

## virtual curb crawling, lurkers & terrorists who just want to talk

*His semen had never done any harm  
to anyone*

Samuel Beckett

*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*

Björk

Samuel Beckett wrote *Malone Dies* before Björk was even born. He was already dead when “Enjoy” started to be heard. But there’s an occult *something* that makes it plausible to place them cheek by jowl, as awkward as that seems. Something about bodies, sex and distance. The idea of coitus in Beckett’s bittersweet narrative of slapstick mortality is a form of clumsy regret. The failed passage of seminal fluid from one body to another was an expression of the lonely solipsism of his world-weary and irascible narrator, a Manichean impatience with how long it takes the body to die. Malone just wants a quick end to it all, but during the tedium of his dying he remembers the *petit mort* of an urgent ejaculation as a young man: “Now my sex, I mean the tube itself, and in particular the nozzle, from which when I was yet a virgin

clouds and gout of sperm came streaming and splashing up into my face, a constant flow, while it lasted..."<sup>1</sup>

Beckett's ascetic and sterile words weirdly anticipate a time in the future, in fact not too many years after his own death in 1989, when the exchange of fluids between bodies was surplus to need and would not be required for sex when it could be mediated across time and space via the internet. Björk's lyrics in "Enjoy" from the suitably named *Post* album also presume sex in the absence of bodies, at a distance, without the passage of fluids. With the wordiness of Beckett's narrators in mind Björk's parsimony anticipates, *rere regardant*, a time when intimacy at a distance was exclusively the province of the written word, transported as an abstraction in letters from one location to another. Rather than an utterance of new media, the idea of "sex without touching" is an expression from old media, and not just the *post*.

## POST-CODE

Taken from a work about letter writing Björk's lyrics suggest the idea of the *post* as an experience of making connections with absent others through the decentred word. As an old pre-internet telecommunications motto used to go, let technology "reach out and touch you." The titillation of sex at a distance over a computer network presumed forgetfulness and lots of willing suspension of disbelief, since text substitutes for the tactile rumble of bodies. But with Malone's tutelary shadow hovering like an abject chaperone, keep your fluids to yourself for now. Between 1989 and 1995 the world changed for yet another time in its history and sex at a distance was only one of the delirious highs of this new *post*-human condition. Cyberpunk author Rudy Rucker wrote in 1992 of a "massive human/computer symbiosis developing faster than we can even think about it realistically. Instead of thinking realistically, we can think science-fictionally, and that's how we end up writing

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Molly. Malone Dies. The Unnamable* (London: Calder & Boyers, 1973) 235.

cyberpunk near-future science fiction.”<sup>2</sup> The future had arrived by *post*.

In the same year as *Post* (1995) Microsoft’s Internet Explorer was first released to a world hungry for that reach and that touch, having intuited the potential of now archaic interfaces that for a time were the future. In the 1990s the future became obsolete very quickly and it was clear how dominant that company’s brand would be as a mode of immediate access to telepresence and the ambient ecology called “information.” But the name “Internet Explorer” was as bland as the utilitarian grey of the computer screens that acted as portals to the enticing otherzone of cyberspace. *Internet Explorer* actually sounded more like a pioneering cyberspace album by cosmic rock bands of the analogue days like Hawkwind, or Krautrock adventurers Ash Ra Tempel or Tangerine Dream. But at a time when all things cybercultural defined the times we lived in, a more plausible incarnation of internet exploration is to imagine it as an Dadaist intervention by Mondo Vanilli, a trio of West Coast culture jammers who were fascinated by but also suspicious of the networks of Big Science, pioneering Internet corporations and the reach and invasive depth of media penetration. The names of their personnel, Simone Third Arm, R.U. Sirius and Scruppi Dūchamp were suitably “new edge” for a time of scepticism towards “simulations of the real [that] have utterly replaced the real. For us, the media – both one-way broadcasting and the interactive media – are a playground for competing fantasies,” with most of which “we have no actual connection at all” (174). From the media pranks of Mondo Vanilli to the cyberpunk fiction of Bruce Sterling and William Gibson, the rapacious embrace of finding a new “home” in a global media network was a highly contested zone that required radical, conspicuous and loud critique.

