

RYAN, CHRISTIAN, M.F.A. *Leptaxis and the Constructed Body: An Exploration of Poetic Queer Cyborg Prosthesis*. (2010)  
Directed by Chris Cassidy. 10 pp.

This written portion of the M.F.A. thesis describes the both aesthetic experience of the artwork *leptaxis* and the critical intent, political perspective, and conceptual motivations behind the construction of the work. The artwork *leptaxis* consists of a series of objects worn by participating viewers in conjunction with a reactive audio installation space. Framed as a space of play outside of traditional art spaces, viewers are invited to participate in the installation space by wearing the prosthetic objects and interacting with each other and elements of the installation. These worn objects are framed as queer cyborg prosthesis in the way that they intend to disrupt heteronormative perspectives on how gender and the human body is defined. The prosthesis interface with each other and the installation space via physical computing technology and digital audio signals. The audio component of installation is modulated and effected through the viewers' social interactions with the prosthesis. A key element within the artwork is the use of the concept of as pleasure functioning as a communicative vehicle for the radical queer cyborg political perspective.

LEPTAXIS AND THE CONSTRUCTED BODY:  
AN EXPLORATION OF POETIC QUEER  
CYBORG PROSTHESIS

by

Christian Ryan

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2010

Approved by

---

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Chris Cassidy

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_

Elizabeth Perrill

\_\_\_\_\_  
Mariam Stephan

\_\_\_\_\_  
Lee Walton

19 April 2010 \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Acceptance by Committee

19 April 2010 \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Final Oral Examination

## PREFACE

### *the queer cyborg addendum*

Our bodies are constructed in studios, garages, hackerspaces, and spare bedrooms.

We build them to custom specifications,

designing them to meet our individual expectations of our non-reproductive future.

These bodies are modular and contextual,

and we playfully try on different augmentations in the same way

we playfully try on different genders.

We shrug at the term "synthetic" because a synthesizer has never

produced an artificial sound,

the Amen Break is a linguistic phrase without origin,

and a 909 is just another kit in our library.

We shrug at the term "virtual" because we've always ridden Light Cycles,

the Konami Code is a childhood nursery rhyme,

and we assign different email pseudonyms to multiple online perversities we engage in.

As we mix our realities of flesh space, game space, gender space, network space,

the borders between spaces become more porous,

the delineation between X and Y (especially XX and XY) cheerfully ambiguous.

We are fluent in over six million forms of communication,  
but we are not golden idols passing as effeminate stereotypes.  
Our dialects include 1337, txt, MIDI, 68 65 78, and Chicago style,  
but even though technology is our lingua franca,  
we are more interested in the non-linguistic communications between our hybrid bodies.

We used to think we were the bastard offspring of gattling guns and Bernanke's FRB,  
but now our origins are recounted in tales of Larry Levan, Steina Vasulka, and Delia  
Derbyshire in mythological analogue landscapes of The Hacienda.

We actively forget the canonical abattoirs of Pollock, Serra, and Lou Reed,  
instead making pilgrimages to the discothèques curated by Orlan, Abramović, P-Orridge.

Of course we've never had an Eden to return to,  
but down on the disco floor, we make our prophets.

Our currency is spectacle and pleasure,  
the most luxurious tool when dissolving normativity.

In fact, why riot when dancing is so fucking radical?

...but we're not engaged in a polemic against;

it seems redundant to oppose something as obsolete as

5.25" floppy disks and rock music.

Rather, we work in our studios, garages, hackerspaces, and spare bedrooms  
to construct polymorphous possibilities beyond the scope of binary imagination.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CLARIFICATION OF PERSPECTIVE.....	3
ENCOUNTERING LEPTAXIS.....	6
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	10
CATALOGUE: ARTWORK INCLUDED IN THESIS .....	11

## INTRODUCTION

The conflicts surrounding what is considered a valid body, or legitimate human, seem to endure as an ever-present source of challenge in both art and the broader culture. Nowhere do these conflicts generate more friction than when they surround complex issues of gender and sexual identity. The challenge then, for artists whose work enters into these political discussions, is to make art that provides an expansive and nuanced experience for the audience, but without being didactic or leading them to predefined conclusions. This challenge only intensifies when the artwork advocates a perspective that sits outside normative views on gender and the body.

