

Nakedparts

By Don Simmons

Since the beginning of the World Wide Web, pornography has had a constant presence. Although predominantly male fantasy based, there are some alternatives. Nakedparts is one such alternative site, that is an amateur pornographic community. Individuals join LiveJournal, a network of posting boards, and then are free to post cam pics of their nakedness or to comment on others. As such, this site is more than just a pornographic subculture, and so, what are the deeper issues of gender and representation in this technology? What does it mean to have a body in a technological medium? Discussing freedom, self image and the desire to fill the void, I will show how we are creating and designing a body that will inhabit cyber space. Concerning absence and presence of the body on the web, I will discuss how we are redefining our gendered bodies to create something new that extends our own experience.

The World Wide Web is a vast space, less than ten years old, that has constantly redefined itself. It originally promised to be the largest library resource in the world and has turned some individuals into billionaires while making others bankrupt. Despite the Web's failures, an interesting characteristic is its ability to create new communities and networks of people that otherwise would not form. Freedom and access does exist on the Web; unattainable information is now available to anyone who has access to the Internet. This is great if we think of it as educational and providing networks of dialogue; however, it does have negative effects. Privacy may no longer anymore. An individual's rights may be violated by others who use information against them. New inventions always have polar effects. Martin Heidegger states in his essay, *The Question Concerning Technology*, "The closer we come to danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become. For questioning is the piety of thought." Here Heidegger refers to the dichotomy of new technology that saves us and condemns us at the same time. It is difficult to predict the results of a new technology like the internet, but it should be questioned, as well as explored for the potential that it creates. This is a Modernist notion because it idealizes technology, but it is useful for understanding what the internet is capable of becoming.

Since its creation, the Internet has been dominated by the male gender. This is a result of the fact that more men have traditionally worked in the technical fields of computer programming and software development. However, the internet is a space where identities can be hidden or changed, meaning that a man or woman can pretend to be someone that they are not. This makes the Internet a prime playing ground for individuals or groups who want to subvert the technology or other communities. With websites like LiveJournal.com, individuals can create and customize their own live journal or posting board. Users update their page with entries as often as they like. Communities are created, inviting people with similar interests to post to them. These users create

nicknames and identities, while keeping their real identity hidden, protecting the individual's background. This brings up the issue of trust. Who do you trust? Or should you trust at all? With the community called Nakedparts, most individuals keep their identities unclear despite the fact that they are exposing their otherwise private parts to the world to see if it chooses to.

Information about every posting can be traced to its source. However, the profiles that individuals in the community use are often very vague. The most you can usually uncover out about a person is their interests. Sometimes people state their age and possibly the city where they live, but this is normally provided so others can identify with them. After all, the purpose of any community is to meet people and make connections with like-minded individuals. This does cause problems when inappropriate comments are voiced, especially for women being harassed. A unique characteristic of Nakedparts, however, is that it is watched by two individuals, Eris and Elvis. Eris is the woman who created the community and Elvis is a frequent user. Both are LiveJournal employees who can be emailed with complaints and have the power to delete comments. This "Big Brother" tactic is used to keep the peace in the community. It is interesting that there is an equal representation of gender in the policing, with one man and one woman.

In the rules section of the community, it does state that comments or users will not be deleted in "the exception of majority rule on a situational basis". Eris and Elvis are in control but the community is open to debate. It is a communication device and users are only removed if they are harassing. Decisions are made collectively by the members. There is a freedom of expression because the watcher is being watched as well. The leisure activity of surfing or "playing around" on the net is creating communities that structure discipline differently than traditional models. Thus, women are able to "weave" themselves into the web, to use Nina Wakeford's metaphor. Their presence is more than metaphoric though. Women are able to be active and voice opinions in this non-patriarchal system of power.

But what is the big deal? It's amateur porn. Who is its audience? Well, for the most part we can assume that it is mostly male. Not because it is marketed toward a male audience but because there are many more male users anywhere on the internet than female users. However, for the most part, the number of women who post approximately equals the number of men who post. The audience is comprised of two sections; the users and a lurking group that does not post. The latter has no power because of its refusal to participate. They are silent observers by choice and they make no judgments because they are silent. For this reason, I will only consider the users, both the individuals who post pics and those who comment, as the audience.