And you didn’t have to look further than your own home to find it. That most insidious domicile on the new edge, “Microsoft Home,” underlined the corporate branding that

<sup>2</sup> “On the Edge of the Pacific, ” in *Mondo 2000: A User’s Guide to the New Edge*, eds. Rudy Rucker, R.U. Sirius & Queen Mu (London: Thames & Hudson), 9. Further references in the text.

insidiously cauterized the private with a new public sphere in that ever-expanding notional world that was nowhere. William Gibson had prepared us for the abstraction of this pretzel logic a decade earlier so it was easy to be caught up in the rhetoric of simultaneously feeling at home while being elsewhere in a newly wired world. That accursed tyranny of distance associated with the world of atoms shrunk in the incessant flow of a new bit-stream that circumscribed the planet. Beyond the first nature of experience and the second nature of culture, the wired world was a kind of Borgesian third world that was notional, consensual and fabricated through the persuasive rigours of writing. We learned from him that in the age of the Encyclopaedia and its unimpeachable imprimatur that fictitious worlds were rhetorically irresistible. When Gibson wrote *Neuromancer* (1984) forty years later the new utopia he described was, like Tlön, a “consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions” (67). That same planet was shrinking into a global village made possible by ubiquitous electronic media. The year after Gibson gave the word cyberspace to a world still curious what to do with the computers that were becoming a feature of home, the anticipation of a whole earth electronic link found its acronym in the WELL, arguably the first virtual community associated with the internet that launched into cyberspace in 1985.

In this new globally connected home the *post* represented a new economy of presence and a dramatically altered psychopathology of being in space and time. Counterpointing this insight in terms of another tradition, the release of Björk’s second album underlined the overwhelming delay of the familiar tele-presence of posting letters. Like many before her writing in the epistolary genre of fiction, letters fulfilled a desire to reach out and talk to someone elsewhere. They were the parchment from which the vaporous sound of the sender’s voice could emanate and be heard by a distant other, beyond the physical proximity of the body which uttered them into writing. When Björk relocated to England in the mid 1990s the *post* became an extension of herself in transit between the UK and Iceland, a way of dealing with homesickness, making an intimate connection with a distant home, a kind of talking cure. But in 1995 *Post* was also a savant allegory of the desire

for an intimate connection promised by the new postal system of the internet. Shared presence at a distance was becoming immediate, always on and ambient. You didn't have to wait long for the *post* to arrive.<sup>3</sup>

## TEXTASY

But the lyrics of "Enjoy" speak of other kinds of pleasure, unwittingly or otherwise. They represent the interior monologue of an early Internet user reflecting on their first encounter in a text-based MUD (or multi-user domain or dungeon, in case that earthy acronym has lost its currency). It could also be their anticipation of a frisson new to culture, not dissimilar to the excitement and titillation of literary and telephonic porn that was private, voyeuristic, solipsistic and safe. That pleasure was the textual play of fluid identity, of being who you are not, a metamorphosis sanctioned by the anonymity of screens as animated pages of writing that supplemented your absent presence with voice, image and other surrogates of *being there*. Whether it is online sex or polymorphous identity play, illicit scenarios and hunky method acting, happy endings were for perverts in porn theatres, cat houses and drive-ins. The primal eroticism of cybersex was among the first forms of generic writing to emerge from the internet. And it presumed that the *post-coital* didn't come afterwards, but during sex.

With Malone's crumbling body in mind as well as Björk's desire for a connection other artists, another world away, had also been anticipating the reality that physical embodiment was unnecessary in the ambient bit-stream of cyberspace, that identity was fluid and that text-sex could be fun. 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 and the Bitch Mutant into the realm of female empowerment on the net. While co-ordinates of physical space didn't mean anything online, the VNS girls were

<sup>3</sup> See Esther Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Email: Technologies of Presence* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

always on top.<sup>4</sup> 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, hacking and appropriation. The “Gamegirl” was a new form of identity, a console and a motif for controlling the ascendance of a New World Disorder.

