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Seeking Sex in an Electronic Age

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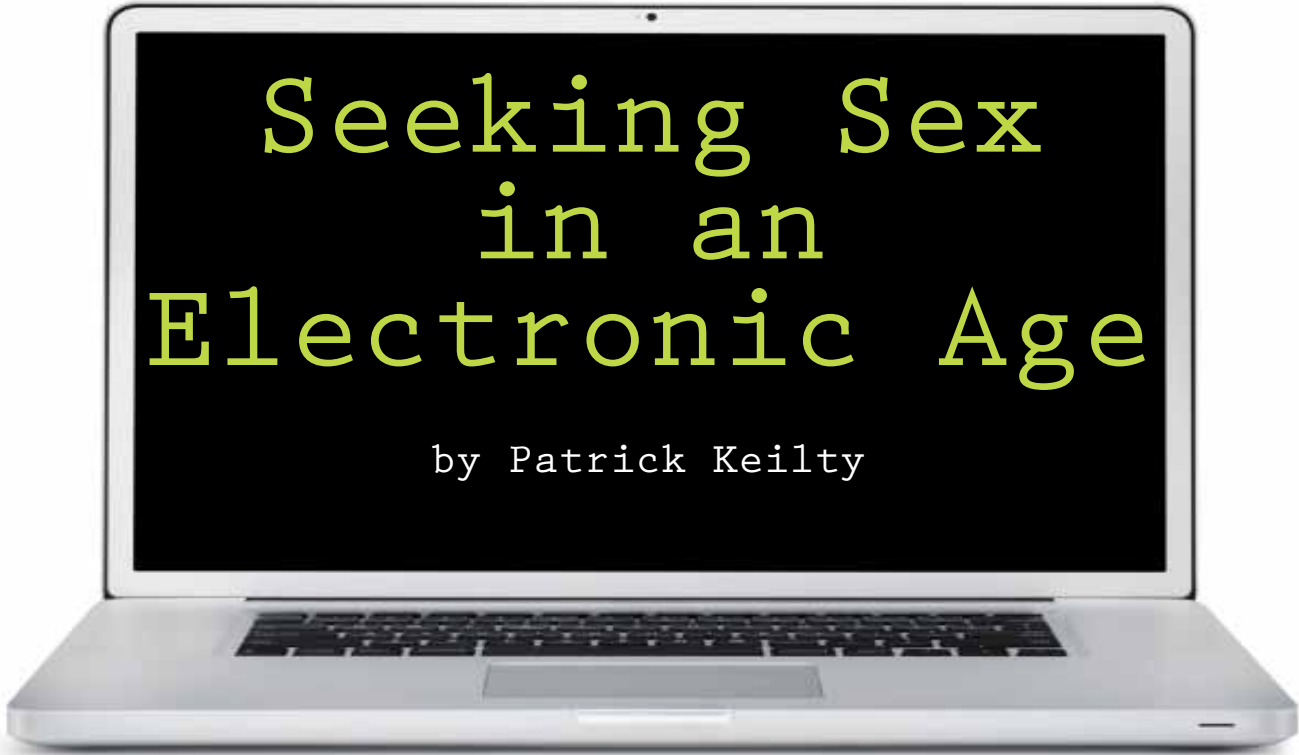
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Seeking Sex in an Electronic Age

by Patrick Keilty

Technology is never merely used, never merely instrumental. It is incorporated into our lives in ways that are socially pervasive and profoundly personal, informed not only by its own specific materiality, but also by a political, economic, historical, and social context. Just as transportation technologies, such as the train, plane, and automobile, have

extended our culture's spatial and temporal consciousness, so too have representation technologies, such as the photograph, film, and the Internet. Technologies help shape and reflect our presence to the world and to others. In the past decade, scholars, such as Don Ihde,¹


1. Ihde, Don. (2002). *Bodies in Technology*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Vivian Sobchack,² Kate Hayles,³ and Brian Massumi,⁴ have become interested in the radically material nature of our human

2. Sobchack, Vivian. (2004). *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA: UC Press.

3. Hayles, N. Katherine. (1999). *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

4. Massumi, Brian. (2002). *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.



These new forms of sexual sociability also reveal the body's participation in creating new media cultures, which lies at the intersection of sexuality studies and studies of our embodied encounters with technology.

existence in an increasingly electronic age.

In concert with these corporal concerns, sexuality scholars have wondered how objective encounters with computer technologies may reconstitute our sexual sociability. At the end of his lengthy cultural history of masturbation, Thomas Laqueur observes that masturbation, once a solitary sexual pleasure governed by Enlightenment sexual ethics, has become an increasingly public, social, and communal experience online.⁵ These new forms of sexual sociability

also reveal the body's participation in creating new media cultures, which lies at the intersection of sexuality studies and studies of our embodied encounters with technology.

