

BRAINGIRLS AND FLESHMONSTERS

Holly Willis

I like the idea of contaminating the technology, of putting the blood, the guts and the madness, all those nasty womanly things, into this beautiful, slick technology, into the beautiful and pure machines.

LINDA DEMENT

American culture is obsessed with bodies, perhaps now more than ever, as we become accustomed to the often disconcerting realities of the digital era. One response to these anxieties is the creation of incredible man/machine hybrids such as the hypermasculine Terminators and RoboCops from the recent past. Another response is the development of disturbingly “perfect” cyberbabes and female sex robots, primed to serve (Wiedemann; de Fren). However, feminist artists have offered a more interesting retort: they’ve unleashed a bevy of grotesque monsters and female freaks whose uncanny physiques refuse the norms and propriety of the proper feminine form. Indeed, these bodies turn themselves inside out, making the internal external; they disassemble themselves into an array of moaning body parts; and they recombine into discomfiting shapes and bizarre forms. Moreover, these tweaked and twisted bodies often appear in the context of media installations and websites that extend the critique of representations of the body by, in a sense, calling attention to the process of the body in any act of spectatorship, whether in the context of a gallery, museum, or screening room or in front of a computer monitor. Continuing a long-standing feminist interest in the grotesque body, these new media artworks use the body—in the artwork and as a site for the artwork’s reception—as a site for examining forms of representation in general, while considering the complex relationships between the body and technology in particular.

From Michel Foucault we know that bodies are disciplined, and from Luce Irigaray we recognize that the isomorphism between Western philosophy and the male body is reflected not only in the privileging of the male form in logic and metaphysics, but in the

body politic as well. Further, as Mikhail Bakhtin demonstrates in his study of Rabelais, a culture's images of the body embody, so to speak, that culture's social relations. The manner in which we represent the body via various imaginaries reflects, in some manner, the way bodies are represented socially and politically, and there is perhaps no more striking proof of this than in the multi-tiered influences of the grotesque body, which provokes disgust and strategies of containment and exclusion.¹ The division between the proper body and the grotesque body constitutes the division between upper and lower, high and low, pure and impure, intellectual mind and material anatomy, along with a series of other similarly weighted oppositions. The normal body and the grotesque body are dialectically related, function in relationship to each other, and are historically specific. One depends on the other, and taken together, they affect not merely the physical contours of the individual body, but the larger cultural identities in play at any given time.

In feminist art practices, especially body art from the 1960s, depictions of the grotesque, abject body have been constant. Rather than accepting the clearly defined boundaries of the body and their regulatory function, women artists have delighted in probing the contradictions implicit in the formulation of the abject while reveling in cross-boundary celebrations of the grotesque. The imbrication of body and machine in technoculture raises new anxieties about the crossing of boundaries, however. The relationship between the body and technology has grown increasingly complex, such that to speak of one is to speak of the other. Body and machine become coextensive, and yet the predominant trope for understanding the relationship between the two tends to presuppose a desire to be rid of the body altogether, or to view technology as a phallic prosthesis.² But, as Amelia Jones points out, the desire to displace the body in this manner is problematic, to say the least, and entails a sustained disavowal (A. Jones, 2006). Borrowing Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh as a tentative, shifting perimeter of the body, Jones argues for a "technophenomenological" subject, one that is continually situated in relation to the not-quite-locatable limit between the body and the world. For Jones, the technophenomenological subject is in a constant state of flux with the world around it.³

If embodiment and the limits between bodies and machines form one nexus of fascination, the seemingly unthinkable infinity of cyberspace forms another, bringing with it anxieties about openness and indeterminacy. Consider, for example, the rampant warnings about potential theft, abduction, and violence foisted on users of online services, as well as the nefarious but ill-defined threat of hackers, viruses, and worms. Add the hyperbolic vehemence with which the news media chronicles instances of web-based child pornography, the seduction of minors, and the addiction that afflicts many so-called stupefied gamers, and it is easy to see that the widespread use of the Internet has sparked a kind of national terror.

Because conceptions of space and those of the self are connected, understanding one necessitates understanding the other. Cyberspace adds a new realm for exploration, one that, Margaret Wertheim claims, encourages a continued inquiry of the relationship between body and mind. "When I 'go' into cyberspace," she writes, "my body remains at

rest in my chair, but some aspect of me 'travels' into another realm. . . . What I am suggesting is that when I am interacting in cyberspace my 'location' can no longer be fixed purely by coordinates in physical space" (Wertheim, 41).