Francesca da Rimini from VNS Matrix explored the 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 mutant-erotic-role play is perversely liquid. Text and sex in da Rimini boudoir was always about controlling the code of an anonymous submissive. And doing it slowly. Titillation and flirtation was bound in an algorithmic tourniquet of BIOS and eros, hyperventilation and hypertext, as in the “Triple Temptation of Circuit Boy” from *The Contested Zone* (1993):

Abject feigned sleep, her thighs slightly apart, her left breast uncovered

She favoured a non-linear approach

Her pathways were subtle

Circuit Boy tended her biological components, practising ethereal modes of convergence in his down time

He partitioned his RAM, slowing his response times to match her requirements

She was highly encrypted, he became expert at decoding

Their surveillance narratives grew so dense it became impossible to know who was in control<sup>5</sup>

da Rimini’s cyberfemme hackers are politically, sexually and textually reverse engineered from her experience of the male dominated geek world she associated with online role-play and power. Hacking into this continually morphing zone she takes

<sup>4</sup> The cyberfemmes of VNS Matrix were Francesca da Rimini, Virginia Barratt, Julianne Pierce and Josephine Starrs. <http://www.sysx.org/gashgirl/VNS/TEXT/PINKMANI.HTM>

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Darren Tofts, *Interzone: Media Arts in Australia* (Melbourne: Thames & Hudson, 2005) 123. See also <http://www.sysx.org/gashgirl/>

control of "Deep Space Slime where cyberfeminists, data deviants and pathogenic vectors engage in pleasurable distractions of the virtual flesh and projected imagination." This is no place for newbies on the crawl for their first timid experience of cybersexual roleplay. Circuit Boy may have been tempted three times, but the Puppet Mistress always comes first: "Suck my code, baby!"<sup>6</sup>

### *Teledildonics*

da Rimini's various online personae anticipated a theme that emerged in post-human literature at the time, a distaste for corporeal flesh and the physical union of bodies, or at least an impatience with its necessity and resignation to its obsolescence in the bit-stream. This new abstraction had been prefigured by another Australian explorer of dataspace for whom the organic body was indeed obsolete, and therefore unprepared for the imminent network age. Since the 1970s Stelarc has been the most consistent and provocative explorer of the possibilities of escape velocity beyond the tyrannies of distance. His robotic *Third Hand* (1980-1998) forecast the becoming-cyborg of human nature as it blended more intricately with informatic technologies. But performances such as *Ping Body* (1995) anticipated the principle of *tele-dildonics* as stimulation at a distance across the noise of the internet: "During the *Ping Body* performances, what is being considered is a body moving not to the promptings of another body in another place, but rather to Internet activity itself – the body's proprioception and musculature stimulated not by its internal nervous system but by the external ebb and flow of data."<sup>7</sup> Proprioception, the tongue-twisting name for this organic process of the flow of somatic information, converges with data in a kind of weird ghost dance. And it actually sounds more like a term from the lexicon of the human-computer interface than the corporeal body. The experiments that Stelarc was doing in the name of the *post-body* gestured to other forms of simulated stimulation to come.

Tele-sex or cybersex was interesting territory for a writer in the 1990s. Instead of an actual coupling of bodies it promised

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sysx.org/gashgirl/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/ping-body/>

the notional or virtual pleasure of synaesthesia in which the penis and the vagina, the mouth and the anus were substituted with the fingers, the eyes, the imagination, a keyboard and a screen. Like snake oil salesmen on the Oregon Trail its spruikers in Silicon Valley even extolled the virtues of the absence of bodily fluids as a dramatic panacea to wipe out sexually transmitted diseases. But getting hot on Internet Relay Chat, role-playing in LambdaMOO or taking a room in *Hypertext Hotel* were merely forms of literary foreplay. At the time the speed of chasing the future was considerable and software and hardware obsolescence was only half of it. West Coast cyber-futurists in America were also doing a lot of theorising in the early 1990s, talking up something called “teledildonics.” A term fabricated by Project Xanadu maverick visionary Ted Nelson in 1975, it had been variously laughed out of the bedroom and boardroom as a joke as a peculiarly cumbersome way of streaming masturbatory orgasm across the Internet, with all that follows at either end. Nelson’s fanciful name for sex at a distance was his contribution to the vocabulary of the techno-sublime that he and other futurists were imagining at the time. But what was all the fuss? The concept of unwired eroticism was old media anyway, since it was familiar in mystic disciplines such as tantric mediation and sex magic as ancient wisdom. But it was also known in cinema.

