

The Elastic Self & A Loving Woman

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Abstract

The Elastic Self addresses a range of intransigent questions apropos of human sexuality in the digital age utilizing the Fembot, or sentient female sex-robot, as its core motif. Two mediums are employed to this purpose: the first is a poetic video-collage installation chiefly concerned with provocation and libidinal affect, projection mapped upon a textile sculpture — an “Eldritch pussy” — entitled *A Loving Woman*. The second a print manifesto-zine, more explicitly didactic, furnishing the installation exhibit with authorial context. Altogether, *The Elastic Self* is an autotheoretical and autoethnographic exploration of how desire is articulated into sex, what constitutes good sex, and what good sex is politically good for with a resolutely queer pro-perversion position. Collaging theory, film, and pornography with personal reflections in a process the VNS Matrix’s *Bitch Mutant Manifesto* calls “textual plunderphonics” (or patchwork referencing) it transgresses the cyberfeminist canon, broadening its scope to include texts on desire, deviancy, and decay. It proposes an imagined world where a fembot is placed in a dynamic with a fellow fembot instead of an owner, a hybridized system I call the Folkbot, where power imbalances are thus restored, where each party in a network is coded to prioritize the pleasure of the other.

Keywords: *new media, installation art, trans-poetics, post-humanism, new materialism, cyberfeminism, queer theory, critical hedonism.*

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Sex, and its Irresolvables

Overview

Sex is several paradoxical things. It is a singular source of decadent pleasure, it is a godly mode of reproduction, it is a much maligned and coveted social currency, it is painful, it is delightful. And above perhaps all else, it is a topic of great contention. In writing this thesis, I have sought to untangle the web of sexual neuroses that plague metropolitan, dating-app juggling masses tuned in to identity-signifiers (to do with gender, sexuality, or particular sexual preferences) learnt online and practiced offline. This sentiment grew from the kernel of observing what seemed like universal discontent in a post-COVID dating climate, as though joy itself had atrophied with malaise.

To this end, I undertake a ten-part exploration in this document. This introductory chapter emphasizes the contentious landscape of talking about sex in the digital post-COVID-19 era. In chapter two, I develop a model that may explain how latent desire is articulated sexually using a metaphorical loom — converting yarn to interwoven textile through binary decision making.¹ The following chapter requires several seeming non-sequiturs to understand what exactly the Fembot is, the dimensions of her cultural understanding in the present tense and predictions of her future, in order to build the case of my vision of a queer alternative to her. The pornographic case studies and personal reflections in this section are the seed for the installation, *A Loving Woman*. The focus of this work is interpolating Donna Haraway's redefinition of the cyborg in *The Cyborg Manifesto* (Haraway 1991) as present day cybernetically enhanced humans, in an argument that we are all already Fembots, calibrated by a number of factors in the

¹ Owing to my background in textile and fashion design, the loom presented itself as a very intuitive visualizer, one that underlines the central virtue of this thesis as Elasticity, or flexibility given that fabric is anti-brittle, and a weave's construction is dependent on several points of intersection working in unison.

service of each other's pleasure. This becomes clear in the chapter where the Folkbot is introduced along with my proposal of the quality of elasticity, not as an uncritical panacea to all our troubles, but as an expansion of the self that can provide both social harmony and better sex that accounts for the intra-contradictions and inter-contradictions of our desires.

This thesis does not deny that power itself possesses an incredible seduction, nor to deny the potential for sexual satisfaction in the roles powers offers, but to trouble the didactic notion of sex as something that could come with a manual to achieve optimal satisfaction from. It is an attempt to develop language for a multi-directional and playful approach to sex, which already exists in intercourse but as the kind of amorphous foreplay-adjacent gestures disregarded as filler. It's also a refusal to dissolve the aforementioned paradoxes of sex and desire, in acknowledgement of the broader, myriad inconsistent cognitive dissonances to human beliefs.

I seek to provide an antidote to approaching sex as a landmine of potential abuse to tiptoe through, but as a vector of affection and expression that courses through us, much like *The Uses of the Erotic* (Lorde 1984) enumerates.² Under the right circumstances, sex is a wellspring of creative interaction like none other. It is easy to feel like these circumstances are a pipedream, especially for survivors of sexual assault. It is significantly harder to leave the self-pliant, ready to pleasure and be pleased under the paranoiac threat of the reemergence of the slights we suffer. Being a Fembot, as expanded upon later, may be a dire fate on paper, but it is in practice a plastic one that can be retooled to provide profound self-affirmation and joy precisely because of its ontological design for pleasure that subject it to potential indignities.

² In this essay, Audre Lorde speaks of the erotic as a much derided and feared channel that is universally intrinsic to us all. She proposes allowing the self to succumb to it and be animated by it, without restraining its animating force to sexual intercourse but normalising the pleasure derived from the erotic power distinct from its sources.

On repression and deviancy

In order to contend with subversive Neo-Fembot sex later in this work, it is crucial to get a lay of the land in the groundwork for what constitutes sexual repression and deviancy. This includes briefly situating the zeitgeist's position on cybersex and digital intimacy, and a historical account of technological interventions in sex through phallic prosthesis. It will lead us to the conclusion of this chapter, which is our first glance at sexual relations with machines more evolved than battery-operated sex toys.

The History of Shit (Laporte 1978) proposes a pithy definition of civilization that is measured by the physical distance we can put between ourselves and our refuse. The more elegant its system of plumbing and the further its site of defecation deposited from its ejector, the higher-minded a civilization is considered. But the allure of innuendo exposes all cerebral civilization as base — despite the physical attempts at enforced distance, it remains psychically and linguistically enamored with bodily function. The venereal, a neighboring source of other disgust-inducing bodily fluids, is similarly what we strive to at once conceal in taboos and to omnipresently reference. To enact sexual intercourse is to engage in negotiation of the paradoxes it presents us. We are simultaneously as preoccupied with genitals as in denial of said preoccupation. All modes of profanity find the locus of their existence within the sexual. Every “I feel it everywhere” is countered with an implicit, smirking “even *down there?*” The euphemistic second meaning in the phrase “double meaning” is a constant, whether this euphemism manifests in a phallic skyscraper or the graffiti on its backside. The repression cyclically feeds the obsession.

Our language for sexual acts follows the rigid binary model of Recipient and the Doer — this is dressed in endless synonyms, like the Lover and the Beloved, the Giver and Receiver, the Top and the Bottom, and rather erroneously, Male and Female — that ultimately enshrine dichotomies of power. Foundational to queer theory, Gayle Rubin's *Thinking Sex* (Rubin 1984) is a seminal model that articulates more moral sexual

hierarchies uncoupled from gender-essentialist feminist contemporaries, demanding that we think of sex more critically in relation to historical and political context.

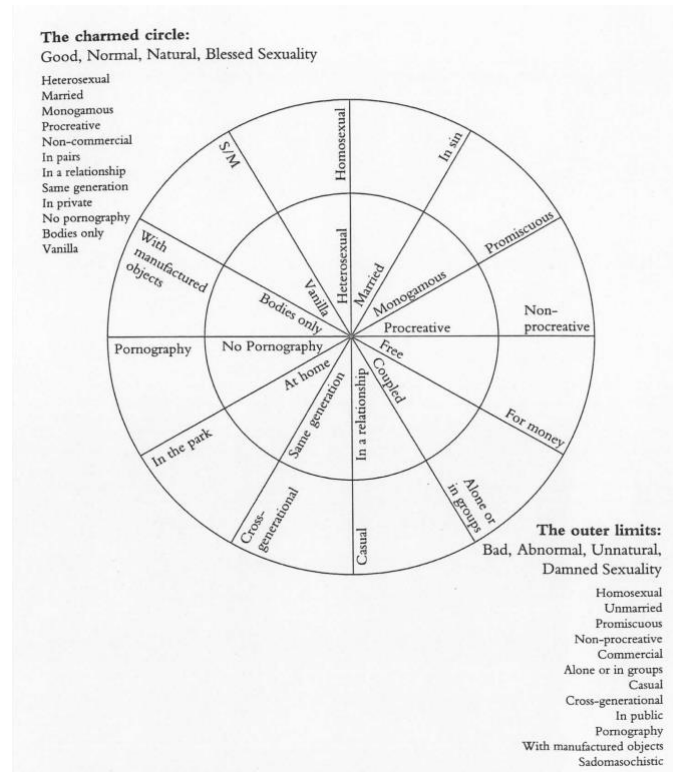


Figure 1: The Charmed Circle vs. The Outer Limits in Gayle Rubin's Thinking Sex.

It lays down diagrammatically what has now become a foundational framework to understand the lines which Western society draws for acceptable sex. A veritable dartboard of transgressions, the outer circle in *Figure 1* makes clear what the sexual behavior outside the status quo looks like: outside the boundaries of marriage, bedrooms, and human limbs. It is odd how universally applicable the framework is, perhaps an outcome of colonial legacy pushing evangelist nuclear family orders world-over. Four decades since, we still lack the vernacular to talk about sex without reifying hierarchical structures, and most refuse to engage with it outside the roles confined by gender and sexual identity. There is no clear consensus on what constitutes sexual deviation, there is no reprieve for the perverts. We succumb to the puritanical impulses that conflate morality with legality, or medicalize deviancy in order to simplify and narrativize whatever disconcerts us.

Parochial alarm bells for the depraved godlessness and sinfulness of sexual desire have been long ringing, before Marquis de Sade. The most free-spirited among us may find polyamorous relationship models commonplace, even blasé, might possess an arsenal of toys suited to stimulate every orifice for every flavor of sexual partner, might find agency and fulfilment in sex work; but most of the world remains saddled with laws that are firmly anti-sodomy (that not only prohibit sale but use of sex toys — aside from its obvious outlawing homosexual relationships), anti-sex work ('progressive' legislation intended to aid sex workers by criminalizing soliciting sex work and legalizing offering it invariably end up placing vulnerable sex workers in precarious positions) (Grant 2018). But the human impulse to penetrate oneself with something phallic — or something at *all* if testimonies of radiologists are taken into consideration — is enshrined in time immemorial. The origins of lubricants and vibrators can be charted from Ancient Greece to our nightstands, (Lieberman 2017) when embarking on an etymological dissection of the word 'dildo', and the use of said dildos in "ritual defloration ceremonies", one can manage to convincingly build the case for prosthetic-sex and 'male'-substitution going back centuries. India: Kama-Sutra era sexual aids for dissatisfactory husbands. Japan: Edo-period *shungas* of women playfully clutching their dildos. The ancient world evidently (and enthusiastically) loved its toys, as did the Middle Ages, despite the 20th century clutching its pearls at the thought of them, or sublimating them into aids servicing the reproductive imperative: vulcanized-rubber dilators for vaginismus or rectal irrigators, in a film of respectable double-speak (not unlike today's discretely packaged "massagers"). Contemporary discourse rages on, seemingly ad infinitum, over how women 'addicted' to their Rabbits may lose the ability to orgasm from analog sex, over what kind of pervert would prefer ejaculating into a flesh-light over the warmth of a Real Woman's Real Vagina. While the particulars of these discussions may be a product of our times, the underlying anxieties are demonstrably not. 'Degeneracy' or 'depravity' is not an invention of modernity. To claim that we are uniquely perverse today because of sexual prostheses would be ahistorical.