The inquiry called for by Wertheim continues a long-standing investigation of the relationship between the body and mind in acts of spectatorship initiated by early feminist artists interested in video installation. Video installation became prominent in the early 1970s, in tandem with video and performance art, and is often associated with the phenomenological impetus of minimalism in which artists sought to engage viewers in the relationship between objects and space by making works that were site specific (Iles, "Between"). The emphasis shifted from the pictorial space within a frame to the object's situation within the architectural dimensions of a space. The work of Frank Stella and Donald Judd is exemplary, and their ideas about space were considered in early video installation by artists such as Bruce Nauman, Michael Snow, and Anthony McCall. Subsequent video installation art, however, moves well beyond the concerns shared by minimalists to include issues of performance, the viewing space itself and vis-à-vis its connection to an institution, and the relationship of the viewer to the work.

Although video installation art, especially that which incorporated live performance, was very prevalent in the 1970s, it gradually grew more scarce, in part because of large-scale arts funding cuts, the difficulty in mounting installation projects, and the lack of affordable projection equipment adequate to do the work justice. The form returned full-force in the 1990s, however, for several reasons, all of which in some sense orbit around the radical impact of the Internet and ideas of technology and cyberspace on our sense of the body and identity.

The first reason for the return of the form is the convergence of diverse artforms made possible by digital media.⁴ As the tools for creating digital artworks have become more accessible, more and more artists and filmmakers have entered the realm of video installation, bringing with them ideas particular to their original discipline. Painter Jeremy Blake, for example, brought notions of painting to his large-scale projection pieces, while Diana Thater, in her installations, focuses on ideas about sculpture and its relation to space. Doug Aitken, whose background is in music videos and commercials, brings fractured narratives into tension with his multiscreen pieces, spatializing the narrative while alluding to the plenitude of cinema. In all these cases, however, the interest in digital media must, in some ways, confront the newly reconfigured relationship we have to technology, not only in our personal lives, but in larger social, economic, and political spheres.

Second, the metaphors used to describe cyberspace, along with the increasingly prevalent activity of "being" online, have sparked a transformation in how we understand space itself.⁵ Architect Marcos Novak began to articulate this transformation in his seminal essay "Liquid Architectures in Cyberspace" in 1991. He writes,

The notions of city, square, temple, institution, home, infrastructure are permanently extended. The city, traditionally the continuous city of physical proximity becomes the dis-

continuous city of cultural and intellectual community. Architecture, normally understood in the context of the first, conventional city, shifts to the structure of relationships, connections and associations that are webbed over and around the simple world of appearances and accommodations of commonplace functions. (249)

Novak here alludes to the prevalence of technology and the ways in which it expands in a postmodern era, such that it is imbricated not only in what Donna Haraway refers to as “the informatics of domination,” but in the ways that we understand space, the world, and ourselves.

While many video installation projects are merely resituated cinematic works that use the gallery or museum space to accrue high-art status, many other installation video works share in the historical avant-garde's desire to disrupt the power of the museum by sparking insights that illuminate the contradictions implicit in creating a locus for art that is separate from the outside world. Installation art, by its very being, calls into question the location of art, if only in bringing to the foreground the space in which it is found, and the space the viewer needs to traverse in order to experience it. Indeed, installations often act as a space within which the negotiation of boundaries—between private and public space, or between art and the “real” world—are made literal. The acts of perception, reception, and movement are emphasized and the installation becomes, in Thomas Zummer's analysis, an interface, a device through which viewers negotiate the differing spaces, as well as the cultural status of art production and interpretation.⁶

In her essay “Video and Film Space,” Chrissie Iles charts the evolution of three distinct phases of film and video installation in terms of their concerns. “The first phase can broadly be termed the phenomenological, performative phase; the second, the sculptural phase; and the third, the current phase, the cinematic,” she writes (252). Although Iles's categories may work for delineating the larger history of video art, they do not reflect women's work as neatly, in part because women were often responding to different issues and traditions than those that concerned their male colleagues. For example, while much early video installation did indeed participate in the phenomenological phase noted by Iles, in which artists, influenced by the expanded cinema movement occurring in film and music, played with the relationship of the body to the image in large-scale, multiprojection projects, women's work concentrated on exploding the cinematic apparatus and depicting a fractured portrait of identity.