Online pornography is especially ripe with examples of the ways in which the body participates in creating new media cultures. There are literally thousands of websites that cater to every masturbatory fantasy imaginable. But what is new is the way in which these sites reflect and create fetishistic communities and diagram relations of sexual desire through the arrangement of images on display. This is because pornographic images

online have often been arranged around corporal and social experiences, whereby curiosity, frustration, surprise, desire, repulsion, pleasure, and wonder arise from the relation of images to their location within a digital space, from their representation of particular acts, body parts, and other such fetishes, and their proximity to similar or different images, a kind of sexual *Wunderkammer*. Indeed, several scholars have conceived of the display of digital objects within a digital space as part of

5. Laqueur, Thomas W. (2003). *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*. New York: Zone Books, 419.

Pornographic video hosting services (basically YouTube for pornography), for example, have incorporated social networking design elements into their websites, making explicit sexual communities online.



a Baroque genealogy.⁶

Pornographic video hosting services (basically YouTube for pornography), for example, have incorporated social networking design elements into their websites, making explicit sexual communities online. Viewers can “befriend” each other, exchange stories, follow each other’s uploaded videos or favorite videos, and contribute to wikis. Viewers add titles, descriptive tags, commentary, and narrative

6. Murray, Timothy. (2008). *Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press; Munster, Anna. (2006). *Materializing New Media: Embodiment and Information Aesthetics*. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press.

description about images that solicit or repel them. These textual fragments contribute to the metadata of an image, which enables searching, retrieval, and the arrangement of images on display through a predetermined dataset in the design of an algorithm. In this sense, viewers enter into a participatory, albeit mediated and constrained, relationship with online pornography in that the arrangement of these images are particular to viewer-initiated spatialization.

The corporal and social experiences viewers have with online pornography thus

enable an image’s relation and proximity to each other and reflect an image’s place in a larger network of sexual fetishistic relations. Conceived diagrammatically, an image functions as a single node around which a constellation of images, along with their respective textual fragments, maps a fetishistic network within a digital space. These corporal arrangements adhere to the associative principles of indexing and classification systems, in which objects are placed always in relation to other objects for a particular purpose. Many online pornography

websites, then, effectively catalog and index sexual fetishes. These systems, following Suzanne Briet, not only point to an object but also reflect the social networks in which the object appears. Any catalog or index is always a culturally embedded and socially networked phenomenon.⁷

Yet these images do not maintain a fixed identity in relation to other images. Nor do they represent the static presentation of a thing. Instead, these images are performed when looked at or experienced. Their corporal and social arrangements constitute, according to Johanna Drucker, an “active, dynamic field of forces and energies in dynamic suspension, acting on each other within a frame of constraint” to produce the conditions a viewer is provoked by in the constitutive act of seeking, viewing, or hearing that makes an image.⁸ Thus, these images and their arrangements are lived events, not fixed entities.

It is important to remember, too, that a

7. Briet, Suzanne. (2006). *What is Documentation?: English Translation of the Classic French Text*. Trans. R. E. Day and L. Martinet. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

8. Drucker, Johanna. (2009). “Entity to Event: From Literal, Mechanistic Materiality to Probabilistic Materiality.” *Parallax* 15 (4), p. 14

viewer’s experience with these images is always mediated through through one’s own body capacity and the particular material limitations of a technology. Some of these limits can be seen in the material limits that characterize the operation of a computer’s information flow: the capacity of silicon to conduct electrons at particular speeds, its resistance to degrees of deterioration, its ability to change in composition and properties according to temperatures, the possibility of its combination (or not) with other material flows, and so on. And then there are any number of material limitations of the desktop computer that concern ergonomics: its stationary status, the height and size of a screen, a reliance on the proximity of certain hardware (such as the mouse, keyboard, and electrical outlet), and an appropriate level of illumination of the screen, to name a few. These limitations can be said to further mediate, constrain, and structure the body’s participation in creating new media cultures, which are of necessity technologically grounded and structured. As technologies change, so too will the structures of these social relations. Pause for a while, for example, over the impact of mobile electronic devices

on sociability and one quickly grasps how important technological structure becomes.

The corporal and social arrangements of pornographic images online are only one example of the many ways in which the body participates in creating new media cultures. Understanding these arrangements allows one to map the contours of new forms of sexual sociability in an electronic age. In this way, the Internet does not merely act as a repository for objects. Instead, these objects are relational and dynamic, and their arrangement is socially and culturally embedded. The Internet is, therefore, never merely used, never merely instrumental. It is itself a site of social relations that has become incorporated into our lives, transforms us as embodied subjects, and alters our subjectivity.

Patrick Keilty is a PhD candidate in the Department of Information Studies with a concentration in Women’s Studies at UCLA. His dissertation project is entitled “Seeking Sex: Embodiment and Electronic Culture.”