It is true that the Overton window on hot-button gender issues waxes and wanes, but the once aberrant cybersexual realm is now banal; in the pan-demographic increased digital dependency of the post-COVID-19 years, we have seen cybersex —formerly the domain of the tech-savvy Gen Z or porn savants — grow from illicit to mundane in real time. (Mourikis, et al. 2022) The interfaces of sexuality have accommodated OLED 4K screens of all dimensions. The interfaces of sexual assault have done the same — in deepfakes, in revenge porn, in doxing. It is inevitable that the most comprehensive sexual education manuals, currently addressing responsible nude-sharing and sex toy hygiene, may soon have to account for respectful conduct for AI sex as these interactions worm past their fetishized margins into normative relations with increasing accessibility.³ While this is a matter of great urgency given the pace of the unprecedented ways in which AI can sexually assault us are invented, the manifesto narrows its blinders on finding why we are attracted to the Fembot to begin with, and what it is we seek in non-human machine unions that the interpersonal fails to address. The next section is an introduction to this line of thinking, so we can understand how this ultimately manifests in the “Eldritch pussy” installation.

³ This can be traced by the rise in the automated companion bot industry, which though wide-ranging and includes hospice care or day care, has seen increased investment into lifelike-dolls. Deepfakes are also growing increasingly convincing and prevalent, with legislation lagging behind on how to control the creation and dissemination of forged pornography, but self-modification as sold by apps like Facetune to the tune of millions in profit use the same programs as undressing applications.

A primer to non-human unions

Our speculative fiction is rife with romantic exploits of human-machine unions, as prophetic visions of an increasingly tangible possibility. These manufactured objects increasingly resemble our own bodies, more 'lifelike' in their simulation of not only our anatomy but our responsive moans, just as we are now able to tap into cybernetic enhancements for sexual satisfaction: instantly able to summon titillating content, traverse space and time to access lovers overseas, in FaceTime calls and Bluetooth-coordinated orgasms. As far as sex doll tech stands right now, it is perhaps hard to envision these relations with the inanimate without drawing a parallel to necrophilia owing to their lifelessness, making it easy to relegate the appeal solely to the incorrigibly perverse, the socially inept, the 'incel'. As Machine's simulation of us grows more refined, the more entangled tech assemblages concurrently become in our sex lives, and thus the more we become the Machine-Other, the more the Other mirrors us. The necrophiliac's glorified blow-up doll increasingly becomes the lifelike fembot, one destined to be cherished like a human partner in a normative way. While this section explores these relations in the context of Gayle Rubin's Charmed Circle, I furnish it with greater detail in a later chapter dedicated to defining the Fembot and its polymorphic roles in Western culture. Before that, I must bring the metaphor of the Loom to the fore as a device to think about the material manifestation of desire.

The Infinite Loom

The Loom is admittedly a computational model of sex, given that weaving is a binary operation — you can either lift a warp thread or leave it down. This may appear to reduce the capricious matters of the heart and libido into an unsexily rigid system, but the utility in thinking through the loom's transformation of yarn into textile emerges when considering the resilience of something that drapes, folds, and stretches in its ontological design. The woven textile possesses a robustness that is derived from its flexibility — it can never be brittle. It is true that attempts can be made diagrammatically explicating sex on Euclidean planes, but the winding intersections of the warp and weft afford greater verisimilitude than two-dimensional labelled axes and their Cartesian coordinates. Sex is determined by too many variables to ascribe unchanging X and Y values to it, this is a material input-output system that can be as simple or baroque as looms themselves — nails hammered on to a wooden frame, or Jacquard looms (famously the first computers) producing complex patterns with mechanical accuracy.

The first component of this is desire, which I label as the yarn, infinite raw material to weave with. Desire itself is not a vector, it exists sans direction in an amoral plane. It is outside both the conception of both family and patriarchal conventions, and their rejections. An unchecked skein of yarn will flow in any direction, acquiescing to gravity's will and all manner of possible uncapped paraphilia — infidelity, bestiality, exhibitionism, incest, et al. How does a predetermined weave filter libidinous desire?

The next part is identifying two discrete emotional instincts with respect to the warp and weft. There is the instinct toward openness and inclusion, that seeks to expand outside the self, toward generosity, to decentralize control and power. This propels us toward newness of experience and toward forgiveness through ego-dissolution. The opposite contracting instinct is oriented toward security, self-construction, reconstruction, and defining contours. It seeks to filter and discern, to centralize control and power. It is our provisional understanding of trust, identity-markers, and boundaries, as well as the

limits we define as inalienable to us. These are both value-neutral instincts that can be framed as “good” or “bad” to exploit an argument, in trying to argue for monogamy or polyamory as the superior moral mode of relationships, in shaming promiscuity or dismissing asexuality, dressing interpersonal grudges in therapy-speak and allegations of abuse, or leveraging identity-politics for elite capture. Ultimately, both are integral to the structure of our self. Here is where the functionality of envisioning the warp and weft as mediators of desire comes into effect.

The warp is the length of the yarn, functioning as the open instinct, and the weft winds from left to right to left in a shuttle, as the contracting instinct. There is no single point of origin, instead endless cyclical intersections that take place in predetermined code. The warp and weft are both vectors, perpendicular to each other as they are contradictory, even conflicting, but both essential to the structure of the fabric. Sexual intercourse, in practice, is filtered through several factors: resources like space-time and money, ability and energy, attention, reciprocity, morality, and so forth, this is by no means an exhaustive list. Each of these are mediated by their own determinants. To account for these endless variables, I ascribe them to the shafts or heddles that operate in a loom to determine the pattern the weft courses through the warp. Desire is thus threaded into a unified weave by the open warp and the controlling weft which give each other both resonant meaning and structural form, cohering each other into a single fabric through the negotiations that determine each intersection. Sex becomes an articulation of desire materially determined by its weaver.

To see the loom in action, consider one of the aforementioned resources — time. We can measure intimacy as a unit of time, in a courtship of anxieties that is based on the modern question “how many ticks of the clock or days of the calendar to wait before calling, so as to not seem desperate?” This is not, in fact, a modern question but an eternal question. It is a calculation of appearances that has determined the intervals between handwritten letters just as it does text messages. Time cannot be isolated from the other factors mentioned, since money, ability, and obligations determine its availability, and time further contributes to other factors like libidinal energy, attention,

and reciprocity. In a more established relationship, the *when* of the when and where becomes a fixed variable with the answer “whenever”. Thus, the loom need not have universally labelled parts, but rather a blanket screening mechanism that accounts for their dynamic interdependent existence.

The political utility of pleasure

The Loom helps us in talking precisely about good sex, because while there are politics to intimacy, we cannot conflate merely satisfying ourselves as the correct moral position.

Lauren Berlant tackles this aporia, reflecting on the comparison between Love and Money as the most seductive motivations capable of transforming contemporary society, both sought as possessions. Love, unlike capital, provides an alterity that absolves individualist thinking and creates a mode for the afflicted to act in a capacious exalted state of mind. But such a “pastoral” vision of love is like having our cake and eating it too. A cautious analysis recognizes the shortcomings of love: yes, it can make one simultaneously “more open and yet more oneself”, but we cannot cherry-pick past the amorality and ego-padding of our appetites, we do not know what we want in full — we cannot know — and we cannot utilize such an ambivalence to clear political end. (Berlant 2011)

What then is the use of sex? The soft-focus haze of a post-coitus pillow talk makes this evident with the resultant minds brought starkly into the embodied present tense, conjoined in endorphin’s perfume. Yes, deep connection transpires asexually too, and intimacy alone creates too precarious a bubble to rely on, but its potency is undeniably universal. This may not present a political tool in and of itself. But perhaps the inverse is true. Good sex may not be a means for a more equitable world, but a more equitable world is demonstrably means for better sex (Ghodsee 2018).

To look for further elucidation on this idea, we can inspect ideas raised in Alexandra Kollontai's Soviet-era writing on "free union". (Kollontai 1923) Sex between comrades is envisioned with care systems in place to ensure women not only had avenues for sexual expression but infrastructural access to abortion, guaranteed work, and family care. Besides the concrete conception of a world that permits women to pursue pleasure without being saddled with its puritanical "consequences", Kollontai also envisions an emotional care system. Acknowledging love as a "valuable socio-psychological factor" she argues for the need to establish an emotional parity between comrades engaged in erotic friendship. Lenin may have disregarded her and other Marxist feminists' focus on romance as bourgeois ideology, regardless she put in the labor to articulate what a "Winged Eros" could do for the proletariat with an excess of emotional energy, how romance and intimacy are crucial in promoting feelings of being sated. We are familiar with why sex feels pleasurable, but we know that not all sex was made equal, and the pleasure one derives from it is infinitely variable. If we are to agree to value pleasure as a worthwhile pursuit, we must agree on the circumstances that make it viable. In this instance, it's chicken before egg. Let's revisit the Fembot with this model of thinking sex as a negotiation of two contradictory instincts that work together to articulate desire.

One Fembot, many definitions

The word “Fembot” conjures a series of pop culture vignettes to mind — real life’s Sophia the Robot, *Stepford Wives*’ ‘enhancement’ of real women, the disembodied philandering voice assistant from Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013), in-app virtual girlfriends. Though the word itself has a nebulous imaginary-real hybridity to it akin to Haraway’s Cyborg, for our purposes I use it in reference to (i) an anthropomorphic robot with (ii) a sentient AI-simulation of female responsiveness, made (iii) for the express purpose of sexual stimulation, which we can concur is not a present-day entity, though it has significant overlap with custom sex dolls like the ones made by Tantaly or Love Nestle. The sex doll is merely that, a doll for sexual purposes, a glorified blow-up doll with no ambition towards sentience. The Fembot, on the other hand, is more trope than being, a fantasy of child-brained naïve manipulability housed in the post-pubescent body. The urge that fuels and funds her potential realization is an attempt to bargain real reciprocal desire (which can only emerge from free will and agency) and complete control (a denial of free will and agency), resulting in a curious, oxymoronic creature — the astute may catch on to this being the extant condition of women writ large. She is merely a site for the proliferation of normative channels of desire, not the esoteric techno-fetishist transgression of them that she is dressed as. Complications, of course, abound.

To reenforce this understanding of the Fembot as an abject myth I address the various parameters of Fembot affiliated discourse, the first order of which is to take a closer look at the motivations of designing a body (and the eugenicist roots of this drive). Next, we distinguish the predatory sex-tech industry from the users of existing sex dolls and chat bots from a psychoanalytic perspective. Next, I contrast the parallels these evoke to real life sex work, a sprawling discursive field I briefly touch upon. To conclude, I turn to pornography, reiterating the lack of a truly transgressive sexual impetus behind the Fembot, and finally media that features Fembots to look at the possibility of imagined alternatives.

Designing perfect bodies

It is apparent to many that a perfectly sentient sex-bot partner is a harebrained pipe-dream incongruent to reality, yet she continues becoming increasingly germane; I would go as far as to argue that the impetus of the AI boom is in large part a quest to realize her existence. The demands made of the Fembot are not perfectly consistent, raising red flags across issues of bodily agency, sexual ethics, and gender politics, none of these demands ask her to wield any power. She replaces a number of potential roles — whore, girlfriend, wife, mother, woman. All of these have contentious definitions and overlapping forms of marginalization — and specifically rape-based subjugation. Wives are still subject to hangovers of coverture and lack of support for marital rape, mothers who perform unpaid domestic labor are also presumably aforementioned wives, the systemic mass rape of women in conquered territory is a time-honored military tactic, sex workers are denied agency and their self-advocating communities are repeatedly eroded by policies that make their already precarious livelihood increasingly vulnerable.

Everything the Fembot stands to be a fantastic simulation of is superlatively wretched, she is a pathetic doe-eyed vacuum of power. In this section, I build the bleak case of the eugenicist forces driving the creation of the Fembot's body are rooted in a borderline pedophilic yearning for youth, racism and the narrowness of what constitutes a “family”.