Joan Jonas's *Vertical Roll* (1972) is exemplary here, as it distorts the scopophilic gaze of traditional cinema, making it constantly slip away in an installation that dismantled generally invisible structures of looking, identification, representation, and disavowal. *Vertical Roll* begins with the loud pounding of two objects—Jonas hits the hard floor with a spoon, making a harsh, staccato sound that continues throughout the entire tape. As she pounds, the image slips vertically, fracturing the usually seamless sequence of images into a series of frames that slip endlessly off screen, not only referencing the segmentation of the cinematic filmstrip, which is composed of discrete frames, but making use of the television's

deficiencies. The frames seem to skip in time to the pounding, but the rhythm often shifts out of synch as well. As the pounding and rolling continue, Jonas appears onscreen in close-up, her body splintered into pieces that are initially impossible to make out. Caught in the unending desire to see the image and to find a degree of wholeness, the viewer is frustrated until the final shot of the tape, which shows Jonas's face, albeit sideways in the frame and outside the footage controlled by the vertical roll.

The piece embodies the sense of violence of representation but, perhaps more importantly, captures a more adequate portrait of the almost monstrous subject splintered under the unceasing gaze of the camera. Jonas's performance highlights the artist's anger over fetishized views of the female and adroitly plays along the edge of the viewer's ability to withstand the constant pounding and sliding of the image next to the desire to see the entire tape. And when her face finally appears in a stable image, her direct gaze at the camera is entirely unnerving.

For women, early video installation projects tended to be very much concerned with the relationship between the body and the technology being used, and with issues of identity. Similarly, later work is not so much cinematic as networked, concerned with the role and experience of bodies in an increasingly virtual environment, and with ways of creating a language for discerning insights gleaned through the body.

Overall, then, it is this intersection—where notions of the body's boundaries and ideas about space collide often in the form of the grotesque and monstrous—that fascinates many contemporary digital artists.⁷ Their work concerns the complex interplay of body and machine, and the evolutionary possibilities of bodies in the future. For many feminist artists, the challenges posed by engaging issues of virtuality, interactivity, and the body/machine conjunction continue many of the longstanding goals of feminist artmaking since the 1960s. However, they add the allure of the computer and technology, along with the uncanny, infinite space of the Internet and its networked connectivity (Bureau of Inverse Technology; Vesna; Bookchin).

This essay examines several projects concerned with the body's boundaries, and their reception, including the grotesque and monstrous bodies depicted in a series of digital projects such as *Cyberflesh/Girlmonster* (1995) by Linda Dement, *Braingirl* (2000) by Marina Zurkow, and photographs and sculptural pieces made by Floria Sigismondi, as well as the Frankenstein-like monsters and robots created by S. E. Barnet and Heidi Kumao. Further, a series of collaborative media installations by Molly Cleator and Anne Bray show how artists create spaces within which viewers negotiate a series of boundaries using their own bodies. The importance of this work cannot be underestimated—one of the more insidious projects of information and communication technologies is the reconfiguration of the body such that it conforms to the needs of an aggressively policed culture.⁸ Similarly, the evolution of the biotech industry in the past decade and its development of new forms of genetic modification and reproductive technologies bring to the foreground the fundamental necessity of grappling with the diverse incarnations of the body/machine conjunction (subRosa).

The ways in which these artists situate their work fall into three relatively characteristic categories: (1) projects which focus on the relationship between the viewer's body and space; (2) those which grapple with the spatialized body whereby spaces become sites for the depiction of the body; and (3) those which understand the body as an ephemeral locus for memory, language, and identity.⁹ In most cases, too, the relatively rigid, gendered space of the cinematic apparatus is exploded into a new apparatus, one in which differing ideas of identification, experience, and knowledge are possible. But more significantly, each of these artists creates a space within which spectators stage a complex negotiation of binary oppositions. In this sense, the installations and websites are indeed interfaces, as noted by Zimmer, hovering ambivalently between polarized opposites. The fact that the contemplation of these binaries occurs in and through the body is also no accident—the projects return insistently to contemplate closed identities, of the sign or language in opposition to the body, and of identity itself, which is shown always to be divided. Further, these artists recognize that the body is not merely the “stuff” surrounding a knowing intellect, but is itself a speaking, sensing, knowing entity. Overall, these projects and artists extend the discussion of the body and media by limning the borders of the social body and the monstrous female body. They bring together questions raised by body theory formulated in the 1980s and contemporary issues of technology, using the body as a site for considering them.