Faced with this seemingly daunting position as I started my thesis work, I followed my initial intuition: I opened iTunes and played the Larry Levan's 1980 remix of Loose Joints' "Is It All Over My Face." In a way, I think this critically important disco track successfully utilizes a strategy that I now find integral in my own practice when addressing challenging issues of gender. It's a strategy that I later found used by all of the most important dance music tracks from the last 30 years - from New Order's "Blue Monday" to Giorgio Moroder/Donna Summers' "I Feel Love" - but curiously underutilized in most contemporary visual art practices, including "new" media and interactive digital art. That strategy is simply acknowledging and harnessing kinesthetic bodily pleasure, especially the pleasure one has when dancing. Once bodily pleasure is introduced and experienced

by the viewer, more abstract and intellectually rigorous concepts can be added into the work; in disco these abstract ideas might take the form of academic jazz structures, experimenting with electronic audio signal processing, or simply playing with the vocalists' timbre and lyrical content. Listening to Arthur Russell and Loose Joints gives a good example of how this strategy takes form within pop music (Lawrence, 2006 156) - that somehow it's the "pleasure from the bass" that dissolves an audiences' emotional and intellectual resistance to potentially radical ideas.

As a queer artist, the idea of using bodily pleasure and sensation in my artwork coincides firmly with the queer political tactic of subversion, or using the rules and structures of the thing in order to turn it against itself. This queer subversion is a complex non-normative pleasure that simultaneously repels and attracts, seduces yet performs the affect of disgust (Bell and Freeman, 305). In musical terms, it's the drag queen camp of RuPaul and the goth rock of Bauhaus as two sides of the same coin. If, at the core of my work, I'm addressing the fluidity of gender and the post-human body, then it seems playfully fitting that I use this strategy of pleasure as a way of offering the viewers non-threatening access to potentially radical propositions. However, this pleasure principle (perhaps more in the Gary Numan sense than Sigmund Freud) is more than just seductively eliciting an aesthetically pleasing sensation; it's the playful manipulation of the expected and the uncanny in order to find a more fulfilling and complex experience. At a certain level then, I view my thesis work as creative research into how aesthetic and sensorial pleasure, especially when facilitated via play, can function as a powerful vehicle for radical and political ideas.



## CLARIFICATION OF PERSPECTIVE

The entirety of my thesis work is a collection of poetic queer cyborg prosthesis that I'm calling *leptaxis*. Before I go further into a more in-depth discussion of the work, it might help to quickly clarify both the queer cyborgian perspective, and disco (and its various mutations and evolutions) as a subversive political action. The cyborg is a posthuman concept, something beyond the scope and definition of what is traditionally thought of as "human." As theorized by Donna Haraway, it is a feminist theoretical critique of traditional notions of naturalism, duality, and "essential nature;" the cyborg is a hybrid of machine and animal without natural origin that transgresses humanist definition that have historically favored privileged races and genders (Haraway, 150). If this sounds like science fiction, consider these examples of cyborgian technology that exist right now: pacemakers, artificial joints, kidney dialysis, smartphones, and even eyeglasses.

We already exist as cyborgs, but then what constitutes a queer cyborg? For individuals doing queer (or engaging in the political activism of disrupting and subverting heteronormativity,) it can involve expanding on the idea of the hybrids between animal and machine, performing this identity through the spectacle of "carnival, transgression, and parody" (Miyake, 54) This performance typically involves deliberately situating the body in multiple ambiguous spaces of gender, temporality, and location. The idea of prosthesis, in this cyborgian application, is a nonpermanent elective body augmentation that's not used to bring the body into a normative state, but instead to allow access to abilities or

sensations outside the realm of normative human capability.

Non-normative states can also relate to the multiple parallel and intertwined meanings that are embedded when I use the term disco. On the surface, I use it as an encompassing term that includes the genre of underground dance music from the mid-1970's that has its roots in funk and soul, but also all its multiple mutations and evolutions, both historical and contemporary. At another level, I also use disco as a politically symbolic term - a hybrid of the New York underground of 1970's and 80's, of subcultural geographies of queer and anti-normative resistance, and of centers of subversive embodied pleasure accessible only through dance music (Lawrence, 2008) Of course any of these ideas can be expanded upon in a different venue, but for now these definitions provide enough of a suitable theoretical framework from which I can talk about my artwork.