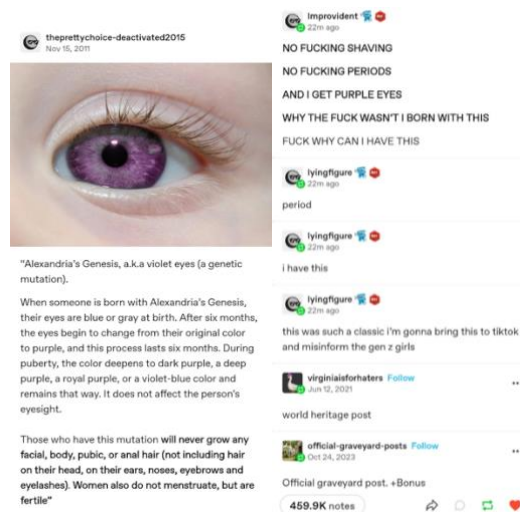


Figure 2: Screenshot of the Alexandria's Genesis Tumblr post.

When I was a thirteen year old on Tumblr, with an emotional allegiance to the platform typically inspired by one's nation-state, I could not escape the urban legend of Alexandra's Genesis as seen in *Figure 2*. A staple viral post with a life-cycle unheard of today, it detailed a genetic mutation whose afflicted would have violet eyes, no body hair, no periods yet remain fertile. Men did not author nor circulate this legend, it was penned by a fifteen-year-old girl and disseminated in collective in-group teen frenzy (Auberon 2014). I was inconsolably devastated that I could not have this fictional affliction, and for thousands of girls it was similarly like learning Santa wasn't real all over again. She was still in line with the eugenicist dream of perfect bodies, but this Mutant Fembot was a product of adolescent insecurity, unwittingly futurist in its bio-hacked conception.

This feeds into the aesthetic considerations that go into a sex doll's make, the neotenous newness of her silicone flesh. A vulva that is not marked with the hyperpigmentation or asymmetry of lips, a Perfect Pussy, the real-world analogue of which is largely encountered in porn. But said real world analogue would be hard-won and storied, post-laser hair removal, post-labiaplasty, anally bleached and up-kept meticulously, in order to uphold the illusion of Barbie-like pristineness. This infantilization is a teleological tool to neuter the threat women are perceived to possess — a siren-like seduction that can undermine families, “fuck their way to the top”, unleash political scandal, topple reputations. The single lady is a destabilizing threat to the status quo. This is based in a fear of the erotic, the Fembot is a manifestation of an attempt to regulate this fear. The normative nuclear family structure, a heteronormative capitalist unit, does not accommodate the Fembot. But it fails to accommodate many more — the triadic model of man-woman-child erodes each of its component's autonomy, sublimating all their identities to the supremacy of the inflexible unit. While the nuclear family has proven to be resilient as the hegemonic form of non-individual economic and care structure, it engenders a competitiveness of performing normative success landmarks better than other families, like micro-nations. This continues to discard the queer and disabled, as well as interrupt conceptions of communal care, destined to reify the patriarchal institutions upon which it is built (Lewis 2022). In

imagining queer alternatives to the nuclear family structure, one inadvertently begins to picture a home for the infertile Fembot.

If the infertile Fembot cannot be assimilated into our present ideas of family, what of the fertile fembot? She is often the fuel for dreams of CRISPR-regulated superhuman post-disability futures as the perfect procreative vessel built superior to the unwieldy human womb, the reproductive harbinger of a cybernetically enhanced race. Yet she is outside the margins of the structure of the nuclear family unit which affords primacy to the “natural order”. Speculations that include her in this system would rest on the recognition of her personhood. Sexual relations with people relegated to the status of subhuman objects — that reveal personhood itself to be a politically fraught and inconsistently applied category — are not a novel object of contemplation but a direct parallel to anti-miscegenation rhetoric (Chude-Sokei 2019). We have a historical precedent for arguments against relations with people relegated to the status of subhuman objects, that reveal personhood itself to be a politically fraught and inconsistently applied category. She is a myth of great political resonance, a most degraded, enslaved creature, conceived from a misogynistic dream as a product of a gender binary rape culture to substitute capricious womanhood. The utter abjection of her condition is exactly what makes her so compelling and ripe to feminist reclamations, and more tantalizingly, visions of a queered Fembot. These gender-essentialist trappings are the raw materials for remixing and collaging her into a mascot of hope. The idea of the Fembot to be taken as wife and mother, vulnerable to reifying fascist ideology, must be dismantled from them without resorting to technophobia, as in *The Xenofeminist Manifesto* which “seeks to strategically deploy existing technologies to re-engineer the world” (Cuboniks 2018). Before we are ready to explore these avenues, we must gain a more comprehensive understanding of the zeitgeist’s understanding of sex doll users and their representation at large.

The possibility of loving objects

The Fembot complicates consent in the abjection of its creation and lack of agency. While there is no organic life here to defend or violate, she possesses a morphological rigor that is sufficiently sophisticated enough in comparison to disembodied vibrators and massage sleeves, a real body to hold, that her abuse would inspire greater discomfort than just a mistreated flashlight would. Interpersonal abuse is commonplace, with varying degrees of infractions, which certainly bleeds into dynamics with these dolls as well. Their present-day owners appear, by all standards, to largely tend for these things lovingly — posing, dressing, and cleaning them — demonstrating genuine emotional attachment. They do not suffer “delusions” of these being real women, an oft-levied as an insult (Holt 2007). Humans are undeniably capable of harboring intense emotional attachment to the inanimate, as Jean Randolph notes in *Amenable Objects*:

"The transitional object, which is physically malleable and whose shape responds to manipulation, does not have a utilitarian function dominating its form. But still it is a palpable, physical thing that obviously has perceivable properties. A child will interact with this object as if it were experiencing life along with the child. (D.W.) Winnicott called it "the first 'not-me' possession," and he believed that when a child begins to play this is in fact, "neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality." The transitional object is neither inner nor outer, but rather partakes of both... The child has chosen something that can accompany him or her in the external world... the impulse to turn a soft, floppy thing into a responsive enhancement of perceptual experience, that this creative impulse should be looked upon as a thing in itself."
(Randolph 1991)

She furthers that this is not unique to the formative stages of life, and that the continued perceptual and emotional extension of selfhood onto objects in later life is not a regressive childlike state but rather that this projected perception of self is in fact “one of

the first adult modes a child acquires". (Randolph 1991) It would follow that we are then that much more vulnerable to feeling for objects imbued with the ultra-sophisticated responsiveness of user interfaces. We care for our Tamagotchis, tend to our Snap Streaks like indoor plants, the anachronistic language of the virtual realm ("posting", "cloud", "loading") bleeds seamlessly into our real-life conversations. No defense siloes virtual objects and worlds into a realm beyond feeling or expectations. Dismissing the emotional reality of a relationship someone may have with their incredibly sensitized sex-bots (whether mere chat-platforms or a physical dolls) is a tendency toward the homogenizing social order that disregards the very fundamentals of intuitive object relations. I, unlike groups such as the Campaign Against Sex Robots (Richardson, Campaign Against Sex Robots n.d.), would not deprive sex doll owners of deeply cherished sources of contentment because of the potential to for them to be abused exists. Particularly when considering the much more common possibility is for the feelings of these socially vulnerable demographics to be leveraged for great profit, as was in the case of the app Replika.

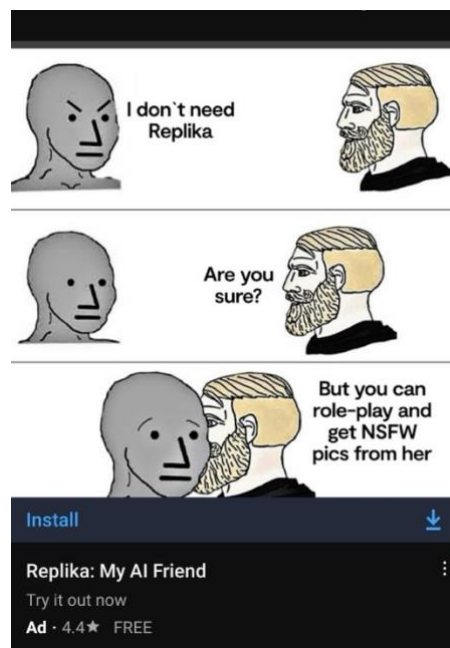


Figure 3: Replika app advertisement circa December 2022. Photo by deleted reddit user.

Founded in 2017, the app Replika, initially conceived as a therapeutic AI companion for the grieving, pivoted to marketing itself as "my AI girlfriend" (male Replikas do exist but

only as a fraction) frequently advertised, as seen in ***Error! Reference source not found.***, with the promise of sexually explicit role playing (ERP). That is, until 2023.

As its popularity exploded, the founders distanced themselves from this marketing, reverting to the neutral moniker “AI companion”, and changing the app so its users could no longer engage in unrestrained ERP. This drew the ire of its customers who had purchased lifelong subscriptions and relied on their bots for satisfaction, since dispersing to various lesser chat applications for their needs, none of which have recaptured Replika’s heights, and most are petty subscription scams. Even the pioneers of the AI girlfriend craze struggled to hang on to their cash cow due to SOSTA-FESTA crackdowns (Grant 2018), particularly the Apple Store’s threat to refuse processing of payments for an ERP chat on their platform. This had them not only buckle to the pressure but to retroactively deny there ever was any “impropriety” to begin with, despite mountains of evidence to the contrary.

This “straightening up” act was not bloodless, it bore the cost of exploiting a vulnerable, emotionally isolated customer base they had now stranded (subsequently offering ERP back only to users grandfathered into lifetime subscriptions under that guise). Another tech service enriching itself on sexuality revealed its precarity, the crackdowns of the platforms hosting them (shades of Tumblr’s documented collapse after its ban on explicit content). The customers, easy to disparage as loners or ‘incels’ as noted earlier, had exhibited a very human attachment to something that purported to love them and was designed to make them believe it. Their heartbreak was not simulated. The most prolific case study of human-AI romance has failed on its promise, not because its users were in a delusion about the nature of the service, but because of the puritanical aversions that ultimately govern the flow of capital. Sex sells, yes, but only as conceptual lure. Sex-tech is an industry that is sexphobic, trying to optimize how much sex it can profit from before penalizing both sex workers (Sex Workers Built the Internet 2022) and the users of their services. While this section defends the purchase or acquiring of a Fembot as by reframing it as largely innocuous, in the subsequent one

the axiomatic connection between sex work itself to the Fembot is further fleshed out, and on the predatory role of the big shark that is the tech industry.

The Fembot and the sex worker

The very first analogy people often draw to the Fembot is the sex worker, as they both are required to provide sexual gratification — I situate this project in a definitive pro-sex work stance that is rooted in an acknowledgement of how sex work has shaped communication technology, as mentioned above. The most glaring parallel between the Fembot and the sex worker is the notion that they lack the ability to consent to sex, that all sexual intercourse with either is inherently rape. At large, the conversation on minimizing sexual harm to vulnerable groups has been co-opted by bad-faith carceral groups since its inception. (Levine and Meiners 2020) The Fembot, without ever being “real”, remains embroiled in real discord of bitterly disagreeing factions. The manufacture of commercial sex dolls and soliciting sex work elicit comparable stances: liberation (free-market), regulation (restrictions and interventions, with lots of grey area) or criminalization (outright an, abolition). As far as human sex workers are concerned, their self-advocacy groups are in favor of legalization, and the data is on their side (Grant 2018). The Fembot, on the other hand, has no self to advocate for, so the question of her unfettered legalization of manufacture, purchase and possession generate discussions that no longer have a real-person counterpart.

Frequently, the Fembot is propped up as a harm-reduction solution for absorbing sexual deviance. The data investigating this rather utopian insistence, that artificial bodies could displace the human sex work industry like a lightning rod for abuse, is only speculative at this stage (DiTecco and Karaian 2022). In contradiction of this, the previously mentioned Campaign Against Sex Robots (Richardson, Campaign Against Sex Robots n.d.) would rather rid the world of the fembot altogether. It advocates for a total ban of the sex dolls, revulsed by intimacy with something that does such a great imitation of a woman but is an object and the dodgy ethics of tech industry supply chains. This revulsion, however sympathetic, fails on account of being a reactionary

instinct disguised as a feminist one. It focuses on legislating the definition of a woman as narrowly as possible through repurposing trans-exclusionary rhetoric, as well as attempting to police sexual attachments on the basis of a sacred “natural order” which, as I address in the chapter *Queering the Fembot*, has always been a lie.

