxious space of her far-reaching domain and power, whose boundaries are, by definition, beyond my purview and my control. I am seduced and pleased by her spectacle, but wary of its consequences. I fully expect some final satisfaction, but assume it will never be dispensed. I realize that it works only within strict parameters, but want it never to end...The point is not to succeed. The hope that "we shall overcome" only emulates the Domain-Matrix. Instead, playing the bottom, while denigrating even that role as efficacious or conclusive, might be the only "point" that succeeds precisely where it fails (236).

Case, the "butch bottom," is disciplined by her conqueror's cords of love, by the very wires whose mysterious configuration produces and sustains the charmed illusions of cyberspace.<sup>22</sup> Waiting for final satisfaction, Case is in the same position in which Lyotard, in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* leaves Burke: she waits, she anticipates, she finds herself suspended.<sup>23</sup> The fear of "nothing happening," the cessation of all activity, the eradication of the "now" delivered by death, is what Burke faces and which Kant elides. In *The Inhuman*, Lyotard connects the possibility of nothing happening with sublimity: "The possibility of nothing happening is often associated with anxiety, a term with strong connotations in modern philosophies of existence and of the unconscious. It gives to waiting, if we really mean waiting, a predominantly negative

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<sup>22</sup> I take the expression "cords of love" from a Chris and Cosey song of the same title on their 1991 album *Pagan Tango* (Play It Again Sam).

<sup>23</sup> In "Coldness and Cruelty," Gilles Deleuze connects the experience of suspense with masochism: "In Masoch's novels, it is the moments of suspense that are the climactic moments. It is no exaggeration to say that Masoch was the first novelist to make use of suspense as an essential ingredient of romantic fiction. This is partly because he masochistic rites of torture and suffering imply actual physical suspension (the hero is hung up, crucified or suspended), but also because the woman torturer freezes into postures that identify her with a statue, a painting or a photograph. She suspends her gestures in the act of bringing down the whip or removing her furs; her movement is arrested as she turns to look at herself in the mirror" (33). See the compilation *Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

value. But suspense can also be accompanied by pleasure, for instance the pleasure in welcoming the unknown, and even by joy, to speak like Baruch Spinoza, the joy obtained by the intensification of being that the event brings with it" (92). Case, penetrated, permeated and pleased by the apparatuses of technology, yet left suspended, forever waiting, occupies a position similar to Burke's. Rose, Barbarella and Madonna all nod their heads in agreement and, perhaps, enjoyment. The pleasure inflicted upon Rose in the swatch of spacetime separating *La Mariée Mise a Nue* from the *Étant données*; the ecstasies and transports forced upon Barbarella by Duran Duran and his pleasuring-torturing apparatus, the Orgasmotron; the Material Girl's sacrificial immolation in the flame of technology: all three scenarios operate via principles of domination and submission articulated by Case yet prefigured by Burke.

### **Pulling the Plug on the Big O**

It is at this point that I allow Rose Sélavy, Barbarella and Madonna to part company from my discourse. In piecing together the philosophies of Donna Haraway and Sue-Ellen Case with a little help from Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant and Jean-Francois Lyotard, I have hopefully achieved my rather strange goal of finding a way (1) to differentiate the cybersublime from Tabbi's conception of the technological or postmodern sublime, while (2) highlighting the Orgasmotronicity or sexual stimulation associated with the human/machine, cyborgian interface. It should be obvious that not all accounts of the human subject's postmodern plight, or the assimilation of heterogeneous bits of information and simulacra demanded of it by the new technologies which have proliferated in late capitalism, are couched in terms as blatantly sexual as those I have chosen: not every cybnaut will be a Rose Sélavy, a Barbarella or a Madonna. My intention throughout this enterprise has been similar to Case's: that is, to find some way of talking about sexual desire and performance in a world of rapidly disappearing bodies. Overheated by her nine bachelors, all of whom constitute some machine, lubricious gear train or desire magneto, as Duchamp referred to them in *From the Green Box*, Rose Sélavy, Duchamp's drag alterego, vanishes from *Le Grand Verre* to reappear cunt-forward on the other side of a peepshow in the *Étant données*; in another room of this strange house, Barbarella, her

hormones and blood pumping, cums so hard she destroys the machine which produced this pleasure, only to be subjected to further sexual devices which she will likewise short circuit, while, on the roof, Madonna, sick of her lusty Catholic material body, vaporizes into the apparent nothingness of one hyperactive wave: for these women, being a cyborg means much more than the genderless dystopia of Haraway's future. The cyborg is voracious—whether or not she is able to withstand the pleasure she receives. Technology is no arid arrangement of wires, plugs and circuits: it has the power to satiate sexually, to motivate limbically, to imbricate libidinally, with the accompanying dangers of human explosion (Mme. Sélavy), technological counter-suffusion (Mme. Fonda) and the very tempting prospect that body and machine might fuse-implode in a fantastic discharge of light and heat (Madonna).

True, these women inhabit only one moment in time, after which their subsequent manifestations part company from the cybersublime. For Madonna, the acorporeality of “Ray of Light” gives way to an oddly bodily spirituality in which the renunciation of the material world must be articulated on repeat in a futile effort to convince none other than herself that an egoless universe is possible. As her *Re-Invention* (2004) and *Confessions* (2006) tours demonstrate, the Material Girl does not renounce materialism, but rather creates a species of religious experience in which immaterial entities like “soul” or “agape” are treated materialistically, hoarded and mastered as commodities in their own right. For only a moment, she vaporizes into some force, vapor, quintessence or subatomic particle-wave jetting away at speeds in excess of 186,000 miles/second, an *épatisme* in the face of Albert Einstein, whose *Special Theory of Relativity* posits the speed of light in a vacuum as matter's upper motility limit (“VII: The Apparent Incompatibility of the Law of Propagation of Light with the Principle of Relativity,” as well as “XV: General Results of the Theory”). And then she's gone. Similarly, there is no proof from the mind of Duchamp that the destroyed woman of the *Étant Données* is Rose Sélavy proper; her existence in this tableau I have only surmised, and with the most devious of motives. And Fonda will never short circuit a sexual device again, despite what an embittered Ted Turner might say. As with any aesthetic experience, the cybersublime is delicate in constitution, evanescing the moment that anyone, including myself, seeks to pin it down. A truly Heisenbergian creation, the precise moment of pleasure can only be located at an expense, becoming a mere snapshot of expired desire which can only be regarded retroactively.

The technological waste product of Duchamp's mannequin, together with the intergalactic pixie and the materially condensed pop princess, all speak the language of love. Their dialects identical, each hails from Diotima's hideaway and takes as her object the infinite as embodied in the flows and streams of a technoreality which might destroy her, but which also might send her careening into the tenth dimension. "Is there any difference?" she seems to be asking, clarifying the nature of pleasure for a desublimated, post-Millennial audience of pill-popping metros, silicone-stuffed globe-trotters and individuals absolutely coincident with screen names and user profiles.

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