Let me briefly comment on *leptaxis*, the title of the series, because it helps inform how the physical forms of the prosthesis are generated. Recently, artists and writers such as Eva Hayward have begun to introduce ideas that raise the possibility of transspeciation as an additional possible element to the idea of the queer cyborg; instead of codes of software programming and digital technologies, this variation of cyborg consists of multiple shifting genetic and hormonal codes. While still processing the theoretical ideas, I find transspeciation is a particularly salient and powerful metaphor for a hybridization of animal and machine. In fact, prior to my introduction to Hayward, I began incorporating biomimetics as a way to potentially think about the physical forms of these new prostheses. In doing some light research on the sex behaviors of non-"human" species, I stumbled upon the concept of the love dart while looking up the hermaphroditic nature of

snails of the leptaxis genus. The abstract idea of the love dart is compelling - this modular and replaceable appendage is used during the reproductive process. Its physiological function is that of a conduit for data. The love dart is not a sex organ belonging to male or female, but something else - a communication vehicle that transmits neither sperm nor egg, but hormonal information that alters the physical sex function of its recipient. While I'm not terribly interested in hanging out in slimy gastropod allusions, the love dart as an uncanny sex-data conduit is a cunning, if imperfect, metaphor for cyborgian prosthesis. I consider the ports on all the prostheses included in the thesis work to poetically mimic these love darts.

## ENCOUNTERING LEPTAXIS

Materially, *leptaxis* is a collection of objects, worn by participating viewers, within a reactive auditory installation space. These objects, or prostheses, are comprised of fabric, speakers, microphones, fur, animatronic motors, physical computing sensors, and audio jacks. Somewhere on each prosthesis there is a cluster of ports - audio jacks enclosed in fabric and leather housings that allude to both the enveloping of foreskin and labial anatomy in human and the protective shells of snails and mollusks. These jacks connect to micro-controllers, audio devices, motors, electronic sensors, and custom digital media software. In each work I use commercial audio jacks that are either the conventionally male (penetrator) or conventionally female (penetrated) variety. However, it is important to note that the function of each discrete port isn't explicitly indicated; the intent is that the audience discovers their function while exploring the work. Another shared formal similarity is a distinctive motif that incorporates animal fur and a constructed triangular form that references both clitoral and glans anatomies. The fabric used to construct the prosthesis (industrial-grade denim, upholstery vinyl, heavy formal wear poly-blend, and occasional safety netting) is materially situated between fashion and utility, neither one nor the other - yet when conjoined to each other become something else entirely. The installation space consists of two illuminated clear acrylic rods. Chrome clothes hangers sit on one rod, displaying the prosthesis; a curtain hangs from the other rod, acting as divider for a private

"changing room"-like space. The changing room is simply a small enclosed area with a mirror and dressing table, functioning as a space that participants use to privately try on and view how the prosthesis looks on their bodies. Also within the installation space are a variety of the triangular constructions hanging from the walls; more ports, in the form of long fabric tubes, dangle from these construction and are connected to a computer running digital audio software.

There are a few elements that occur within *leptaxis*, and I'd like to look at how they relate to this idea of pleasure as communicative vehicle for radical propositions. The first element is more preliminary and facilitates the actions and events to come; it happens right when the viewer encounters the piece upon entering the installation space. The audio within the installation is an undulating mix between a deconstructed disco rhythm and a rumbling bass line, and the space is lit by two illuminated acrylic rods - from which hang bizarre, sometimes sexually suggestive, fabric forms. The installation space alludes to a strange hybrid between a discothèque and a retail fashion boutique. This indicates that the installation is not solely an art space, but a space where the normative social behaviors of an art space are not entirely applicable. This ambiguity allows the viewer to enter the piece and encounter the prosthesis with a different set of assumptions and expectations than they would in a typical gallery setting. Viewers are invited to touch, handle, and wear the objects hanging from the rack.