These audience/users are individuals who have a digital cam at home and decide to take pictures of themselves. Never before has such an open community existed; the idea of reproducing an image of yourself naked has been considered taboo in recent history. There is no longer a need for a photographer's darkroom or for a commercial photo-

finisher who may not print the images. There is no authoritative censorship, only personal self-censoring. This new style of image is different than the more accepted published photos from magazines like Playboy. These images produced by digital cameras are taken with an amateur eye, expressing a personal sexuality that is not commercially driven. The aesthetic is not air brushed and the bodies represented are not idealized. The individuals look more real, like people we know. They are more familiar and recognizable than any models' photograph.

This practice is stepping out of the framework of a male dominated history. Images are not intended for the male gaze alone. As Teresa de Lauretis discusses in her essay, *The Technology of Gender*, by stepping out of the male frame we are able to rethink representation. There is a blurring of public and private sexuality present in Nakedparts that enables us to move past problems of representation and the construction of gender. Labels of sexual orientation are often unclear from members of the website, which helps in building the present community where restriction enforced by gender roles no longer matter.

In moving through the website, though, one is struck by the nature of the comments that reoccur. After someone posts an image and another user responds, usually the comments are based around flattery. For example, "Cute pic. Big dick, cocky smile. Loved it." or "sexy, you have a sweet face too". These comments can often engage the people who posted the pic to comment back with more flirty talk or a simple thanks. This can be viewed as normal human interaction but sometimes the comments returned often reveal self esteem issues in the individual who posted the pic. Not uncommon to the community are individuals who post before and after pictures of themselves showing weight loss. This type of post is definitely more gendered than the others, reaffirming the judged body in a traditional standpoint. In Ann Balsamo's essay entitled, *On the cutting Edge: Cosmetic Surgery and New Imaging Technologies*, she points out that technologies that scan the body have a tendency to reform the body. She discusses scanning devices for cosmetic surgery that support the ideal notion of the body and give false hope of obtaining it. These types of self esteem improving images are rooted in the tradition of unreal expectations of the body.

However, there are plenty of images on Nakedparts that counter these improved body images. It is very common for individuals to post regularly who do not have the so-called ideal body that is found all over the media. These individuals are very proud, open and honest about the way they look and are helping to redefine the image of the erotic body. Their representation of the naked body gives rise to a gaze without gender. The gaze reflects their own, not what society has pre-determined.

These images in cyber space help redefine what the new body in a technological space looks like. It looks very familiar because it is ordinary and looks like our own. Images of ourselves will define the development of how we look at cyber space. It is important to reflect back our actual image, not the idealized image of ourselves. If we

reflect back the idealized image, cyber space will support the values of a patriarchal society, which is something we should keep in mind while moving through the space.

One can liken this to *Walking in the City*, an essay by Michel de Certeau, where he metaphorically describes a person moving through a city with all its structures. Sections of the city that now suffer from urban decay are haunted by their past. These cityscapes are merely transformed into ruins but they are haunted places that have memory. Cyber space does not have a long history but we, its creators, do and we bring that memory with us while moving through it. This is why the internet is not pure; it has our past values throughout. The network simply offers a way to change these views and values more easily.

With our memory, we bring our baggage and scars to the Internet. These scars can manifest themselves through marking on the body. It is very common for members of Nakedparts to post pics of their tattoos. Tattoo culture in the last century has mostly been dominated by males, but more recently in the last decade, women have been increasingly going under the needle. These images on the body represent a self expression to the individual wearing the tattoo. Tribal tattooing often had more to do with a rite of passage from one stage of life to another. The pain of the needle would give the individual strength to move forward and the image on the skin acted as a reminder of the event. Many contemporary people have identified with this notion of passage and adopted this philosophy as their own. Images of tattoos on the web can also refer to a passage, from one stage to another, maybe from a real persona to a cyber persona or from an image of the self to the cyber image of the self.

Drawing on the body measures and maps it as a surface. The skin can act like an interface for a person's senses and their environment. Skin being depicted on the internet refers to a touch or a need for a touch. Often in Nakedparts members will write headings for their photos such as, "I need a touch", expressing a desire for intimacy with other members. This desire and lust exist primarily through their computers. Members may meet for discreet rendezvous, but this is rarely made public. I would even question the extent to which this happens at all. Most of the members live all over the world, making it not that easy to actually see others who are in the community. The desire is fulfilled through the machine, the computer.