Linda Dement's *Cyberflesh/Girlmonster* ponders the body in parts, examining it in relation to the regulatory functions determining propriety.¹⁰ The project is an early interactive CD-ROM that invites participants to revel in the corporeal, presented as a series of images of limbs and organs which have been grafted together into familiar but simultaneously monstrous forms. There are elbows with moaning mouths, multiple hands fused together at the wrists to create dangling tentacles, and bulbous eyes (or are they nipples?). Caressing the uncanny shapes with the mouse provokes sounds of pleasure, a surprising effect that registers as uncanny in Freud's sense of the word. Clicking introduces a piece of text, either written or spoken and accompanied by still or moving images. The texts tell partial stories and reference blood, violence, affection, and intense desire.¹¹ The strange monsters formed by the collaged body parts are self-sufficient and autoerotic. Indeed, an image of hands joined at the wrists invokes Luce Irigaray's notion of sexuality in which there is a fusion of touching/being touched, and a sense of the body folding back on itself. This body, while grotesque in being strangely shaped, melds interior and exterior, undoing the clear distinction between them. The body spills open and rolls inward, eschewing uniformity and offering models of bodies fitted to divergent needs.

The process of making the project was also fragmented: *Cyberflesh/Girlmonster* was initiated in 1994 in an Australian lesbian bar with Dement, seated at a table with a scanner, inviting women to choose parts of their bodies to scan. Participants also donated a line of narrative or a sound, making the project partly communal. Further, as with Dement's earlier CD-ROM project, *Typhoid Mary* (1991), there is no organizing interface

or controllable menu system. Instead, the viewer enters the project but, at the same time, relinquishes full control.

Los Angeles-based artist S. E. Barnett similarly plays with notions of the body in parts with her project *Mary Shelley's Daughter* (1999), a video installation which consists of nine video monitors arranged to suggest the outline of a body. A humorous reworking of the Frankenstein monster in more contemporary terms, the piece includes images of various parts of the body on different monitors. The body in pieces becomes the body in pictures of pieces. Next to the configuration of monitors, Barnett includes a bookcase holding stacks of tapes; viewers can eject and insert different tapes to assemble different sorts of bodies at will, as if playing with a large, mechanical paper doll. The project continues Barnett's interest in delineating aspects of subjectivity, as well as the well-established feminist tradition of using video installation to comment on the cinematic apparatus. However, while much earlier work—Jonas's *Vertical Roll*, for example—concentrated on exploding the cinematic apparatus and depicting a fractured portrait of identity seen through the relationship between the body and the technology being used, Barnett's concern is not so much singular identity reflected via cinematic structures, but networked subjectivity. The piece comments on the role and experience of bodies in an increasingly virtual environment.

Heidi Kumao, known for a series of sculptural pieces initiated in 1991 titled "Cinema Machines," also created a project titled *Misbehaving: Performative Machines Act Out* (2002–2008), which consists of three female robot-like figures. The first two robots are made up of pairs of legs similar to those of a young girl. They are outfitted with video screens and sensors, and they react to the presence of viewers, moving nearer to or away from them. A third robot has a pair of legs with a screen in place of the girl's torso. This robot walks back and forth between two projectors, becoming a screen for the projector that she's closest to. Viewers will get to see whatever fragment of narrative she screens as she moves. While reminiscent of the work of the surrealist Hans Bellmer, Kumao's interest in the basic workings of the cinematic apparatus and her focus on the conjunction between the animate and inanimate—referring here to that which moves versus that which does not—makes Edison's talking doll "Eve" a more apt reference point.¹² A clunky, barely functioning toy, Edison's doll was doomed to failure, but it represents a larger moment at the turn of the twentieth century when people were fascinated by the possibility of "mechanical life." But Kumao is also responding to the prevalence of very aggressive versions of robots—battle bots and destroy-and-conquer machines; she's more interested in creating a robot with hints of psychological complexity, and with addressing issues of performance and misbehavior, both of which are referenced in her project's title.

The work of music video director Floria Sigismondi continues, in some ways, the trajectory of Barnett and Kumao's assemblages. Known for her gothic-oriented music videos for MTV, such as "4 Ton Mantis" for Amon Tobin and "Megalomaniac" for Incubus, Sigismondi has created a series of mannequins based on women's bodies—the bodies, however, like Dement's, are strangely mutated female forms. Legs morph into

other legs and arms, and fashionably svelte torsos sprout a multitude of breasts. One handless mannequin looks down over her smooth belly, but where she should have genitals she instead sports a spike. Behind her stretches a broad tail. Sigismondi's somatic distortions reflect a sense of uncertainty about the body in an increasingly technologized culture, and while Kumao's robots deploy the clunkier, more awkward aesthetic of the handmade, Sigismondi's mannequins are highly polished, smooth creations, at once purifying the body by making it clean and sleek, and yet, in their distortions, compromising attempts to eroticize it.