#### *Inter-course*

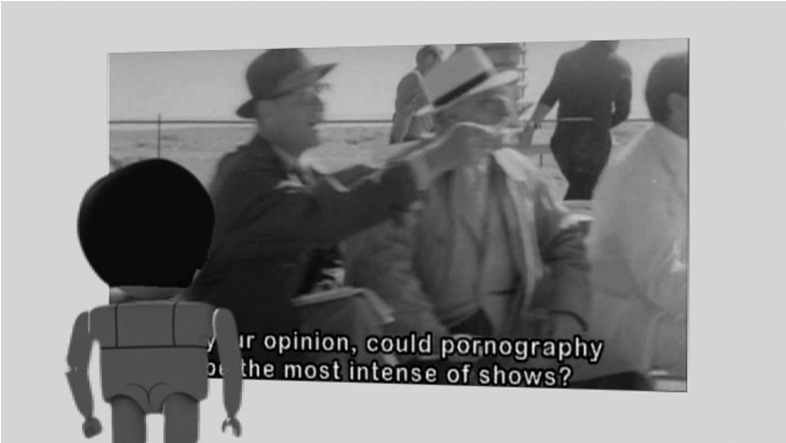
In Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) there is a curious scene in which the two central characters attempt to have sex without penetration, a virtual orgasm that twenty years later would be touted as the next big thing in carnal pleasure. Meeting anonymously in an apartment for this purpose, Jeanne (Maria Schneider) and Paul (Marlon Brando) experiment in transcending the physicality of bodies coming together. Jeanne suggests they try to come “without touching.” The experiment fails, according to Paul, because his partner is “not trying hard enough.” 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. In 1971 Bertolucci took Marlon Brando to see a major retrospective of Francis Bacon’s work at the Grand Palais in Paris. It was to instil in the mind of the great method actor the idea of bodies in isolation,



being torn apart from within while still making a connection. The disfiguring and degeneration of the body in Bacon's painting renders it for what it is, meat, like portraits of hanks of beef astride grinning or screaming Popes. Meat was a disparaging term for the corporeal body in cyberpunk fiction, notably in Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Its use as a term of boredom and obsolescence amongst his console cowboys reflected their desire to escape it into the unfettered vectors of cyberspace. Even technologies that we can only still dream of such as "simstim" or simulated stimulation were totally uncool and outmoded. It was "basically a meat toy" (71).

## **CURB CRAWLING**

Hackers in cyberpunk fiction are hustlers on the make, usually for data to steal, databases to wrangle and corporations to bring down. They always live on the edge, alt-tabbing between two metaphysics of space. Their posthuman otherness in the '80s and '90s has lost some of its sheen at the start of the twenty-first century. It still looks like a future yet to come, one of tomorrow's parties that speculative fiction continues to crash, luring us to imagine our becoming cyborg in the name of technology. That time may come. But right now we can get our cyber kicks whenever we want, from wherever we are. American artist Frances Stark has shown us how we don't have to jack into the matrix through implants plugged into the central nervous system, or simulate presence at a distance with dermatrodes strapped to your body. In Stark's video *My Best Thing* (2011) there is a different kind of hustling going down in the tele-space of real time internet chat. Stark doesn't speculate on what is to come, but reminds us of what we have forgotten about the world around us, a world that has become so intuitive that is invisible. Like tuning your television to a dead channel. "Ubiquitous" hardly describes the ambience of screens in daily life. From mobile phones to Google Glass, cyber-sociality via mediated screenery has become just another form of person-to-person interaction. Internet Relay Chat, *Second Life*, RSVP.com are interesting ideas, but they could learn a thing or two from *My Best Thing* about sex and abstraction.



Detail from Frances Stark, *My Best Thing* (2011). Courtesy the artist, Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Gavin Brown's enterprise, greengrassi and Marc Foxx Gallery.