The only sexual contact that can take place through the internet is masturbation. Virtual Reality or VR, creators promise the idea of virtual sex but it has not happened. The technology, speed in processing and the sensorial devices have not yet been developed. VR makes a better art project that deals with issues around reality, but the actual experience of VR at present is disappointing. We still desire to fill machines with the answers to our needs. We project our desires into devices like the internet, and they become apparent with web sites like Nakedparts.

We are becoming new creatures. Our bodies are changing with the development of new technologies. This is something we can embrace because it gives us a new beginning

to live in a world where gender representation no longer matters. Donna Haraway uses the myth of the cyborg, in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, to describe an individual who is outside history and not restricted by it. By becoming new beings we can move in new directions and be selective about what we take with us. We do not have to live in the past with its old patriarchal systems. By starting over, there should be no ideals to follow or to guide us to an end goal, we are then able to branch out into new directions. We just know we have to change from that which has restricted us in the past.

New representations of the sexualized body help in this movement. Our desire to fill our technologies with answers to making our bodies more efficient has led us to the development of the machines that have surpassed our bodies. This has been going on for some time now. For example, heavy machinery like bulldozers and cranes are now doing the work that it would have taken several people and a lot more time to finish. Our machines are replacing our bodies, and we are left to think about what our machines require to answer our needs, not the body's. We are, in a way, filling the void in our machines by giving them that which they don't have, which makes them more intimate and personal than they have ever been.

Why are we so intimate or desiring intimacy with machines? Filling the void or absence in something can be explained more easily with simpler technologies like eye glasses. For those of us who have been wearing glasses from most of our lives, they are now a part of us. We need them to function in the world around us and would not be able to see much without them. In a time when glasses did not exist, individuals with poor vision would have been a disabled persons their entire lives. It is not uncommon for people who wear contact lenses to attempt to adjust their absent glasses if their nose is itchy. This technology is so much a part of them that they are not conscious when it is not present. Glasses have filled the void of sight and has extended it to enable to see.

Intimacy with technology can be seen in prosthetics as well. Prosthetic limbs have enabled individuals to live their lives more fully than without limbs. These new limbs fill the void of the body. Allucquere Rosanne Stone refers to this as the phantom limb, where someone who once had a limb is able to adopt to a prosthetic limb as if it were their old missing one. Stone argues in the essay *Neural Games: Remapping the Locus of Desire* that "the body image, or the sense of physical, topological self is partly mediated by an internal hardwiring as well as by social conditioning." She believes that not only are we driven socially to function, but there is also an internal force desiring a limb. The body wants to fill the void as best it can.

In her essay, Stone cites battle veterans as a source for individuals who have lost limbs. She noticed that "soldiers' internal images of their bodies did not change to match the new external reality: that frequently the internal body image retained the shape of the old now vanished, body." With change, our body desires to be the same as it was. This can be likened to Nakedparts, which is a manifestation of our desire for an image of the body on the internet. The internet does not have a body, so we fill the void with what we

know, our own bodies, that look the most familiar. This enables us to expand on the images we have present and to redefine the body in a new space.

Stelarc is an Australian performance artist who deals with this idea of redefining the body. Through his performances, he addresses issues around enhancing the body and viewing the body as an evolutionary, objective structure. From this description, his work sounds very male gendered and rooted in the Modernist notion of idealizing technology for the betterment of the human race. However, his work is not really isn't as gendered as it appears. He has no agenda or ideal vision of where his work is leading him. He enhances the body to experience things in new ways, extending its capacity to encompass a new changing reality.

Theoretically, he believes the body is obsolete; technologies are beginning to outperform the body, making the body less useful than it was. We are now confronted with the idea of designing a body to fit the machine, redefining the body to work in new ways. This contrasts cosmetic surgery that reconstructs the body to fit ideals of beauty that have been controlled by a gendered society. The potentials and possibilities change when we think of designing a new body without the ideals of the past.