For all of the prostheses, it's intentionally ambiguous how the viewer might put them on; straps may be too big or certain forms might not align themselves to the body in expected ways. This playful awkwardness allows the viewer to experiment with different

orientations and relationships that their body has with the prosthetic. The next element that occurs is when the viewer attempts to understand and operate the prosthetic, especially in relation to other viewers and the space around them. While the forms of the prosthetic might encourage certain body postures, all of the prostheses are really activated by connecting to other viewers, their prosthesis, and the installation space. In fact, the ports on all the prostheses are designed in a way to discourage solo interaction - for example, ports on *leptaxis\_transpanica* are clustered tightly together in a way that intentionally prevents the wearer from plugging into, or penetrating, themselves. This activity of connection - the act of plugging into, or using the prosthetic augmented body as interface to connect with, another entity is another strong element within *leptaxis*. The events that are triggered by this act are sometimes very private for the participant (a motor vibrating along unexpected parts of the body), or very public (an audio event that changes the musical space of the environment.)

The multiple pleasures the viewer experiences are embedded, in a way, in all of these elements. Some pleasures are very personal and private - an unexpected vibration when wearing *leptaxis\_straponica*, or the tactile sensation of using a furry grip to manipulate *leptaxis\_speciate!(yellow)* - while some are decidedly social pleasures. The awkwardness when attempting to figure out how to wear the ambiguous form of *leptaxis\_nervosa* in the presence of other viewers is both humorous and unsettling; it's a pleasure that can only exist when participants figure out how to perform their new augmented bodies in a destabilized social environment. Even when a viewer enters the installation space without other participants, by entering the dressing room, they can begin

to construct imaginary social interactions that take place while wearing these pieces. However these multiple pleasures are experienced, their function as communicative vehicle for thinking about radical embodiment is always present.

Rather than being a didactic exposition on how the hyper-normative cyborg body has access to a spectrum of experience beyond the range of the capabilities of the normative human body, *leptaxis* invites the viewer into a realm of play where they can physically try-on these ideas without reprisal from a greater society at-large. Maybe a more clear analogy might be that the artwork is not a dense philosophical academic text, but an invitation to a third-wave feminist queer dance party. As something that exists outside of binary definition - neither performance nor object, neither tool nor body, neither data nor sensation, neither expected nor uncanny - the queer cyborg prosthetic can suggest another strategy of pleasure within, and outside of, the art experience. The aim of *leptaxis* isn't the conventional advocating for a political position, but simply to offer an experience that opens the possibilities for new pleasures that exist outside of hegemonic normatively.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berlant, Lauren and Elizabeth Freeman. "From 'Queer Nationality.'" *The Material Queer*.

Ed. Donald Morton. Boulder: Westview Press, 1996. 305-309. Print.

Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991: 149-181. Print.

Hayward, Eva. "More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciated Selves." *Women's Studies Quarterly*. 36.3/4 (2008): 64-85. Print.

Lawrence, Tim. "I Want to See All My Friends At Once: Arthur Russell and the Queering of Gay Disco." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 18.2 (2006): 144-66. Print.

Lawrence, Tim. "Disco and the Queer Dance Floor." *Feminist/Queer Desires: Past, Present and Future, the third annual Gender and Theory Seminar*. Goldsmiths University. London. 11 June 2008. Conference paper.

Miyake, Esperanza. "My, is that Cyborg a little bit Queer?" *Journal of International Women's Studies*. 5.2 (2004): 53-61. Print.



CATALOGUE: ARTWORK INCLUDED IN THESIS

*leptaxis\_nervosa* v0.2; fabric, speakers, microphone; 2010; 90 cm. x 10 cm. x 10 cm.

*leptaxis\_pseudotrichia* v0.2; fabric, motors, speakers; 2010; 95 cm. x 35 cm. x 35 cm.

*leptaxis\_speciate!(orange)* v0.2; fabric, motors, wiring; 2010; 15 cm. x 145 cm. x 15 cm.

*leptaxis\_speciate!(yellow)* v0.2; fabric, motors, wiring; 2010; 15 cm. x 145 cm. x 15 cm.

*leptaxis\_straponica* v0.2; fabric, motor, electronics; 2010; 105 cm. x 45 cm. x 45 cm.

*leptaxis\_subversa* v0.2; fabric, fur, microphone; 2010; 50 cm. x 20 cm. x 25 cm.

*leptaxis\_transpanica* v0.3; fabric, digital audio player, speakers, wiring; 2010; 25 cm. x 25 cm. x 25 cm.