Sigismondi's bodies also reflect the desire to parry danger. Several contain motion sensors in their eyes that detect and respond to noise in the gallery. Further, the bodies are perfectly attuned to a society of surveillance, deflecting the gaze through a degree of utter difference. If, as Gerfried Stocker notes in the "FleshFactor Opening Statement" for the Ars Electronica Festival 97, "our media are a second skin at the periphery of the body, a body whose sentient pores are formed by surveillance cameras, image recognition systems, 'eye in the sky' satellites, personal data record systems, networked databases and intelligent agents," then Sigismondi's bodies are the perfect, shimmering response. And where the digital male body is often half man/half machine (the "Six Million Dollar Man" or "RoboCop," for example), a "super" man catapulted to new heights of masculine power, the female body in each of these projects permutates, shapeshifting as needed, becoming an assemblage of parts that are at once organic and technological. As psyches shift in relation to the differing possibilities of technology, so too will the body shift, becoming altogether other.

Web artist Marina Zurkow engaged the grotesque body in more humorous terms with *Braingirl*, her Flash animation series made initially for the website RSUB featuring the eponymous character, a young woman who boasts a bulbous, wrinkled brain on the top of an open skull, combined with prepubescent nipples and strangely webbed fingers.¹³ Braingirl is neither young nor quite adult, and while her breasts are bare, she is hardly eroticized (especially compared with the fantastically full-figured cyber females of much digital art). Zurkow's creation clearly critiques her feminine digital counterparts, but she is also an emblem of the body that has been formulated to undercut the dichotomy between inside and outside. Indeed, in some ways, the hapless Braingirl illustrates Elizabeth Grosz's model of embodiment—Grosz argues that the relationship between interior and exterior might be understood as a Möbius strip, where the one flows fluidly into the other, and where the psyche, in a sense, produces the body as the body produces the psyche (Grosz). Braingirl's protruding brain parodies the desire to situate intelligence in a single organ—Braingirl regularly removes her brain, with no discernible complications. While philosophy, dedicated to ideas and concepts, denigrates the body and situates thinking in some nonmaterial realm, Braingirl grounds thinking in the body (even if her thinking is not quite astute).

Braingirl's brain is not the only organ that comes and goes. In an episode titled "Braingirl's Brain," Braingirl awakens one day to discover that she has a penis. Perturbed,

she and her sidekick Bag Boy visit the doctor to see what can be done about the unwanted appendage. While waiting, Bag Boy presses the reset button on Braingirl's cerebrum, prompting a colorful tailspin downward through layers of sin, tumbling finally into the unfettered chaos of the unconscious. Braingirl emerges happily whole again, the extra organ nowhere to be found.

Braingirl flirts with the confusion of gender boundaries, and "Braingirl's Brain" is the most compelling episode in this regard. Although she suddenly has a penis, Braingirl remains female. And rather than being excited by the potential that having a penis might signify, Braingirl is instead disgusted, nicely twisting the common horror of the female genitals back on the male body. It is also not insignificant that the episode is titled "Braingirl's Brain" instead of "Braingirl's Penis"—the story moves beyond the acquisition and loss of the organ with ease. The confusion of genders extends to Bag Boy as well, who is clearly unsure of "his" gender and wants to have sex with the newly augmented Braingirl, until she reminds him that he is a boy. If the genders and desires seem unclear here, it is no mistake; the confusion reflects the general state of gender anarchy that rules the series, and which helps make all of the bodies gleefully grotesque—they readily cross or confuse boundaries and blur distinctions. And, as this episode suggests, they disregard the idea that gender must remain fixed and static; gender in the series mutates and is quite frequently up for grabs.

Finally, the episode also toys with the body/machine matrix—that Braingirl has a reset button is never questioned, but instead is accepted as entirely natural. Many factors in Braingirl's world hover similarly between the possible and impossible—it is an animation after all—but the casual incorporation of the machinery of technology is much more akin to Donna Haraway's utopian vision of the cheerful cyborg than it is to the anxious fantasy of abandoning the body, or in using technology as an armor against the threat of dispersal sparked by the postmodern dismissal of foundations.