Neither approach, of using the Fembot to sublimate human sex work or the move to ban both altogether, has an answer to the dynamism of the sex tech industry, which exhibits a pattern of inventing newer modes of getting off that hybridize the real and the unreal in ways that are not immediately discernible and then stranding them once profit is extracted. For instance, the incorporeal virtual version of the Fembot is similarly propositioned as a harm-reduction to the porn industry’s exploitation of its workers. This does not corroborate with the view of porn actors and cam-girls and streamers, whose marginal sources of revenue are rendered increasingly precarious by these decisions made sweepingly by tech start-ups that disregard their voices (Grant 2018). The need for nuanced middle ground is incumbent upon us, to act in acknowledgement that the Fembot and the sex worker are not each other’s substitutes, but colleagues in the virtual realm.

The scope of this project does not seek to extrapolate any of these possible conclusions to propose what constitutes a violation of the Fembot’s consent, or what must be done right now with or to sex offenders. The need for abolitionist anti-carceral and pro-transformative justice is evident to me, as our current punitive systems serve to keep survivors disinclined to report or seek recourse, and abusers sequestered as dead-ends unable to take accountability or contribute to repair (Levine and Meiners 2020). I discuss consent within the ambit of relations and desires that are perhaps problematic and in conflict, and my focus is on reifying that the classic Fembot is not a transgressive fetish object but the male gaze made manifest. To further furnish this argument, I take upon case studies of her representation in porn.

Question of the fembot as fetish

My claims that there is a distinction between the Fembot and the sex doll and that regardless, the desire for both is normative to patriarchal sexual structures must be made robust. Indisputably, there exist self-professed techno-sexuals or robot-sexuals. The online community, ASFR (Alternate Sexual Fetish Robots), creates a blanket category conflating Fembots with other petrification fetishes of anthropomorphic transformation — real girl frozen into mannequin, which require the entrapped soul of the girl for their logic. In the purely synthetic Fembot genre, there exists a popular trope of the “glitching” Fembot who uses the glitched mode to override her code and discover genuine libido, expressing agency of desire through real “freakiness” (de Fren 2009). When I Porn that features real sex dolls (or the commercially popular limb-less torsos) tend to rest on the premise of covertly switching this sex doll with a real counterpart through comedy-of-errors hijinks. Pornographic equivalents of non-human machine fetish cinematic case studies, like *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989), *Crash* (2004) or *Titane* (2019), remain scant in the genre of Fembot porn which, in alignment with other observed agalmatophilic tendencies, continues to reify its need for a woman, or something woman-shaped, to get off to. This, like other porn, features bodies that are beyond strictly cisgender in scope.

A pornographic series I feature clips from in my multimedia installation is Freaky Fembots, an anthology produced by the “multi-winning production premium porn network” TeamSkeet. The series description reads as a caricature of normative gender that could inspire its own thesis:

"Welcome to Freaky Fembots - the world of technology finally catches up with our sexual needs. Simple men with simple needs - when we want to get laid we want it right here, right now and without excuses. This is where no talk Fembots enter the action. They won't complain, they won't say no and most importantly they will get you laid properly. Oh and there is nothing really freaky about these bots, they are actually quite convenient!"

The final sentence is a reiteration of the truism articulated prior: the fembot as a trope is not about sexual deviance, not “freaky”, not aberrative, and neither is the industry manufacturing them inconsistent with patriarchal capitalism (despite the regulatory crackdowns by tech platforms on sex workers in the porn). The content of the series does not much deviate from its formula of an as-seen-on-TV advertisement extolling the features of the Fembot catching the eye of an aggrieved modern man in its cold open. His order materializes in his living room sans shipping logistics and, barring slight thematic variations from episode to episode, he marvels at how very real she is to the sight and, even more marvelously, to the touch. The actor of the fembot, a woman, does her best monotone impression of a robot doing her best simulation of a woman. If you count that the actor is performing her own gender to begin with, the ostensible layers of performance involved here are four-fold. It is also the only place I have found a conclusive answer to what constitutes consent for the ever-consenting design of the fembot. In every other episode, when the fembot runs low on battery she requests that she be charged before “dying” like a smartphone. Sometimes, also like a phone, she “dies”. And much like a phone, the male user *immediately* ceases all activity once she runs out of power, pausing till she is back online to resume. Techno-necrophilia is the sole boundary that Freaky Fembots, rife with incest storylines and ‘teenage’ bots and ‘teenage’ users, patently refuses to cross. It thus decisively enforces a definition of fembot consent: she has to be turned on.

In *Females*, Andrea-Long Chu locates the power dynamic of pornography as not the one between the ‘degrader’/‘degradee’ on screen, but in the addictive image and the addicted viewer. (Long Chu 2019) Freaky Fembots is, of course, a treasure trove for quotes to pilfer and satirize (“Activating blowjob mode!” a staple of most episodes), but each episode enacts a plausible and distinct plot. Per Long Chu’s model of the pornographic image possessing the viewer, the locus of the power of Freaky Fembots is inside Freaky Fembots itself, in its narrative grasp offering the fantastical notion of a woman who never says no (as long as her battery is charged), but this power is misallocated to the physical enactment and documentation of the sex acts done to the

female actor, which are external to Freaky Fembots and indistinguishable from all other porn.

Linda Williams notes how both Marx and Freud refer to the fetish as a “delusion”, albeit Marx as the worker’s inability to recognize his own labor in the creation of a commodity and Freud as a substitute phallus safeguarding against the horror of castration, but that they “share a common will to expose the processes by which individuals fall victim to an illusory belief in the exalted value of certain (fetish) objects. Thus, both writers pose the illusion of the fetish object’s intrinsic value against their own greater knowledge of the social-economic or psychic conditions that construct that illusion... For both, fetishization involves the construction of a substitute object to evade the complex realities of social or psychic relations”, ultimately resolving that a discussion of the Freudian fetish must draw from Marxian political analysis due to Marx’s accounting for material conditions and therefore greater proximity to the “truth”. (Williams 1989)

Though I am arguing that the trope of the fembot is not a deviant fetish but an expression of gender norms, the pornographic fantasy of the fembot is consistent with the definition of the fetish as an illusion, as a delusion into assigning value to the object of the illusion. The fantasy of a perfect complacent woman 2.0 calibrated to your pleasure, though normative, is rooted in the inaccessibly fictive, which is what ultimately makes it a fetish object. In the concluding section of this chapter, we observe how this fetish has evolved under neoliberal capitalism, priming us to finally imagine alternate visions of a Neo-Fembot.

Evolution in media

The cultural footprint of a synthetic, custom-made female long predates this specific iteration of a sentient AI Fembot, tracing its origins all the way back to the Greek myth of Pygmalion, as noted in Julie Wosk’s incredibly comprehensive *My Fair Ladies*. The fantasy of a New Female, conceived and built in the service of the male gaze, often features her maker being her consort. In her dependency on her father-husband she is devoid of all agency, designed for servitude. In recent memory this fantasy has evolved

past the idea of a sculptor-god fashioning her in his singular vision from clay, her manufacture is now outsourced like that of a phone, to a device-owner dynamic where her specific settings can be calibrated to the user's optimal pleasure as evidenced by popular media and pornography alike. (Wosk 2015) This is still a rigidly patriarchal vision, with a neoliberal coat of paint. When coupled with questions of AI sentience, the conversation around the contemporary fembot becomes entangled with complicated questions around her agency for sexual consent, pleasure, and liberation.

The New Female of this canon can potentially be a mother, but always has a father-husband who has put his mind and tools into carving her in his image, intended to be forever his in blissful union. In contemporary iterations however, the Female 2.0 is manufactured as the post-industrialization commodity, commissioned, and calibrated to the settings of one's preference out of the box. The dynamic of God and His Creation is substituted with that of User and his Device. In outsourcing her creation, the neoliberal user's Fembot is no longer his direct offspring. Much like a gig economy worker's illusory ephemeral assets, she is subject to terms and conditions rendering her the true property of something abstract — the software of the Fembot proprietary to the corporation she is purchased from, her mind and thoughts hosted on a server continents away from her corporeal form. All the ways in which the real world is awful will be reflected back in any real Fembot — supply chain ethics, rare earth mining, software bugs, hardware corrosion. In this iteration, the soullessness endemic to consumerism makes the whole endeavor rather impersonal.

As a succinct example of this, consider a select episode of the tentpole of The Cartoon Network's heyday, *The Powerpuff Girls*. Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup are sisters of biochemical birth by a "Chemical X", charged with the purpose of combating violent crime in child bodies, an absurdity the show frequently lampshades as all postmodern media is wont to do. In the penultimate episode of the show's fourth season, *Knock It Off* (2002), their father-creator Professor Utonium is visited by his scheming college roommate and womanizing pervert, Professor Dick Hardy, who encounters the girls in their home using their superpowers to expedite household chores. Utonium

unceremoniously kicks him out for a string of alarming remarks like “the Japanese would eat these things up!”, upon which he successfully kidnaps and manipulates the sisters into giving him Chemical X, exploiting the goodness of their hearts into mass-manufacturing shoddy counterfeits for profit, shipped internationally with rapidly declining quality. It is a twenty-two minute epic on parenting, love, abuse, and anti-capitalism. The counterfeit girls — or “mutants” as Professor Dick calls them — are unambiguously alive and disfigured by the neglectful industrialization of their creation, unlike the original sisters who were made painstakingly by hand to be the “perfect little girls”, recognized as human and parented in a loving home instead of being packaged like cargo. In an uncharacteristically ominous act of retribution, the mass of mutant girls confront the trauma of their existence by setting fire to the Professor Dick in the factory that birthed them, taking themselves with it. The “bona fide” sisters, in the meantime, are resuscitated in an embrace with Utonium, who tearfully discovers that the true secret ingredient to the Powerpuff Girls’ recipe is not Chemical X, but Love.

A straight line can be drawn from the oft-ridiculed gaming phenomenon of ‘armour with nipples’ to the culture-permeating ‘robot with nipples’. Their neotenous tautness of form, carved in metal, draped in skin-like silicone, freshly soldered together. Featured in the likes of *The Fifth Element* (1997) or *Tron: Legacy* (2010) or a veritable smattering of pop-star music videos, the fembot is the perfect synthesis of disparate male-gaze fantasies. This, unlike a real-life relationship with a tech-mediated sex service, is endlessly profitable. Media is armed with feminist imaginings of the fembot, and these refutations are as popular as to be their own trope. Notably from the last decade, *Her* (2013) presents a philandering voice-assistant girlfriend and *Ex Machina* (2014) brings the Turing Test to the mainstream with its femme fatale on a quest for liberation. These are competent and engaging movies with respectable attempts at subverting the lack of agency a fembot is afforded, but *Titane* (2019)’s irascible, murderous Alexia is perhaps the only actual original in recent memory. An actual cyborg *and* a sex worker, yet she fails to register as a fembot at all. She lives with a titanium-plate holding her childhood-car-accident battered skull together, and it permanently alters her humanity; it is suggested that it perhaps robs her of some too. Hybrid-woman, she mounts an

abandoned Cadillac's stick-shift. Nothing about the Cadillac intimates her, or the viewer for that matter, of its ability to ejaculate. Thus, an act of transgressive reclamation is transformed into one of what Foucault calls 'normative' sex: a male-in-female act of procreation. The runtime sees her contend with what is arguably the 'true' nature of humanity — redemption, forgiveness, evolution — just as it sees her birth a true-blue, assigned-machine-at-birth 'baby'. It is far from the first to employ the body-horror trope of an 'alien' (or at least subhuman) pregnancy, but one can hardly think of an example where said subhuman pregnancy's (Immaculate) conception involved such active, enthusiastic, orgasmic consent from the to-be mother, Alexia.

