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## Fuzzy precincts and bleeding edges: Feminist theory and the study of virtual- materiality

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fuzzy precincts and bleeding edges: feminist theory and the study of virtual-materiality

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Whatever the breaks and ruptures, only continuous variation brings forth this virtual line, this virtual continuum of life, “the essential element of the real beneath the everyday.”

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari [1]

As an artist working in diverse media – performative new media interaction, digitally collaged graphic novels, and hybrid reality sculptural installation, I have had the opportunity to experience a breadth of contemporary creative practice, unfettered by traditional labels.

My art reflects my fascination with the yo-yo play between the two ends of a spectrum, at one end the virtual, on the other, the material. Integrating perceived oppositions has been an ongoing creative concentration for me. By essentially not ‘fitting in’ to any particular artistic convention, I have been free to create my own structures which inevitably pose questions of differentiation. If the two extremes, virtual and material constructs, meet and interweave on an intimate stratum, then how does one start to parse and separate them? Is it possible and / or desirable? When imagination and concrete details fuse at a molecular-like level, is it useful to consider these as separate parcels? Are packets of digital information virtual or real? Perhaps neither virtual / spirit or material / substance but simultaneously both, a unique process or matter that I will refer to throughout this paper as virtual-materiality. Analogous to light – an often invisible continuum that is defined only when it comes into contact with something else, creating colour and shadow. It is not defined by established theoretical frameworks, but through the interpretation of its internal limitations. [2]

By way of example, in my piece *Dancing With Myself* (2009), a performative hybrid-reality installation, I explore virtual-materiality through dance. My avatar, Nar Duell, has been scripted to perform a choreography. In real time performance she moves in an immersive environment projected onto three walls. I respond to Nar Duell, attempting to create a duet with her, thereby inverting the person / avatar paradigm, as Nar Duell controls me. Her world is expansive and infinite, whereas the real world space where I respond and dance, a white-walled gallery setting, is boxed in and confined: once again reversing the usual view of space through a computer screen. At the end of our performance, when she has either ‘expired’ or perhaps is ‘just plumb tuckered out’, I stroke Nar Duell’s face. In reality, I am touching the cold hard surface of the gallery wall, nevertheless, the warm presence of projection and the intimacy of our interaction conjures up an all too posthuman relationship. [3] Through this caress, undeniably material things (human hand, painted drywall) become conflated with the agency that I have invested in my avatar. The action ceases to be touch of simple surfaces and strives to cross a divide. Unable to label this moment virtual or real, even digital or analogue, I can only think of it as quintessentially virtual-materiality. Nar Duell’s exhaustion is clearly virtual and I am most decidedly material, but the act of touching my avatar transcends an understanding of those two states. Similarly, in another piece, *Pushing Art* (2010), I display a video projection of my hybrid-reality graphic novel in a real-life mobile rendition of a hot dog cart and newspaper stand – once again confounding boundaries. We are no longer dealing with differences but with a continuum that defies parsing.

The turning point of this argument depends on the idea of the agency of images, addressed by the theorist W.J.T. Mitchell in his seminal text *What do pictures want? the lives and loves of images*.

...the peculiar tendency of images to absorb and be absorbed by human subjects in processes that look suspiciously like those of living things. We have an incorrigible tendency to lapse into vitalistic and animistic ways of speaking when we talk about images. It's not just a question of their producing "imitation of life" (as the saying goes), but that the imitations seem to take on "lives of their own." [4]

The most basic of human interaction with objects, particularly images, causes us to necessarily invest them with spirit in order to understand, control and dominate the 'stuff' of our existence. From a simple photograph of a loved one to the complexity of a virtual alter-ego we must process what we are looking at through memory and emotion. When my avatar, Nar Duell had the misfortune of a corrupted database I had to come to terms with the zeros and ones of her being. For an entire week Nar Duell and I had to sustain the indignity of having her hair attached to her posterior as she inhabited her Second Life world. She slunk around assuming poses where other avatars would not view her backside and the offending tresses. Clearly, I was projecting my embarrassment as a human being on this animation, but her bizarre behaviour was real within the context I had created, and made for an entirely different art experience. As a result of the misplaced hair episode it became clear to me that Nar Duell was protesting the brunette hair I had bought her only an hour before the data corruption occurred. She is now, and for whatever future she has, decidedly blonde. What's a feminist to do?