Each of these projects contemplates the representation of the body and, not coincidentally, they do so in forms that move beyond traditional cinema while still employing moving images. Whether they're installations, web-based series, or photographs, each project asks viewers to consider their own somatic relationship to what they're seeing, a relationship actively brought to the foreground in the work of Los Angeles-based artists Anne Bray and Molly Cleator, who are interested in investigating cultural and social spaces through their video installation work. The pair, who began working together in the late 1980s, are known for their bold video/performance pieces exploring power, the role of media, and the very ability to express critical ideas in installations and performances that ask viewers to contemplate their experience of bodies in an increasingly virtual environment; by asking viewers to enter and move through spaces or to interact with their performances, they are helping create a language for discerning insights gleaned through the body.

Bray and Cleator's installation *Easy Chair, Electric Chair* (1992) incorporates two electronically rigged wheelchairs with small monitors situated to seem like heads of otherwise invisible people. Cleator's face adorns one, and Bray's appears on the other. The

chairs whirl and twirl in the exhibition space, with sensors and software determining their direction. The onscreen faces speak, offering competing riffs on television. Overall, the conjunction of video, performance, and installation nicely embodies the principles under scrutiny. The wheelchairs are like strange cyborgs, unusual amalgams of human and machine that forcefully illustrate the influence of media, suggesting that it speaks as much through us as to us. And yet the piece also asserts a way of slipping into a position of power, of stepping into the frame and becoming the revered spokesperson. But the key to the piece is in the dueling commentaries. They are interesting in themselves, but more importantly, they offer two diametrically opposed points of view that are similar only in their shared description of alienation.

In more recent projects, Bray and Cleator have begun to consider the idea of projection, in the filmic sense but also in a more philosophical manner. In *Double Burning Jagged Extremities* (1998), for example, three large, billowy female dolls seem to rise up on a slow intake of air, and then deflate in exhaustion with its release. On their tremendously tall bodies, Bray and Cleator project a series of appropriated movie images showing women being brutalized, creating a visceral scene that is all the more potent because of its size and immediacy. In their abundance and shared codes, the snippets of film footage confirm a frightening circulation of cruelty and, in their projection on the female forms, become a manifestation of the ways in which the female's role is precisely to act as a screen or placeholder for the identity projected onto her. The dolls designate the blank nothingness attributed to the category of the female. It is perhaps no mistake, then, that a performance version containing this piece in 2000 was titled "Weight and Volume," offering a connection to Luce Irigaray's scathing essay "Volume-Fluidity," which describes a system of hysterical fantasy that relegates feminine subjectivity to nondifferentiation and nothingness. "She is patient in her reserve, her modesty, her silence," writes Irigaray, "even when the moment comes to endure violent consummation, to be torn apart, drawn and quartered. . ." (*Speculum* 227).

Irigaray's portrait might also illuminate Bray and Cleator's *Dis Miss War Party* (1999), a piece of media manipulation that uses four video projectors, a live sound mix by A.R.M. (incorporating sampled Medieval chants and Elizabethan lute and drum grooves), and a disco ball. Pairing images of the tortured heroine from *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928, dir. Carl Dreyer) with images from the more recent film *Elizabeth* (1998, dir. Shekhar Kapur), Bray and Cleator show how the narratives of both female figures begin in the same place, with an incredibly powerful female caught in a system that does not know what to do with her; but these narratives gradually diverge. One woman's life culminates in torture and death, while the other's life becomes a pageant of highly codified, aestheticized displays of power. The impact for the audience in seeing the incremental parting of ways on screen embodies Bray and Cleator's entire project—what do viewers do when faced with total binary opposition? While we may feel inclined to bring them together, to find closure or a solution that will reconcile the two extremes, Bray and Cleator instead urge us to contemplate the space in between.