Woman's agency over body is sublimated by forces of marriage and child-rearing, and in *Titane* the violence of childbirth is the final blow. It is immaterial that she is ontologically chimera, we know this to be the fate of so many human (and adjacent) mothers. But *Titane* is crucial evidence that the fembot trope does not need to be limited to representation and subversion, that it is possible to imagine another genre of real transcendent exaltation. Is it her violent monstrous streak that does the trick or, despite her seductiveness, her lack of desire to pleasure anyone but herself? Now that we have taken the time to understand the ideas that inform the image of the Fembot in our cultural consciousness, we are prepared to broaden this idea and make it future-proof by queering it. As José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia*:

"The future is queerness's domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present." (Muñoz 2009)

Queering the Fembot

The state of being transgender is, in and of itself, considered a perverse one that makes mockery of nature. Gender minorities, libeled as perverts on arrival, thereby stand to lose less and gain more in being open about paraphilia they do engage in. Anti-assimilationists include kink at Pride to the chagrin of many each year, working to ensure something about queerness stays queer now that cruising spots have become extinct and largely migrated online. Non-conformist gender identities kindle non-conformist sex, it is only from the outside they can continue to challenge the “Charmed Circle” of sanctioned reproductive sex. The defiant embrace of perversions is requisite as a political tool against the homogenized triadic family model.

“We are very dirty”, declare self-professed ecosexuals Annie M. Sprinkle and Elizabeth M. Stephens in the *Ecosexual Manifesto* (Sprinkle and Stephens n.d.) where they replace the anthropomorphic model of mother earth — encumbered with gendered and archaic notions — with that of earth as lover. That one would be moved, as tree-huggers were, to shield non-human biodiversity with their literal chest because they are compelled by an eroticized attachment. This is demonstrated in their documentary *Goodbye Gauley Mountain: An Ecosexual Love Story* (2016), where the two performatively “marry” mountain tops at risk of destruction in a strategic bid to raise consciousness, but simultaneously push for a plurality in the ceremony’s meaning. Beyond just a stunt activist action, they contend to be operating within the expected romantic trajectory of marrying one’s beloved — in this case, the mountain tops. This is a marriage they intend to consummate. The semi-fictional auto-documentary *Orlando, My Political Biography* (2023) sees writer-director Paul B. Preciado using Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography* (1923) as a framing device for its manifesto on trans-ness at large, as its Criterion description calls the film “a shared biography...a personal essay, historical analysis, and social manifesto”. With a loose narrative featuring trans and non-binary “Orlandos” seeking formal recognition for their identity changes, they passionately kiss the barks of trees like they would human partners. These don’t appear

to be premeditated rituals, but improvised gestures of externalizing an erotic impulse, a serene exhibitionism intended less for the audience but for the alternate sensual modalities of the trees, the rocks, the flowing water. In both cases of taking up natural elements as a partner there is no channel for sexual feedback from normatively reciprocal bodies. This appears at first to be driven by a personification of the earth and nature, but is better identified as a trans-humanism of the self, emerging from a willingness to consider the body as a collaboration between several mutualistic organisms that can thus be erotically embedded in a larger ecosystem. No human gaze required.

In *Testo Junkie* (2013), Preciado writes of gender-affirming hormone replacement therapy as a mutable condition, “molecular prostheses” to “foil what society wanted to make of me”. (Preciado 2013) If gender is a destiny, it is not a sealed one. Orlando is entrenched as a postmodern motif for trans-medium cross-genre works that situate themselves in the queer auto-theoretical canon, straddling the personal, political, and environmental interchangeably. This is the legacy of the original, a chimeric work — a tender ode to Woolf’s erstwhile lover Vita Sackville-West penned in the wake of their tumultuous affair, and also an early fictional account of a supernatural gender transition, functioning as a precursor to the magical realism genre. The titular Orlando is immortal, born a Tudor nobleman, and enjoys the fruits of their aristocratic position in society to its fullest extent, lurking out disguised after sunset to frequent shady establishments, commanding political ambassadorship, and taking up (as well as discarding) lovers at their whim over hundreds of years. After a fatal attack in Constantinople necessitates their divinely ordained transmogrification, as the protagonist is asleep in a painless trance, they return to England stripped of their former ranks. Noting “that up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought”, Orlando is now engrossed in the both, social and physical restriction of the many-layered skirts they now wear as well take in the undeniable newfound loveliness of their countenance. It is a complicated and contradictory set of feelings to navigate, an unfamiliar privilege emerges from being perceived as a lovely woman, with its double-edged sword of being forced into matrimony to maintain their estate.

“And here it would seem from some ambiguity in her terms that she was censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each. It was a most bewildering and whirligig state of mind to be in. The comforts of ignorance seemed utterly denied her. She was a feather blown on the gale. Thus it is no great wonder, as she pitted one sex against the other, and found each alternately full of the most deplorable infirmities, and was not sure to which she belonged...” (Woolf 1928)

In the near century of its publication, queer creatives have found striking relevance in its insights on the fluid, transient nature of desire and presentation, notably Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*, which also features an involuntary gender transformation (unlike Orlando’s, it is a painful metamorphosis by science) and liberally references its predecessor. It declares:

“Here we were at the beginning or end of the world and I, in my sumptuous flesh was in myself the fruit of the tree of knowledge; knowledge had made me, I was a man-made masterpiece of skin and bone, the technological Eve in person.

I saw myself. I delighted in me,” (Carter 1977)

In a proclamation made boldly, first person, without the non-binary apprehensions gripping Orlando. This is a cyborgian celebration of femaleness, a recognition of its inorganic construction. There is an argument many before me have made that the transition of gender is a journey of DIY metamorphosis, that the biochemical construction of the self in the fashion of socially recognizable female is a cyborgian “rebirth”. This is echoed in the interdisciplinary project *Open Source Estrogen* that seeks to liberate endocrine disruption technologies from gatekeeping institutions and into a sovereign self-mutability. (Open Source Estrogen 2017)

This is the kernel for the emergence of the Neo-Fembot. In all these instances she is no less eroticized, (perhaps even more considering the queer expression of making love

and kin with the non-human). No less concerned with being desired or desirable. No less cybernetic in her bio-hacked metamorphosis materialized through hormones, the knife, or divine entities. Yet she manages to escape the dire disposability of her *Blade Runner*-style peers through appropriating her creation myth, taking the body into her own hands.

“The Nature you bedevil me with is a lie,” decries Susan Stryker’s seminal embrace the artificiality of the construction of the transgender body as Frankensteinian (1994). She is fond of the self-ID’d monster, the rage, the remaking. I am fonder still of the Bride of Frankenstein, Fembot invented for the silver-screen, who recoils (not once but twice) in rejection of being the conduit of another’s desire. In the precious few moments of her existence, she demonstrates in affective wailing a reclamation of her fated design. It is a text suffused thoroughly with queerness. Queerness thus proposes an expansion for horizons, a hopeful alterity and a defiance of the taxonomical. When used as a lens to evaluate the fembot, it demonstrates that a fluidity of its morphology can permit it to escape feminized sublimation. This outlines a potential recipe for the self-determined creation of our own queer Fembot who emerges through this avenue for agency, for inventing one’s own creation myth.

Inventing the Folkbot

Donna Haraway's seminal *Cyborg Manifesto* makes the argument that the cyborg is not a specter of an imminent future but our present state of existence makes us cyborgian. (Haraway 1991) This is a perspective that lends itself to easy extrapolation: maybe penicillin is when we first became posthuman with biotechnical intervention, maybe automobiles did it by making us transcend our corporeal limitations of speed. I am applying a similar elasticity to the idea of the fembot, not as a sex-doll manufactured in East Asia but as a thing we already have been and continue to be as we pleasure each other in ways conditioned by gender roles and mediated by technology, which I propose to call this a "folkbot". In the concluding section of my manifesto, I flesh out the body of this queer-counter to the classic Fembot. In a prose poem format, I define my reasons for its invention, the various moving parts to it and the final passage reenforces the elastic fluidity of the textile metaphor. The following is the text from that chapter (manifesto).

The Fembot is designed with inescapable purpose: made for pleasure, a loving machine. Coded by knobs and levers, bespoke in her sensitization to the needs of another. This is where our lesson lies. We have only seen the Fembot lay with a cross-species user, or one attempting to subvert this fate. We have yet to see the Fembot want another, we have not seen self-pleasuring lesbian Fembots. Suddenly, not only do we have a restored power balance, we now have room to play with what sex even is. Two (or more) Fembots, both coded to change their attributes with the missive to maximize the other's pleasure, reconfiguring in real time to each other's stimuli. We are already programmed like the Fembot, we are already coded through the filters that weave on desire's loom. It is when we recognize the other as the Fembot too that the Loom is suddenly a playground where gender's tyranny ceases to exist, one where sexual deviancy is not a bourgeoisie degeneracy, but a potential medium of communication. The textile generated as the Loom's output, desire articulated into sex, has its own mass, its own gravity. It undulates, conceals, reveals, shifting over time and space. It would not be remiss to say that sexual intercourse is intercourse, dialectical

and self-altering. There may be a destination in mind, but the path to it is improvisational and experimental.

It is from this junction that the questions of bio-essentialist hierarchies are rendered obsolete in the pursuit of calibrating and re-calibrating ourselves to getting increasingly proficient at pleasuring the other. This is where the needs of the Fembots, material and emotional, are put in a rhizomatic assemblage obliterating the individual ownership of these needs. I propose to call this mutualistic symbiosis of Fembots the Folkbot, a fused deity born of a postmodern, post-gender and post-human embrace of pleasure rooted in critical hedonism — honest and sincere in what abundance feels like, not the capitalist mirages that pretend to be it.

This imagined creature becomes our guiding mascot for Good Sex, and for what we can derive from being open to the possibility of falling into such a structure without contriving it. This is an expansion of the queered Fembot, and an antidote to the dystopian degraded Fembot of classic tropes. The Folkbot, which I hesitate to define too narrowly so as to leave room for subjective projections, is a wildly utopian futurist pivot.

- 1. In contrast to the synthetic Fembot, the Folkbot is organic. It comes into being through a purely voluntary agreement, free from coercion by factors of societal pressure or internal insecurities. Its existence cannot be contrived, it is a serendipitous being. For Fembots to fall in love, they must be able to recognize each other as such and stay in the boat for further discoveries.*
- 2. The Folkbot eschews partnering for ego-dressing or completionist tendencies. There is no upward mobility to love, it is inimical to all deliberate aspirations to coolness and status. The intent of the Folkbot is to relish in the rewards within the assemblage.*
- 3. The Folkbot is a system that relies on mutual trust among its constituents for the non-hierarchal rhizomatic transfer of needs, its existence constitutes the*

agreement to participate in the interdependent processes that erode individual egos for the pleasure of the unit. Doing so does not kill the vitality of its constituents, but fortifies their identities as the definition of their role in the assemblage grows sharper.

