Frances Stark: My best thing

Thursday talk by Professor Darren Tofts
The Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne
18 April 2013

Three theses on virtual curb-crawling: from lurkers to terrorists who just want to talk

1. Sex at a distance

I wish I’d only look
And didn’t have to touch
I wish I’d only smell this
And didn’t have to taste

How can I ignore?
This is sex without touching
I’m going to explore
I’m only into this to

Enjoy.

This could be the interior monologue from an early internet user in 1993, anticipating their first encounter in a MUD (or multi-user domain or dungeon). It could be their reflection on the titillation of sex at a distance over a network, in which raunchy text substitutes for the tactile rumble of bodies. It could also be a theoretical understanding of virtual sex from some media savvy study of emerging forms of disembodied contact online.

Rather than an utterance of new media, it is an expression from old media, a verse from Björk’s song ‘Enjoy’ from the 1995 album Post. Taken from a work about letter writing, about making connections with absent others, these lyrics suggest the idea of the post as an experience of distance without delay. As an old telecommunications motto used to go, let technology ‘reach out and touch you’. The post-coital doesn’t come afterwards, but during, sex.

Kinda like the internet.

But the post has been around for a lot longer than the internet. So too has sex at a distance, whether it is tantric, mystic or epistolary. Media theorists have been telling us this for some time. West Coast cyber-futurists in America were also doing a lot of theorising in the early 1990s, talking up something called ‘teledildonics’. Like virtual reality, it would be the next revolution in the history of ideas. It was a peculiarly cumbersome way of streaming orgasm across the internet. Go figure. Very male-oriented, very geeky and thankfully relegated to the dustbin of history.

Frances Stark is reminding us now of what we have forgotten about the world around us. A world taken for granted. A world that we think we really know that has become invisible. Computer freaks, geeks and leets have been courting an old idea in the name of new technology: disembodied carnal experience. Internet Relay Chat, Second Life, RSVP.com are interesting ideas. But they ain’t new and they haven’t got a thing on the sensuality of Björk’s ‘Enjoy’. And they could learn a thing or two from My best thing about sex and abstraction.

The idea of identity performance, of playing at being who you are not, is as old as the internet itself (which is not really that old, but you get what I mean). In the early 1990s the Australian cyberfeminist art collective VNS Matrix took the idea of the polysexual dominatrix into the realm of female empowerment on the net. While coordinates of physical space don’t mean anything online, the VNS girls were always on top. If cyberspace was a new frontier for experimentation and identity formation, these ‘brave new girls’ went to places where no one had been before. And they weren’t mealy-mouthed about it either. ‘Infiltrate’ became a cyberfeminist noun of assertion and control and the ‘Gamegirl’ a new form of identity as well as a console.
Francesca da Rimini from VNS Matrix explored the polymorphous, plastic nature of identity in online chat spaces and multi-user domains, shape-shifting through her various identities as Gash Girl, Doll Yoko and the Puppet Mistress. Sex at a distance may not involve the exchange of bodily fluids, but identity can be perverse, erotic and liquid. Well before the ‘cosplay’ associated with today’s gamer culture, Francesca da Rimini was doing liquid identity in the name of sexual experimentation on-screen. So was Linda Dement, especially in her *Cyberflesh girlmonster* (1995). This visceral expression of the ‘monstrous feminine’ was a vivid exploration of the relationship between the female body and the body politic as they are integrated into, and modified within, the improvised space of interactive media.

2. Performance

Donald Cammell and Nicolas Roeg’s film *Performance* (1968) courts many of the themes that would become urgent in the age of the internet. One was the idea of acting, of performing in real life, playing a role and seeing if it would work or not. Another was solitude and sex. Like a kind of textual method acting, the film pastiches Francis Bacon’s stylised enactments of hectic, desperate or abject couplings. Bacon comfortably moved within the dark world of the London demi monde of gangsters and rough trade that the film portrays. It’s hardly surprising, then, that his shadowy, often violent silhouettes of anonymous figures are traced throughout the film. These cyphers of darkness make cameo appearances in the film’s opening title sequence to suggest these themes. But more dramatically this loneliness and distance is captured in emotionless reflections of faces and mirrors throughout the film. Figures, in other words, that unwittingly and uncannily resemble faces on a computer screen.

Two years later Bernardo Bertolucci took Marlon Brando to see a major retrospective of Bacon’s work at the Grand Palais in Paris. It was to instil in the mind of the great actor the idea of fatigue with the ‘meat’, the physical mess of bodies coming together in conditions of ennui and physical exhaustion. In a film notoriously remembered for that scene with the butter, the impact of Bacon on *Last tango in Paris* is regrettably not as well known.

Accordingly, the two forlorn characters of Jeanne (Maria Schneider) and Paul (Marlon Brando) attempt to have sex at a distance; even though they sit akimbo in intimate physical proximity with each other. It is an experiment. Something different, out of the ordinary. It could be erotic. It is a dismal failure. Paul concludes that Jeanne is not trying hard enough. Instead of coming ‘without touching’, they remain isolated, distant, nameless, identity-less. But in their attempt to have virtual orgasm they unwittingly anticipate something even more important than sex at a distance. And that is the fascination with being elsewhere and there, at the same time.

3. Artists do it better

And this is why artists do it better.

Sex in *My best thing* isn’t about having orgasms in front of a tawdry webcam. Even if it does happen in Sex Roulette or a million other sex dungeons online, it is always onanistic, solitary and often melancholy. Sex without touching, with apologies to Björk, isn’t always enjoyable. So what’s the attraction?

Frances Stark and her ambiguous and unknowable dungeon mate do resemble those figures in Bacon paintings; isolated, discombobulated, struggling with the shit of life, trying to make a new connection. They are very much like the separate portraits of Lucien Freud and Isabel Rawsthorne that come together in the opening credits of *Last tango in Paris*. While technologically mediated, they are still separate, enframed in their own worlds, caged, like so many of Bacon’s figures, by their own solitude.

Suffice to say being hard, tumescent, wet or pliant doesn’t make any sense in the virtual world of sex at a distance. And it is the détourning of sex away from the corporeal to the vocal that is remarkable in *My best thing*. And I’m not talking about talking dirty. The male and female voices in *My best thing* talk about pretty much everything else they can think of other than sex. Despair, disappointment, solitude, boredom. And identity. An artist adrift in self-crisis following the birth of her child, trying to find herself
in this world, discovers another way of thinking about who she is while play-acting with an anonymous other in a mediated otherworld. She re-finds herself while role-playing with an obscure male figure of indeterminate age, who may or may not be a terrorist, a capable intellectual or bored and balding seventy-five-year-old who may just be curb crawling for a bit of fun.

But these details don’t matter. They talk, they comfort each other, they flirt and watch Fellini’s 8½. They watch television coverage of terrorism and riots. They dance in a green void to funky music. And this is the great inventiveness of My best thing: it enacts a peculiar, perverse and seductive dialogue that involves discussions of painting, film-making and books that probably won’t be written. In this it presents the melancholy and hilarious dialogue between two strangers, one in need of finding herself while redefining herself, the other content with playing with identity, politics, intellect and enjoying the ride. And all throughout the process, neither of them knows who they really are, only that they are both pretty good actors.

And you were thinking that My best thing was all about sex.

As one of male characters in the film says: 'life is more absurd than you can imagine'.


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