In another piece, *Pressure Drop* (2001), viewers are invited to move under the skirt of a gigantic female figure, on top of which is projected video and photographic images. We step into a space that is both comforting and totally taboo; it is at once much ado about nothing and the source of everything. Indeed, with this installation, Bray and Cleator have found an incredibly rich terrain. There are the obvious cultural references—the iconic image of Marilyn Monroe holding down her fluttering dress (and later unsuccessfully fending off an infuriated, jealous Joe DiMaggio, who beat her badly), for example. Or consider the myth of Baubo, the playful goddess who inspired a grieving Demeter to smile by pulling up her skirt and offering a flash of her vulva. One might even find a connection to Plato's cave, a womb-like cavity illuminated by phantom, illusory projections. There is also the very daunting threat of seeing what Freud described as a wound, and what Lacan designated as absence, lack, nothingness. And indeed, Bray and Cleator are flirting with the very core of gender and representation, inviting us to cross back and forth over the boundary between the visible and invisible, and to reckon with our own cultural phantoms and the fundamental fear that what we will discover is precisely the unrepresentable.¹⁴

Taken together, these projects continue a central facet of one arena of contemporary practices by women, namely the redefinition of the self as a mediated being situated at a matrix of not only the usual threads of race, class, and gender, but also at the conjunction of the social, the technological, and a revised space/time configuration. Much of this redefinition occurs through a questioning of identity and the body through depictions of the body. If the construction of identity is partly an induction into ideological hegemony and partly a negotiation of complex psychoanalytic processes, redefinition occurs on multiple planes: through the dissection of notions of citizenship in general and gendered citizenship in particular, and through interrogations of psychoanalytic processes such as fetishism and hysteria, where ambivalence and the recourse to the body in resisting the symbolic order figure predominantly. The body similarly hovers between planes, understood not merely as a physical entity acted upon by external events, but instead as a site for the complex interaction of disparate forces.

Why is this focus occurring now? In part, it is a response to shifting media and technology. Questions regarding subjectivity—central for more than forty years—gain renewed urgency as the Information Age becomes more fully entrenched. One could argue, however, that the most recent wave of questioning actually began with video art in the 1960s, when the indexical connection to the world via light hitting emulsion was severed, allowing for an image-based form founded on interpretation rather than documentation. That said, if we understand the trajectory of Western metaphysics as a system—begun with Descartes's division of the *res cogitans* and *res extensa*—that denigrates, disciplines, and renounces the body in favor of the unencumbered mind, the experience afforded by the instantaneous transmission of information made possible by the Internet and the ensuing sense of noncorporeality adds another twist to the questioning, if only in augmenting the anxieties initiated more than thirty years ago by video. Further, while

the hierarchy of mind and body, and its political manifestation in myriad forms, has been a central target in feminist attacks on Western metaphysics for more than twenty years, we have yet to articulate a satisfactory delineation or description that adequately accounts for a global, feminist, political subject. Finally, although much attention has been paid to subjectivity and consciousness in critical theory, less attention has been paid to corporeality and to a system that gets around the mind/body binary in representation—except, that is, in feminist media practices beginning in the 1970s and in contemporary feminist theory, where the body and its relationship to space and time have grown increasingly central over the past five years.

In their emphasis on the tactile body, many recent new media projects also challenge the hierarchy that privileges sight over touch and, in a sense, continue the desire for presence in the face of absence that subtends the evolution of body-centered feminist work over the past twenty years. Trading the “real” bodies of the earlier work that hoped to guarantee political presence through an indexical facticity for a dismembered body that encourages a distance between a created self and a body, many new media projects contribute to a critique of the earlier conceptions of the self.

Much of the most interesting feminist media work over the past twenty-five years, across a range of shifting and diverse political movements, attempts to reckon with the body, to chart the imprinting of history and the inscription of social power on the body. Because knowledge pertaining to these bodies is not recognized as knowledge, much of this work has been trivialized or ignored while, conversely, since the ability to maintain power stems from the ability to regulate subjects, the degree of increasingly precise forms of micropolitical surveillance, control, and punishment has grown steadily. There is thus a simultaneous abrogation of much body-centered work alongside a tremendous growth in the power of various technologies to chart and control those very bodies. Each of the artists cited above steps into this terrain, accompanied by unruly monsters and bodies out of control, helping to disrupt the status quo.

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Holly Willis is chair of the Media Arts + Practice Division within the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California (USC), where she teaches, organizes workshops, and oversees academic programs designed to introduce new media literacy skills across USC’s campus and curriculum. She is also the editor of *The New Ecology of Things* (Art Center College of Design, 2007), a collection of essays, words, images, and fiction that grapples with the potential and design challenges of pervasive computing, and she is the author of *New Digital Cinema: Reinventing the Moving Image* (Wallflower Press, 2005), which chronicles the advent of digital filmmaking tools and their impact on contemporary media practices. The former editor of *RES* magazine, she has written extensively on experimental media practices for a variety of publications. She holds a PhD in Critical Studies in Cinema–Television from USC.