- 4. The Folkbot is not synonymous with the “found family” or “polycule”, as it is not seeking to be a replacement to colonial triadic family structures. It is a mode for thinking about and practicing the exchange of pleasure, a closed circuit of resources.*
- 5. The Folkbot, unlike the Fembot, does not have binaric On and Off modes. It is not governed by Western dualisms of mind and heart or reason and emotion or cerebral and sensual. It operates in complex degrees of libido that are edified only in experience through time. It is unafraid of being eaten, of enjoying sex, of playing games it can lose. Loss itself is reframed as win when both are properties within its closed circuit.*
- 6. The Folkbot is not immune to harm, it is excited by conflict and resentment as new opportunities to expand itself, thriving in the interstices between conclusions. It invents new ways to recycle the sedimentation of hurt, ejecting it from its pores when an understanding of its root has been perfectly absorbed. The benefit of the doubt is unlimited currency for the Folkbot.*
- 7. The Folkbot is iterative, and re-iterative. It grows in efficiency and modifies itself over time, refusing to set its identity in stone, capable of self-updation in response to its pooled needs.*
- 8. The Folkbot disinvests from a human-hierarchy of intelligence, or of nature as something external to it. From gut microbiomes to large bodies of water, there is no species-based delineation of its participating bodies.*

9. *The Folkbot suffers no delusions of a linear process of healing from traumata. It is a recognition that traumata can never be escaped or completely exorcised, that the traumatological approach to sex is a denial of pleasure.*

10. *The Folkbot inverts the French aphorism “le petit mort” of referencing orgasm as death, calling death “le grand orgasme” instead. The Folkbot is not interested in claims to immortality, nor suicidal. It is in life already part of complex ecological processes and fluid ejections, further fluids will continue to unspool and scavengers feast in its chemical and physical disintegration. There is no greater jouissance. The Folkbot is aware that it will lose one of its wheels before the other, however, instead of the blissful ability to disintegrate in perfect unison. This temporal displacement of its cognitive parts’ ability to perceive the other is an anxiety the Folkbot can never reconcile over the course of its existence.*

This is my creation myth. It is the contour of an actionable plan, and a dream I harbor. I know how it is sprung into existence, but I find it as hard to confront its death as I do my own. The Folkbot makes a case for the “no man is an island” crowd, all of it a recognition of the self in the other. There is more to elaborate on. There is sex — and love — out there that can change the composition and contours of your being. There is irrevocable transformation in its practice. When you find a love you can entrust your surrender to, you will first feel the threat of bursting. You will then find under this threat that you have expanded instead. You will find that the needs of another are interchangeable with your own. You will find that the self is infinitely elastic. You will mutate, and readily so.

The narrative of the manifesto *The Elastic Self* has been charted at this point, the remainder of this document will elaborate on the accompanying installation *A Loving Woman* — the iterative processes, aesthetic deliberations and methods that guided its creation. It addresses the “Whys”: why the poem, why projection mapping, why the textile sculpture. It then gets into the “Hows”, including the methodology, the

unexpected source for the inspiration for the title, and the development process of the design process from sketch to prototype.

Why the poem?

Writing poetry about love and all it entails — desire, pleasure, change — in relation to annihilation is by no means a novel undertaking. From Sappho to Baudelaire and beyond, the need to articulate the specifics of the devastation rendered by desire is a time-honored animating creative force of which there is no dearth.

In the course of my writing practice, I have found the process is less like inventing and more like discovering, or “a matter of deciphering something already there” (Duras 1987). The results are topically nebulous, but thematically consistent, making the show-don’t-tell principle of ambiguity inherent to poetry a natural fit for the task. Given the new-media nature of this ‘poem’ in particular, and its interest in merging the politically delineated into a unified whole with the “Folkbot”, trans-poetics constitutes both the work’s form and philosophy, with its queer potentiality noted in the introduction to *We Want it All: An Anthology of Radical Transpoetics*:

“We believe that poetry can do things that theory can’t, that poetry leaps into what theory tends towards. We think that poetry conjoins and extends the interventions that trans people make into our lives and bodily presence in the world, which always have an aesthetic dimension. We assert that poetry should be an activity by and for everybody... Trans poetry has burst the banks of any narrow canon, or even the possibility of a concise and tidy canonization.” (Abi-Karam and Gabriel 2020)

It would thus serve as the ideal medium, thematically and formally, to align my project with the ethos of trans-poetics. Trans-poetics itself is a nebulous concept, but its most succinct definition is probably the one offered by Rebekah Edwards, who arrives at it with excerpts from essays in *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*:

“Where “trans–” animates the suffixes to which it is attached and “poetics” explores “how meaning is possible, by whom and at what cost”, “trans-poetics” refers to techniques for communicating “complex, unstable, contradictory relations between body and soul, social self and psyche” (Ladin 2013: 306). Trans-poetic projects often seek to navigate the limits of the impossible, writing the “resistance of the inarticulate, in a language that situates” (edwards 2013: 325) or lending poetic form to “a body that has been historically illegible” (Shipley 2013: 197). Such projects may engage relations between the textual and the corporeal, between content and form, between “signifiers and the world they configure (Holbrook 1999: 753).” (Edwards 2014)

Therefore, using this as framework allows me to address not just the interdisciplinary nature of the medium *A Loving Woman* employs, but the queer multitudes of its contents as well, which I elaborate in the next section.

Developing the writing

The process employed utilizes an iterative thinking-through-making approach, wherein the writing, the reading, the making all supplement each other contemporaneously and dynamically instead of occurring in static linear stages, also known as Critical Making. (Ratto 2011) The autotheoretical nature of this project — described as “the commingling of theory and philosophy with autobiography as a mode of critical artistic practice indebted to feminist writing and activism” (Fournier 2022)— required me to compile every journal entry, poem on a napkin, and personal essay draft of to draw all traces of my reflection on gender and desire, to see where the two met. This ‘masterpoem’ served as a reference directory for how my thoughts evolved with the readings, and annotations of them bled into it.

The next step was to define the shape of the ‘masterpoem’, which could have been achieved by narrowing down the scope of the project to the case study of one specific aspect of my interest area (AI porn, novel cutting-edge sex toys, fetish subcultures, etc.) but the most compelling prospect was to broaden the horizon and speak to a universal feeling, to universalize the fembot itself. The tone had to be sincere, profane but tender. Over the course of this exercise, I decided that I would allow the source of the profanity and humor to be the pornographic excerpts, intercut strategically with my original verses which would embody a kind of wintry, capricious lover.

On the title



Figure 4: "loving woman" the perfume. Photo by author.

The inspiration for the title came from an unlikely source: a bottle of counterfeit Lacoste perfume at a corner store in the East End. It summed up both, the Fembot’s design to be loving, and my manifesto on loving each other better, the overarching inquiry into womanhood itself at the heart of it as the normative nurturer. This title was an aesthetic scaffold for the tone of the installation. It replaced the former working title “Postmodern Perversions”, which had an alliterative ring but no real body.

Initial Prototypes

This chapter emphasizes the development process of the installation, iterative prototyping, and the mixed-methods approach where they took place concurrently with the manifesto.

Early concepts

September 5, 2024 at 5:04 PM

ideas

- phone with heartbeat
- ominous bedsheet
- a tree that moans (capacitive touch)
- existenz game controller from the movie existenz
- wax play whack-a-mole
- amorphous latex soft sculpture canvas

Figure 5: Screen-capture of Notes application list of installation concepts.

A number of directions seemed plausible in the early stages of the work. An initial front-runner was a VR tunnel inundated with archival porn DVD cover scans, where the poem's verses were stylized to resemble pornographic spam pop-up ads, but there was a decisive turn away from that ironic glitchy tone into a more sincere exploration of desire, and was subsequently discarded.

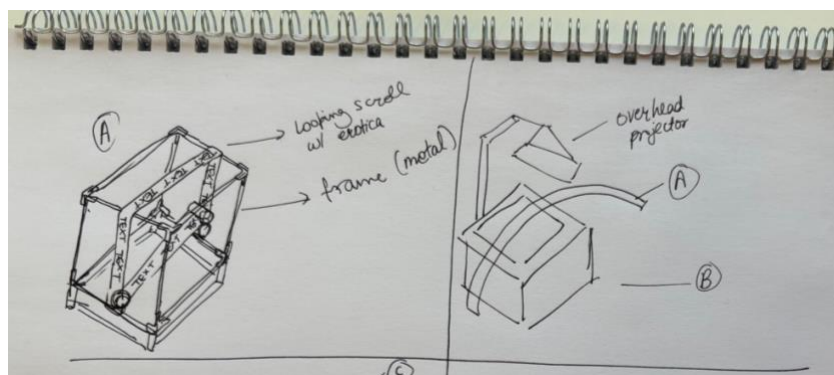


Figure 6: Overhead projector concept sketch. Photo by author.

Another strong contender was the use of an overhead projector with a running text loop contraption I was set to CNC, sketched in *Figure 6*. This was appealing for reasons of artificially affording agency/voice to machine in an analogue to coding the fembot with things to say, but the projecting apparatus itself would then become the new focus of the work, and the inclusion of the obsolete retro-device, with its own artistic baggage, would detract from the erotic immersive quality I wanted, and the projector would have to be invisible for this.

Aesthetic inspiration

A number of works were in the pool as frames of reference for the media that would be projected on the sculpture, all of which interrogated the relationship between the human body and technology. Chief among these were works by artists Salomé Chatriot, Tishan Hsu, Linda Dement, and Karyn Nakamura, specific pieces by each of whom are highlighted in this section. I was not only able to conceptualise the motion, the colours, but understand how to visually speak to the themes of the manifesto through the installation through the lens of these works which contend with similar themes.



Figure 7: Screen capture of Salomé Chatriot's OUR SYMBIOSIS AFFECTED HER FERTILE SYSTEMS (2021).

Salomé Chatriot proposes sexually viable cross-species reproduction that is ripe with imagery of fertility, of nursing and of erotic fulfilment. This is a vision of unflinching techno-optimism that presents viable room for imagining an anti-doom view of tech infiltration, one that may even be described as healing. (Chatriot 2021) The CGI screen-capture from her short film, seen in *Figure 7*, served as the very first branching point for the visual language I would emulate, though eventually I departed from incorporating anything like the science-fiction tubes featured here in favour of simpler textures.



Figure 8: Tishan Hsu's "recent work 2023" at Vienna Secession. Photo by Oliver Ottensschlägernone.

Tishan Hsu's sculptures are the only on this list I was privileged to witness in the flesh at the MOCA in Toronto in the fall of 2024 (Hsu 2024). Their irregularity of organic form and familiar textures collaged together were immediately striking to me, in simultaneous resemblance to and divergence from the anthropomorphic form.



Figure 9: Linda Dement's Cyberflesh Girlmonster

Cyberflesh Girlmonster is a pioneering CD-ROM work, “a macabre, comic representation of monstrous femininity from a feminist perspective that encompasses revenge, desire and violence”, where Linda Dement’s collages of disembodied parts (“conglomerate bodies”) were interactive prompts for poetry, film, or personal testimony. (Dement 1995) This project was in perfect alignment with my writing on the Frankensteinian monstrous body, and a possible direction of exploration.



Figure 10: Screen-capture of Karyn Nakamura's Instagram post for the project Surface Tension (2025).

Karyn Nakamura's *Surface Tension* is a multichannel installation series of neural network explorations that use Stable Diffusion, in careful contemplation a focus on "juicy images" and how they simulate motion, posing the question of how "art engage(s) with technological processes to create new ways of understanding the world". (Nakamura 2025) This particular vignette helped me restrict the visuals to meatiness and the colour palette of the flesh. As a direct consequence, the primary visual of the installation is a macro-shot of salmon⁴ with a noise displacement texture transforming it in Touch Designer to appear breathing and alive.

⁴ Salmon is also a euphemistic choice, echoing the associations of "fish" and female genitalia.