We have developed devices such as infra red and ultra violet cameras, which enhance our view of the world around us and change the way we understand our environment. These types of enhancements to the body benefit our lives. Stelarc attempts to explore this idea with his sculpture, *the Third Hand*, a prosthetic arm that is attached to an individual who has two arms. The wearer of *the Third Hand* is not missing any limbs, but extends their capacity to move with more arms.

Stelarc theorizes that something in the body extends out to fill the third limb. This device is doing more than filling the void of the body. It is changing the notion of what it is to have a body and how we define our bodies. We can extend this idea to the internet and how our bodies are being redefined by this technology. Although the technologies are being developed to stimulate real touch, the sensory devices for it are not available through the internet. However, the image of gender is present, making it an important issue as to how we want to be represented in this space.

Gender boundaries will disappear on the internet with images like those of the members of Nakedparts. We are inhabiting cyber space and filling the absence of a body with our own image of our bodies. We must be careful not to fill this presence with images that restrict ourselves, the idealized beautiful bodies that are common in advertising and main stream pornography. These are very present on the internet as well, and if we continue promoting and accepting mainstream images of the body, we are destined to create the same familiar structures of past patriarchal systems. The internet provides a space where anyone can contribute to a change that is not as gender dominated. Nakedparts is one such space, that can change the way we see and feel about our bodies so that we will not be as restrained in the future, and so that we can move into spaces

were the body can be redefined. Since cyber space is changing our bodies, it is our responsibility to steer the direction of this change into a genderless society.

Endnotes:

1. Heidegger, Martin. The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977) p.35.
2. Orwell, George. 1984. (New York: Penguin, 1999).
3. A list of Nakedparts rules can be found on the web page <http://eriscam.com/np/>
4. Wakeford, Nina. "Networking Woman and Grrrls with Information / Communication Technology: Surfing Tales of the World Wide Web," in Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life, ed., Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert. (New York & London: Routledge, 1997) pp. 52-66.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-66.
6. de Lauretis, Teresa. "The Technology of Gender," Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) pp. 1-30.
7. Quotes from the members of Nakedparts can be found at <http://www.livejournal.com/community/nakedparts/>
8. Balsamo, Ann, "On the Cutting Edge: Cosmetic Surgery and New Imaging Technologies," Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1996) pp.57-79.
9. de Certeau, Michel, "Spatial Practices: Walking in the City," The Practice of the Everyday Life, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) pp. 91-110.
10. Quoting "suddenfury81", a Nakedparts member on Sunday, August 5th, 2001.
11. Haraway, Donna, excerpt from "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in The Artist's Body, Tracy Warr and Amelia Jones, eds., (London: Phaidon, 2000) p. 286.
12. Stone, Allucquere Rosanne, "Neural Games: Remapping the Locus of Desire," Press / Enter: between seduction and disbelief, (Toronto: The Power Plant, 1995) pp. 131-143.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
14. Atzori, Paolo and Woolford, Kirk, Extended-Body: Interview with Stelarc can be found on the internet at <http://www.ctheory.com/article/a029.html>

Bibliography

Balsamo, Ann, "On the Cutting Edge: Cosmetic Surgery and New Imaging Technologies," Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1996).

de Certeau, Michel, "Spatial Practices: Walking in the City," The Practice of the Everyday Life, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

de Lauretis, Teresa. "The Technology of Gender," Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Haraway, Donna, excerpt from "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in The Artist's Body, Tracy Warr and Amelia Jones, eds., London: Phaidon, 2000.

Heidegger, Martin. The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977.

Orwell, George. 1984. New York: Penguin, 1999.

Stone, Allucquere Rosanne, "Neural Games: Remapping the Locus of Desire," Press / Enter: between seduction and disbelief, Toronto: The Power Plant, 1995.

Wakeford, Nina. "Networking Woman and Grrrls with Information / Communication Technology: Surfing Tales of the World Wide Web," in Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life, ed., Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert. New York & London: Routledge, 1997.

Websites:

Allucquere Rosanne Stone's Homepage - <http://sandystone.com/>

Ctheory - <http://www.ctheory.com/>

Eriscam (creator of Nakedparts) - <http://eriscam.com/np/>

Nakedparts - <http://www.livejournal.com/community/nakedparts/>

Stelarc's Homepage - www.stelarc.va.com.au/