NOTES

1. As Julia Kristeva notes in *Powers of Horror*, that which is abjected, both by a culture and by the individual, is that which threatens the integrity of the self, crossing boundaries and blurring distinctions. Similarly, the body out of control, or the body with improper orifices or protuberances, incites abhorrence. The grotesque body is open, impure, heterogeneous, disproportionate, and rife with gaps, holes, and filth, in contrast to the smooth, clean, closed body. Also see Stallybrass and White; the authors explore the polarities between base and noble as they relate to the body. They write, "The grotesque returns as the repressed of the political unconscious, as those hidden cultural contents which by their abjection had consolidated the cultural identity of the bourgeoisie" (9).

2. N. Katherine Hayles, for example, opens her essay "Embodied Virtuality: Or How to Put Bodies Back into the Picture" by noting William Gibson's "fictional representation of the 'bodiless exultation of cyberspace'" and John Perry Barlow's description of a virtual reality experience as "my everything has been amputated" (1).

3. Also see Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*. Here she ponders shifts in notions of embodiment and agrees with Jones that embodiment in the information age tends to get erased; Hayles refutes this erasure, though, offering instead the notion of the "posthuman." She writes, "What embodiment secures is not the distinction between male and female or between humans who can think and machines which cannot. Rather, embodiment makes clear that thought is a much broader cognitive function depending for its specificities on the embodied form enacting it. This realization, with all its exfoliating implications, is so broad in its effects and so deep in its consequences that it is transforming the liberal subject, regarded as the mode of the human since the Enlightenment, into the posthuman" (xiv). She will go on to argue, against many who posit the opposite, that the body is not disappearing but instead that a certain kind of subjectivity has emerged. "This subjectivity is constituted by the crossing of the materiality of informatics with the immateriality of information" (193).

4. Peter Lunenfeld charts this convergence to some extent in his book *Snap to Grid*, if only to resituate discussions of media outside the lineage of cinema.

5. See Margaret Wertheim's *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace* for a discussion of the history of space and its evolution in cyberspace into a kind of "electronic *res cogitans*."

6. Zummer writes, "These works/spaces performed an important series of translations between the somewhat circumscribed and insular context of the art world and a global field of increasing mediation." He continues: "Installations were reterritorialized spaces, simulating, co-opting, or contaminating the museum or theater, tampering with private spaces and public places, in order to confront or destabilize conventional positions of art and its audience" (77).

7. See, for example, Huffman, who considers "electronic volume," which she says "defined information as site, especially as it informs the influence of experimental art and the fundamental discourse relevant to the *reality* of data space" (200).

8. The members of Critical Art Ensemble characterize it well: "In order to bring the body up to code and prepare it for the high-speed social conditions of technoculture, a pancapitalist institutional subapparatus with knowledge specializations in genetics, cell biology, neurology, biochemistry, pharmacology, embryology, and so on have begun an aggressive body invasion. Their intention is to map and rationalize the body in a manner that will allow the extension

of authoritarian policies of fiscal and social control into organic space" (Scholder and Crandall, 23). See www.critical-art.net/.

9. As with this project as a whole, this emphasis is necessarily limited, selecting only a small corner of a larger terrain.

10. See www.digimatter.com/monster.html for more on *Cyberflesh GirlMonster*.

11. In some ways, *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* is akin to the visceral nature of Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*, with its overtly graphic description of bodies, as well as the fiction of Kathy Acker. Both situate transgressive writing in the belligerent, almost assaultive use of text.

12. For more on Edison's doll and other "automatons," see Wood.

13. See the series at www.thebraingirl.com/.

14. Several recent projects move the mutated body into the realm of the economic. In *Metapet* (2002), Natalie Bookchin takes ideas of scientific management inaugurated by Frederick Taylor at the turn of the twentieth century to their next level, tackling issues of biotechnology and worker efficiency. To play the game, visitors to the site become managers of a company. As such, they need workers, so each player is given a "Metapet," an employee who has been biologically improved with the addition of an obedience gene. Designed to be loyal and productive, the Metapet still harbors a few unfortunate flaws—a tendency toward indolence, an appetite for drugs, a need for encouragement, and a penchant for rebellion when maltreated. The goal for each player is to coax maximum work from an unpredictable laborer, balancing exploitation and tyranny with doses of calculated compassion (www.metapet.net).