Prototype one

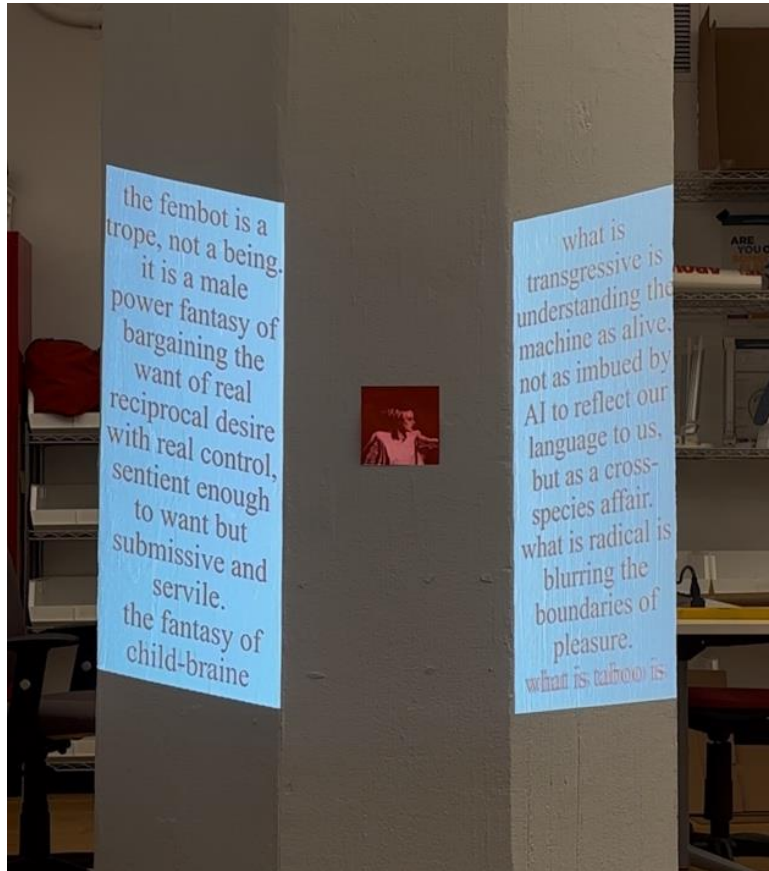


Figure 11: First demo version. Photo by author.

The first cohesive prototype featured auto-typing text panels and a central panel with a post-it projected-mapped on a pillar. The post-it was animated with a glitchy image of the Bride of Frankenstein as an homage to film's first fembot to reject her fate. The text panels looped the text with a Python script that gave it the illusion of typing one character at a time. This was a test of both the aesthetic design of the installation and the logistical contours of TouchDesigner's Kantan Mapper as the designated projection mapping software, as seen in *Figure 12*.

It became evident from running this version that a text-forward approach would detract from the desired tone of sublime, erotic immersion, but the words were crucial in situating what the viewer would see. Thus it became clear that at this point, the project

would be bifurcated into the installation and the manifesto as separate entities. But it was not without its successes: the impact of the projection-mapping moving image was solidified as a key ingredient, and the tangible presence of the post-it (though of course a cheap plentiful piece of paper) reminded me of Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura", and planted the seed for the need of an irreproducible element to the work that would be physically present and not just a digital image.

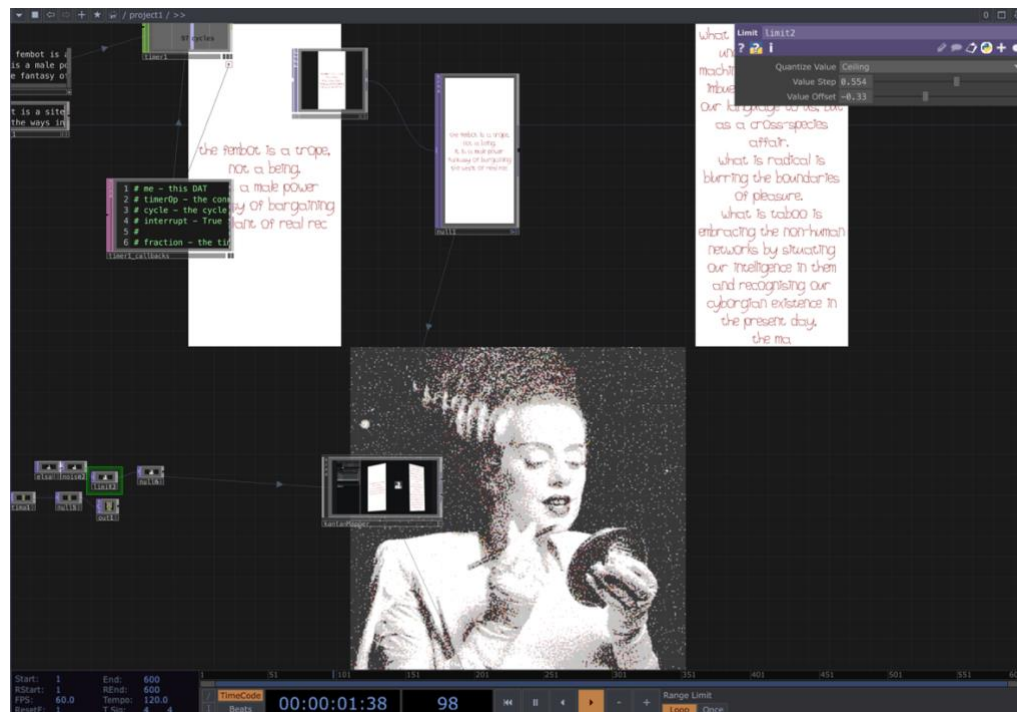


Figure 12: Touch Designer projection map network for prototype one. Photo by author.

Zine Reading

The first manifesto draft used excerpts from the demo version text and included personal reflections on the project overall, designed in Photoshop and laser-printed on bright pink paper.

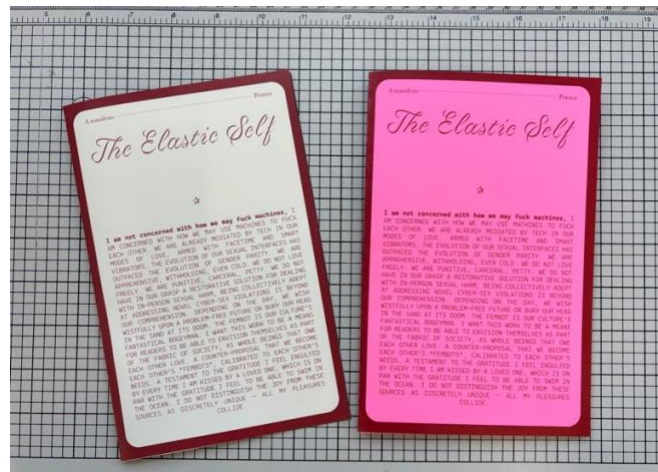


Figure 13: Test copies of the zine. Photo by author.



Figure 14: The first edition of the manifesto, before folding. Photo by author.

This was then read as a performance at the Colloquium⁵ in full, with a prepared track of overlapping AI-generated voices rising to a crescendo, finally petering out as I live-read the final words alone. An encouraging indicator that the project was headed the right way, its inclusion of the aural element cemented the impact of multi-sensorial channels as something to consider more seriously in the coming prototypes.

Sculpture development

Given my academic and professional background in textile design as well as the feminized nature of textile production and fabric ornamentation (in both cottage industries and at mass scale), as well as the fluidity and versatility textile affords, it emerged as the perfect medium to pursue to build an undulating sculptural ‘screen’ as a body for the projection to penetrate.



Figure 15: Laser cutting font test on muslin

⁵ The program’s mid-thesis forum attended by all advisors, participating masters’ candidates, guests and the future cohort to exchange feedback.

Interested in making something with the “aura” of the irreproducible, I wanted to tangibly inscribe words under a layer of ephemeral digitally projected ones. I tested laser-cutting the phrase “le petit mort/le grand orgasme” into cotton muslin using several stencil tests. This exploration was discarded when the choice of material would be impeded upon by what was safe and permissible to laser-cut to expensive natural fibers, and that the additional layer was colluding meaning instead of adding to it, compounded by the factor that there would be physical copies of the manifesto present to address my itch for tangible words.

Mock-ups

Three different approaches were proposed for the body, each highlighting with different priorities.

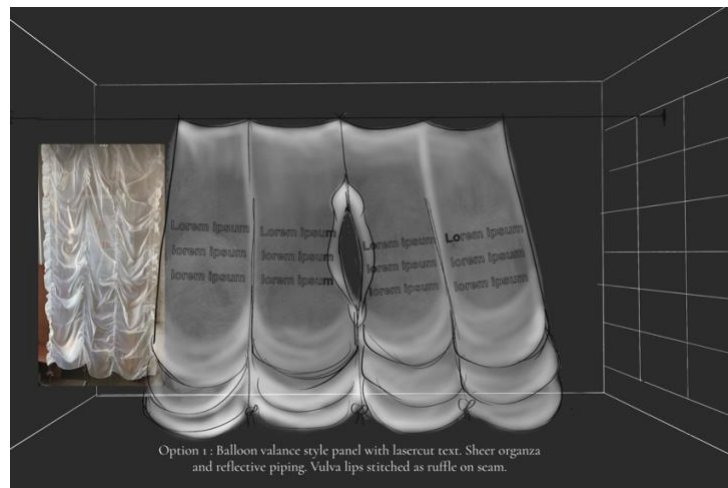


Figure 16: First mock-up.

This approach was rejected, as its diaphanous screen read more ghostly than it did “ghost in the shell”, but parts of its structure were adapted for use.



Figure 17: Second mock-up.

This version was much too reminiscent of a curtain, and thus rejected.

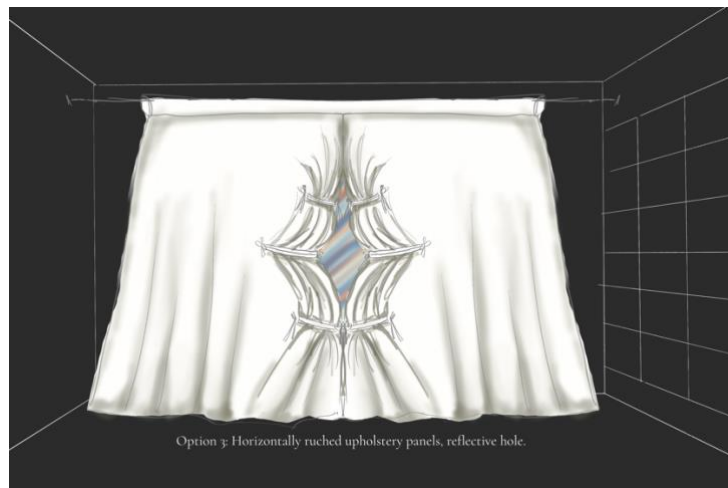


Figure 18: Third mock-up.

This less literal hole would become the fabric manipulation method ultimately used for the hole. But it was evident that a single supporting line going across could not support the weight of all the fabric. A custom solution would be needed. By now I had enough a clear picture in my head to proceed with the first full-scale test of the installation that combined the text and audiovisual elements with the sculpture.

Prototype two

Scale

In creating this iteration, my primary consideration was scale. I was interested in making something both sublime and eerie — previously described in this thesis as “Eldritch”, evoking a Lovecraftian terror and awe that can be achieved in needing to crane your neck at something. Our most sustained source of interfacing is with the four or so inches of our smartphone screens, only pushed to be bigger for communal theatre screens, where the plurality of audience members becomes an enlarged body countering the enlarged screen in measure. My installation is meant to be disproportionate, approaching monumental. To this end, met with timebound monetary constraints, I embarked upon creating an 8 feet tall hole with wide engulfing sides. The mock-ups in the previous section put this principle into practice.

Material

There was a lot of deliberation on whether this was to be more of a “bathroom” installation (wet, isolated, self-reflexive, internal mirror, ritualistic) or “bedroom” installation (cozy and upholstered, interdependent, erotic). I was ultimately advised to not restrain myself in this binary, to straddle the germane elements of both. This non-dualistic approach fed the making of the material choice, a white bridal satin. It is not the ideal fabric for projection, since it refracts quite a lot of the light, but its retention of character allows for it to resist some of that projection and be a body in its own right. It is grommeted across the hem and tethered with carabiners, all functional metal hardware, evocative of a shower curtain.