*Chatroulette* for Stark is about conversation, distraction, redefining herself after having had her first child, balancing her family life and her art practice. So sex in *My Best Thing* isn't about having an orgasm in front of a tawdry webcam, solitary, shared or otherwise. In fact this work isn't really centred around sex at all, let alone at a distance. *Chatroulette*, the media portal that the various protagonists use to share their private worlds and ambiguous lives, is certainly used for such frissons (like *Sexroulette*). This sharing is invariably chatter, discussion, sometimes a meaningful connection. But when eros is courted in this face-to-face situation it is onanistic and often melancholy.<sup>8</sup> You are always only looking at the other,

<sup>8</sup> In an essay underwritten by the divination of Borges on the history of ideas it is fitting to encounter him in a footnote, and strangely in the context of sex. It is in the footnotes of his fictions that some of his most memorable and mind-tangling insights can be found. Mischievous and reflexive, they are not to be completely trusted as they can reinforce the irrealism of the story. "All men," we are told in one, "in the vertiginous moment of coitus, are the same man" (12). This note appends a clarification of the Platonic forms as they are understood in the philosophy of Tlön and it echoes a previous in-text attribution by the narrator to a statement of Borges's friend Bioy Casares, who repeats a saying of one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar: "*Mirrors are abominable because they multiply and disseminate [the] universe*" (4). The link between

and sex without touching isn't always enjoyable. So what's the attraction? With reference to the casual coming together of Jeanne and Paul in *Last Tango in Paris*, Stark and her unknowable screen mates do resemble figures in Francis Bacon paintings, isolated, discombobulated, struggling with the shit of life, trying to make a connection. They are very much like the confined portraits of Lucien Freud and Isabel Rawsthorne that come together in the opening credits of *Last Tango in Paris*. While mediated they are still separate, enframed and caged in their own worlds, like so many of Bacon's figures.

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 makes *My Best Thing* remarkable. 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 and boredom, writing, activism and violence. And identity. An artist adrift, trying to find herself in this world discovers another way of thinking about who she is while play-acting with anonymous others in a mediated otherworld. She re-finds herself while role-playing with obscure male figures of indeterminate age, possibly into terrorism, capably intellectual or bored and balding, just curb crawling for a bit of fun. And they do have fun.

mirrors and computer screens here may seem to stretch the tolerance of credulity. But something of this strange encounter via screens is perhaps anticipated in Borges's fiction "The Other" from 1975 (the same year, as the vagaries of time would have it, that the term teledildonics was coined). On a park bench in Cambridge Massachusetts in 1969 Borges encounters himself as another, sharing the same year but displaced, insisting that he is in Geneva. "It is odd that we look so much alike," the Swiss resident suggests, "but you are much older than I, and you have grey hair." Both men quibble over the spelling of a street in Geneva when recalling "a certain afternoon in a second floor-apartment" in 1917 (the story furtively has both of them mistaken in terms of the street name, for rather than Plaza Dubourg or Dufour it is in reality Place Bourg du Four). This literary nicety distracts both their attention, and indeed the reader's, from the reality of that event for it is the fateful day when Borges's father sent the young Georgie to a whore for entry into the world of carnality (*The Book of Sand*, trans. Norman di Giovanni [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975] 4-5).

But these details don't matter. They talk a lot, comfort each other, flirt and watch Fellini's *8½*, television coverage of riots and political unrest. 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 discussion that involves painting, filmmaking and books that probably won't be written. It presents the sad and hilarious dialogue between two strangers, one in need of finding herself while re-defining herself, others content with playing with identity, politics, intellect and enjoying the ride. And all throughout the process none of them knows who they really are, only that they are pretty good actors.

And who said *My Best Thing* was all about sex? Like being at a distance in cyberspace, solitary in a Beckett novel or homesick in a Björk song, Stark and her anonymous screen friends find many ways to pass the time that has very little to do with it. They are represented as people who just want to talk, chatty avatars not dissimilar to those found in user friendly and benign in-world palaces like *Habbo Hotel* (2000). When Stark was making *My Best Thing* as a film about her real life experience online, she used the utilitarian *xtranormal* software to create a green void that is private, intimate and safe. A telepresent room of their own. But we watch them watching. And in the process we become unseen voyeurs sitting in a darkened gallery, looking at a screen, as if in a porn theatre. And like the recursive figure of the play-within-the-play we wonder who is watching us. As one of the anonymous male characters in the film says, "life is more absurd than you can imagine."