Before discussing virtual-materiality any further, I would like to differentiate between the digital and the virtual. The digital is real enough on a computer chip, but because it exists initially as information only and must be transformed through on and off circuitry to be experienced, we perceive it to be virtual. Even though it must be processed to be experienced and not an obvious material manifestation, it is not virtual. Whereas the truly virtual resides only in our minds and through our imaginations. It is ironic given my interests in continuum that I am insisting on difference here but I think it is important to define the terms as they are often used interchangeably. Virtual-materiality is not necessarily digital-materiality. Digits are representations just as surely as is paint. However, the malleability of digital information and the variety of its manifestations does extend our ability to imagine 'bigger and better'. In my case it allows me to create Nar Duell and experience art and life right alongside her. The quirkiness of a populous, dumbed-down application such as Second Life along with the reality of bandwidth speeds and other people's tastes means that it is an entirely unpredictable place. This eccentricity leads to the illusion of avatars in that environment possessing souls and controlling their own destinies – a virtual existence.

As I said in the beginning of this text, the genesis of this interest in virtual-materiality comes from my engagement with different media. That, in turn, is rooted in a deeper need to grapple with the contradictions of our humanity. There is a gap between our desires and reality which align with virtual / material extremes. By trying to define these edges I find myself in the wide swath of the middle, where the melding is impossible to untangle. If desire equals the virtual, where everything is possible, and reality, the material weighed down by the intractability of matter, then how do these extremes coalesce? Fortunately, art does not have to be an either / or proposition, it is both at once – a lenticular vision, beyond simple interpolation, that does not allow for the splitting of the atom.

This paradox, desire versus reality, is threatened to be rendered mute by contemporary consumerist ideology, and is echoed in pop cultural priorities. I look to pop culture as a marker

to test my assumptions about yearning and that which is 'in your face' real. The drive to conflate those extremes, which I align with the virtual and the material, is a current obsession. For instance, three dimensional film techniques attempt to make a screen-based art form increasingly immersive and tangible. On the other hand, many material based artists, entertainers and marketers are using the advantages of digitally generated or transfigured materials and processes to invest the inert with intelligence. Of particular interest are technologies such as motion capture and mobile devices that allow intersections of real and digital immersion, crossing over into virtuality. An example of this is the mobile smart phone that allows razor sharpened marketing intelligence to guide the user into real world / virtual seamless consumer experiences. The interest in the public sphere is informing and compelling. When the difference between desire and commodity is supposedly erased, we can have everything we want and like everything we have. Or – so the story goes – this perpetuated fantasy is the bedrock of consumerism. However, it is an itch that gets worse with scratching. This presumably seamless virtual-materiality highlights the contradiction of the continuum. Even though we cannot dissect virtual-materiality we still know the two extremes. Capable of a double consciousness, we sense difference and conflation simultaneously. We believe desire and object to be the same thing. Obtaining something will soothe a yearning, but the very act of possession provides unassailable proof that objects are not spirit, and fuels anew fresh cravings.

Following the trajectory of the virtual / material dichotomy as it stems from a classicist position of the mind / body split, and manifestations of the male / female divide, I propose feminist theory as a potent tool to effectively analyze the artistic and sociological implications of virtual-materiality. Plato conceived that the body is from the material world; and the soul is immortal, of ideas and universal truths, and does not exist in time and space. In this sense, the soul is temporarily united with the body and will separate at death. Descartes' theory holds that the body works like a machine with material properties, and the mind or soul is a nonmaterial entity. In this conception, the mind controls the body. I believe these dominant philosophical stances are instrumental in understanding polarities outlined in this text, and how they have come to be defined in opposition to each other. Traditional views equate technology with machine, attributed as male and related to the sublime and power; whereas beauty is often the stand-in and proponent for the aesthetics of the organic, the compliant and gendered female. Theorist Elaine Scarry discusses this perspective in *On Beauty and Being Just*:

...in the newly subdivided aesthetic realm, the sublime is male and the beautiful is female... Why should this bifurcation have dealt such a blow to beauty...? The sublime occasioned the demotion of the beautiful... Formerly capable of charming or astonishing, now beauty was the not-astonishing; as it is also the not-male, the not-mountainous, the not-righteous, the not-night. Each attribute or illustration of the beautiful became one member of an oppositional pair, and because it was almost always the diminutive member, it was also the dismissible member. [5]

Scarry's critique around the issue of beauty provides pivotal clues and associations for a discussion of virtual-materiality within a feminist perspective. Once again, a 'pairing' of the sublime / beauty equals the virtual / material. But beauty, with its quicksilver qualities, helps to destabilize easy polarities. Dichotomized thinking sets the stage for an avalanche of 'thought', in all its virtual importance, overwhelming 'tangible', often just pretty and overlooked. At a micro-level, virtual-materiality, as continuum, is the antidote to definition and demarcation.

As a woman who came of age during second-wave feminism, I have a strong interest in formulating what a feminist position means to me as an artist, and particularly in my strategy of taking on an alter-ego. The relationship between myself and my avatar could be best characterized within a feminist context, as a mother-daughter bond. I have created Nar Duell,

but I am at the mercy of her physics. Limitations and strengths determine what we can do together. I nurture Nar Duell, but it is the unforeseen and unknowable combination of what I have 'fed' her that makes the work live. But what of neo-feminism? From the simplest of decisions – what colour hair to purchase, to which friends to accumulate, one is always hyper-aware of gender in Second Life. Nar Duell's personality reveals a full range of contradictions. She strives to be nice, agreeable, conciliatory and shudders at the thought of looking dowdy for the sake of politics; but is thoroughly empowered when flying around in her super-cape. She wears a hard hat because she does a lot of building in Second Life. At the same time, she wears short, tight skirts, cat ears, fishnet stockings and stilettos – performing her own, one-woman, slut walk protest.

The reality of online virtual worlds is that they tend to be highly charged, sexualized places, full of fruitful data to examine contemporary male / female ideology and practice. The writers R. A. Brookey and K. L. Cannon, in their article *Sex Lives in Second Life* say “there was a great deal of optimism about the potential for virtual environments to offer users opportunities to explore multiple identities”. [6] However, they conclude on a very different note: “Arguing from Foucault, we suggest that cyberspace should not be regarded as an environment that moves the user outside of the political and social matrix of gender and sexuality.” [7]

We cannot entirely escape our bodies, our innate materiality within the virtual, since it is primarily a product of our history and societal imperatives. What we dream into existence is limited by what we have already, and what we have already is largely a product of what we are and the 'things' that surround us. Sometimes it appears as though the material trumps the virtual. However, the virtual is extremely robust and infects the real at the sub-particle level, making it impossible to root out. We only know it when we see it in the extreme.

My need to reflect on our human condition through virtual-materiality is a romantic notion. Although instead of peering only into the enormity we call nature (the material) and feeling awe (the virtual), I look into an abyss of technological change and find a similar wonder and incongruent beauty. Mess, obfuscation, bedlam, redundancy, contradiction – these qualities, redolent of humanity, are typically considered the antitheses of insight. They confound compartmentalization. Perhaps the necessarily chaotic can be an impetus for 'soft' thinking that relinquishes conceits of specialization and repudiates the polemics of division. By breaking down ideas of difference using visual and aural language, artists can directly encourage a bleeding of thought, sensory understanding and insight. Engagement through art stratagems can be powerful forces to find new ways of understanding that confound dichotomization and honour the idea of continuum.

## References

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2. I am grateful to Dr. Lorrie Boucher for this insight.
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4. W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do pictures want? the lives and loves of images*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.
5. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999) 83.

6. Robert Alan Brookey and Kristopher L. Cannon, "Sex Lives in Second Life," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 26:2 (2009): 146.

7. Robert Alan Brookey and Kristopher L. Cannon, "Sex Lives in Second Life," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 26:2 (2009): 160.