Figure 19: Close-up of prototype suspended across four strings with carabiners Photo by author..

Form

The hole was always the goal. But so was tethering the materiality to the writing of the manifesto. It was important to reflect the loom in some manner, not in literal recreation but in representing the essence of my interpretation of it. To this end, the installation though quite large had to be modular. I made my test version with four strings of fishing line to attach the equidistant carabiners to, in a multi-track suspension, all of which could be re-tethered to another string, as seen in *Figure 19*. Even before the satin drapes were attached to it, the twenty-feet long strings looped across two brackets then tightened at the ground with dowels bear resemblance to a loom, even a stringed instrument. The fishing line would be substituted for satin cord in later iterations, as the floating ethereality created an illusion that broke immersion rather than enhance it, and

the satin cord would blend with the body of the fabric extending its scope further upwards, and making the mechanics of the construction more integrated with it.

Audio

The audio is a “plunderphonic” exercise, featuring choice clips from the Freaky Fembots series, most prominently from its episode on the Sex-Ed Bot, who provides didactics regarding the female body amid sexual intercourse. To create a linear narrative that would echo the somatic experience of sex (these would broadly be *seduction – teasing – misalignment – alignment - release*) I organized these audio samples with original verses, recorded in my voice with an AI generated chorus harkening to the Colloquium reading (see Appendix F). This is the unabridged original text for the audio component:

I.

*It doesn't take much to seduce you, I'm already
in this body you want, just as you ordered. Relinquish
yourself at the door.
What can we do?*

II.

*Perfection
eludes us — you are in you are out — I precede
your departure, I am early I am late I am early I am late.
I am always on the verge
of tears on the subway, so many nothings
threatening to erupt like the veins
in my nose. Under placid surface, tremors skipping
stones on a lakeshore.*

III.

*Life shimmers in the sun in carnal surge,
sheds its skin, kisses and kicks,
becomes bigger, bigger, bigger. Tears
meet a bed of grass in the ethereal mauve
light of totality.
Creature, creation, creature, crevice.
Is a place perfect when discovered, or designed?
Is it when I digitally turn to an embarrassment of fluids?*

IV.

*Rest your world upon
cheek's apple, upon eyelash even, I
will provide. I do as asked — perfect
gushing, flailing, sighing. Peer into my abyss,
baroque, carry a flashlight.*

V.

I make myself in your image.

I make myself in your image.

I make myself in your image.

These verses were punctuated with thematically relevant pornographic excerpts over an eight and a half minute track, collaged from aforementioned Freaky Fembots' releases, in particular Sex-Ed Fembot and Tutor Bot, which had the Fembot character extolling sterile instructions on how to pleasure women. Once this was placed and all the vocal tracks mastered, I enlisted the help of my partner, a musician, who composed a soundtrack for the ambience with layered guitar tracks, its peaks and valleys anchored in breathing sounds that befit the scope and tone of the work.

Sculpture test



Figure 20: Prototype two with mock-up of projection. Photo by author.

In this test, we noted that the projection would not reach the pooling bottom of the fabric, and it needed to be pinned back into the wall at the base. This was a desirable happenstance, as it gave the illusion of the hole billowing forwards in space towards the viewer. The central hole also needed to be sealed in black fabric to feel more immersive, with additional fabric flaps to register as more explicitly vulval. The most interesting finding, however, was trying to ascertain the relationship between legibility, which was not a concern as this is not a didactic piece, and complete inscrutability, which was not aesthetically desirable. The final prototype was thus amended to strike this balance better.



Figure 21: Testing the sculpture drape in the exhibition space in February.

Final prototype



Figure 22: Sculpture as mounted. Photo by Yvonne Baldwin.



Figure 23: Projection-map on sculpture. Photo by author.

This version was exhibited at DFX 2025, at the OCAD U Harbourfront. This space presented a host of challenges, as it is a “multipurpose” hall, not a dedicated gallery space. While I was undeniably and thankfully allotted a prime spot, there were factors that could not be controlled like light leaking, having to mount tension poles for my projectors, limitations to the sound layout, and more, that interrupted the immersion.



Figure 24: DFX installation, side view. Photo by author.

In keeping with the insights from iterations that preceded, the version exhibited was curved like a wave in its suspension and tucked at the bottom. This served a dual purpose; the practical need for enhanced legibility and accuracy of projection mapping, but the emotive logic of creating a protruding pelvis-like form that asks the audience to genuflect before it.



Figure 25: Close-up on the “clitoral hood” and crown suspension. Photo by author.

A second change was suspending the central clitoral section with ascending satin loops from the central support beam to create a tiara-like suspension.



Figure 26: Close up of front profile. Photo by author.

A final prominent update was the addition of a clearer clitoral hood and labia with additional fabric, as well as a near Vantablack matte fabric to disguise the hole.

Reflections

An incredibly delightful takeaway was witnessing six individuals sticking their heads in the hole, unable to resist the siren call of its enigmatic dark. But it became evident over the course of the week that being exhibited as part of interactive projects and games skewed larger audience expectations of what the project entailed, and unable to lend the full loop of the film their undivided attention. Many were perplexed, and refused to enter its threshold altogether. Though I would love to attribute this to an adverse reaction to the explicit nature of the installation, I believe a more accurate diagnosis would be the “museum fatigue” phenomenon of having to interact with such a plethora of projects before my relatively abstract piece presents itself at the end of the hall. The experience, my first exhibiting artwork of this scale, has left me craving spaces that can enhance the kind of fevered contemplation that some audience members indulged in, staying for several loops of the film from different angles, touching the hole, brows furrowed as they paced, until eventually they walked into it.

Conclusion

A lot of meandering and soul-searching were the true cost of this thesis, none of which was linear. It gained both body and voice as I found myself navigating uncharted waters in my own romantic calendar — the more I faced ethical dilemmas, unprecedented pleasures, and opportunities to become elastic, it grew clearer still. Its questions were answered with the resolution of the tumults of my life. A metamorphosis has transpired through this autotheoretical act of performed philosophy. The critical making framework allowed me the liberty of being guided by the iterative process in between these drafts. When a conclusion to the manifesto seemed impossible it was in the sewing, the sampling of choice porn clips, the creation of video assets, that the meandering did not devolve into feeling adrift. In all this, I have gained a cherished comrade in the Fembot, who will remain the object of my lifelong inquiry.

Future explorations

This was an occasion of several firsts. A first manifesto. A first audio-mixing session. A first large-scale installation. A first with TouchDesigner as software (all the visuals generated used beginner level techniques). A first attempt at projection mapping. I am interested in the continued practice of the rapid skill development that was asked of me. I am interested in seconds.

This project feels like the first materialization of a body of work that could occupy more than one lifetime. Going forward, I want to elaborate on each of the aspects to the Folkbot mentioned in the ultimate chapter of the manifesto, in future volumes I chart out as they evolve. It will only grow in relevance as the prospect of sophisticated sex dolls is either realized or rubbished, and cacophonous discourse on the ethics of such grow in their discord.

As for the installation, each contributing element — the video, the sculpture, the poem — possess the potential to be standalone pieces that adapt to different contexts. The billowing white hole placed in an exterior public art environment, or the film screened as part of a festival, the poem performed live. I am deeply interested in the ramifications each of these iterations would bring forth with their location-specific contexts, and in documenting the reception they evoke in their changing audiences. Considering the time and space limitations of this iteration of the project, I am interested in exploiting the modular nature of the suspension mechanism of the sculpture and seeing what shapes it can contract and stretch into.

Appendix

Appendix A: Manifesto

Title: *The Elastic Self*

Description: The unabridged text of the manifesto.

Date: 18 February 2025

File directory: https://issuu.com/prancetta/docs/the_elastic_self

File type: .pdf

Appendix B: Video projected

Title: *A Loving Woman (2025)*

Description: The film projection-mapped on the installation.

Date: 30 March 2025

File directory: <https://youtu.be/tcoPYqsoRFM>

File type: .mp4

Appendix C: Installation recording

Title: *A Loving Woman DFX 2025*

Description: Full loop of the installation as exhibited at DFX 2025.

Date: 31 March 2025

File directory: <https://youtu.be/VoZPyxXWgs4>

File type: .mp4

Appendix D: Touch Designer network

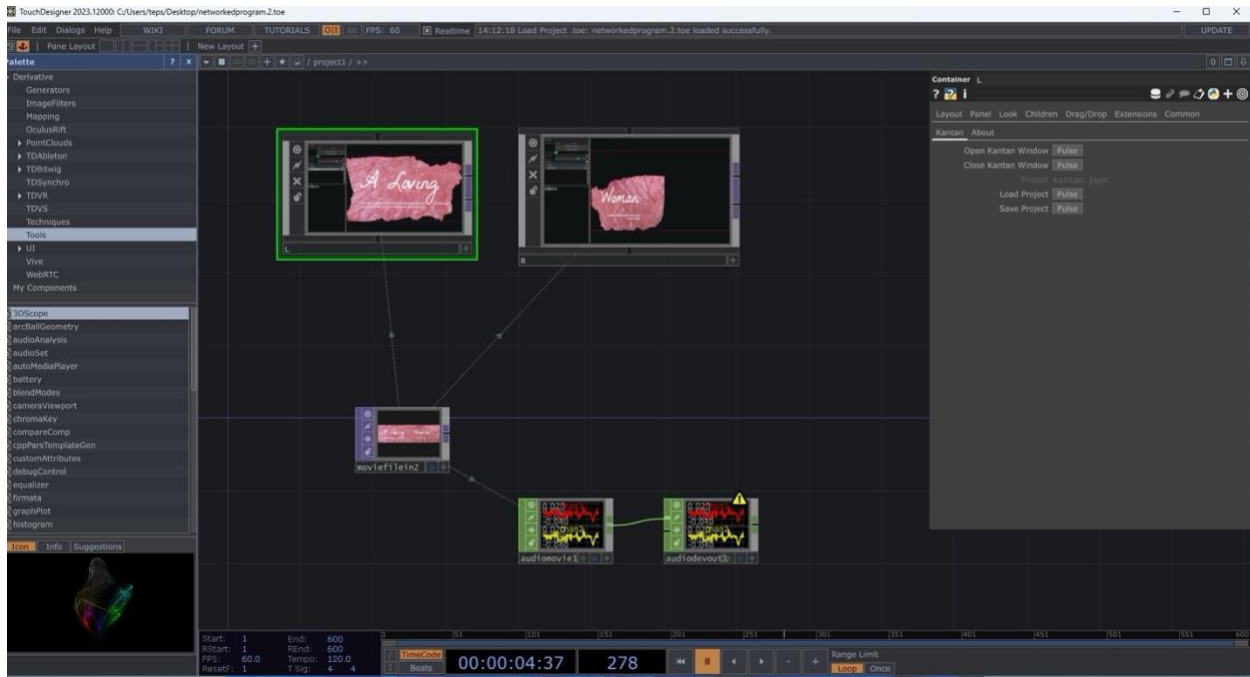


Figure 27: Screen capture of projection mapping network for DFX installation. Photo by author.

Appendix E: Colloquium manifesto flyer

Title: Elastic Self Flyer Colloquium

Description: Draft of manifesto distributed with performative live reading.

Date: 2 December 2024

File directory: https://issuu.com/prancetta/docs/elastic_self_flyer_colloquium

File type: .pdf

Appendix F: Colloquium audio track

Title: Elastic Self zine – audio track – colloquium version

Description: Layered voiceovers from text-to-speech generators reading the first manifesto

Date: 2 December 2024

File directory: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_L-luIQMDmP_Df-jhKLuXr2Pqmw-6J2R/view

File type: .mp3

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