



Constructed Desire

USING DESIGN TO ADDRESS NOTIONS OF CONTEMPORARY SEXUALITY IN THE WESTERN WORLD

BY VIVIAN ANDREA ZIEREISEN

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1. Abstract & Keywords

This body of work presents a series of design propositions that seek to address notions of contemporary sexuality in the Western world, particularly in urban North America and Europe. Our evolved sex and love drives find themselves confronted with an ever-changing cultural landscape where sexual norms are enforced and underlying instincts are sometimes used for the advancement of agendas and financial gain. Critical theorists and designers translate and expose the existence and operations of ideology, patriarchy, and the unconscious. Using a 'research through design' approach and pulling from attitudes and methodologies found in the realm of 'critical design' I present a sequence of explorations that are meant to act as proposals, as vessels through which people can reach their own interpretations and opinions about the influence of media culture on how we think about sex, how we have it, and how we talk about it.

KEYWORDS: Human Sexuality, Critical Design, Research Through Design, Sex, Sexual Scripting, 'Sex Myth,' Pornography, Evolutionary Psychology



2. Introduction

[Harry] scowled at a picture of a French girl in a bikini. Fred, understanding that he seemed a bleak, sexless person to Harry, tried to prove that Harry had him wrong. He nudged Harry, man-to-man. "Like that, Harry?" he asked.

"Like what?"

"The girl there."

"That's not a girl to me." Fred Rosewater leered.

"Then you're easily fooled," said Harry. "It's done with ink on a piece of paper. That girl isn't lying there on the counter. She's thousands of miles away, doesn't even know we're alive. If this were a real girl, all I'd have to do for a living would be to stay home and cut out pictures of big fish."

What you just read is an excerpt from Kurt Vonnegut's novel *God Bless you, Mr. Rosewater*. (1965) While many would like to believe their sex lives are exempt from being overly scripted by contemporary embellished cultural outputs and that they share Harry's discerning attitude, they may be wrong. The reaches of culture have managed to influence even the most intimate aspects of our lives and sometimes this clashes with thousands of years of evolved behavioral circuitry that turns the cogs of our conscious and subconscious minds. Three main points can be extracted from this passage: 1) Man-made creations that play off natural occurrences can fool people, 2) Sometimes we seek the approval of others in order to validate the 'normality' of our sexual desires and, 3) Culture can propagate a feeling that our sexuality is a direct and important representation of ourselves, a view which could affect our 'sense of self.'

French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault wrote extensively on sexual behavior and its correlations with power, politics, economics, and society. Foucault believed that part of why we are so fascinated with sex is because of what we think it can reveal, "We demand that sex speak the truth [...] and we demand that it tell us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness." (as cited in Easthope & McGowan, 2004, p. 105) According to him our interest in decoding the meaning behind sex spans back centuries, that we have always demanded sex be "inscribed not only in an economy of pleasure but in an ordered system of knowledge." (as cited in Easthope & McGowan, 2004, p. 105) Order gives humans a sense of comfort, yet it can also be extremely alienating. Our sexual tastes and inclinations are pigeonholed, allowing for easy identification of what is 'normal' and acceptable, and what is 'weird,' taboo, and perverted. While the walls of prejudice have seen a slow but steady crumbling in Western society, there is still much work to be done and sometimes when one wall is knocked down another may just pop up in its place. Despite the mirage of sexual liberation we think we are privy to, our acts and even our thoughts are guided by highly seductive cultural forces that exert their power on us and our interpersonal relationships. The works in this thesis seek to find new ways of addressing the current state of sexual affairs by using design as a mediator and instigator for provoking thoughts and discussions.

3. Context

3.1. OVERVIEW Within Western cultures, particularly contemporary urban North America and Europe, we like to think we enjoy a great amount of sexual freedom. We have come a long way since the times before and during the sexual revolution of the 1960s, yet a new form of sexual governance has emerged under the guise of complete and utter liberation. In our efforts to combat and overturn rules that mediated our sexuality “we have replaced one brand of regulation with another.” (Hills, 2015a, p. 30) New and still evolving forms of highly seductive media have come into play and in our efforts to achieve greater sexual freedom, we have turned it into a form of regulation on its own. (Hills, 2015a)

Our sexuality is affected by a variety of different aspects of life: cultural, sociological, political, legal, philosophical, religious, and ethical issues must be considered. Additionally, there are biological factors like gender, age/life stage, health, and psychological elements that play into our experiences. While sexology (the study of human sexuality) is a broad and multifaceted subject, I have selected a series of overarching themes that inform my work and provide material to respond to. These themes are outlined in this section and are ordered as follows: supernormal stimuli, evolutionary psychology, sexual scripting, pornography, and the ‘Sex Myth.’ It is within the confluence of these themes that a contemporary sexual dilemma begins to take form, one that affects many different aspects of our lives. We live within a sexual orthodoxy that simultaneously tells us we are having too much sex and on the other hand has the capacity to make us feel inadequate for not having enough. Instead of letting these feelings go unattended we could be proactive in finding ways to dissipate these anxieties. One way to do so may be through discourse, through sharing “the parts of our stories that make us most uncomfortable” (Hills, 2015b) so that we can find solidarity in the diversity of human sexual experiences.

3.2. SUPERNORMAL STIMULI ‘Supernormal stimuli’ is a term coined by Dutch biologist and ornithologist Nikolaas Tinbergen. His work was highly influenced by the findings of English naturalist Charles Darwin, yet he chose to focus his research on behavioral changes as opposed to structural ones that manifest themselves in an animal’s physical appearance. The central idea of a supernormal stimulus is “that the exaggerated imitation can exert a stronger pull than the real thing.” (Barrett, 2010, p. 3) Tinbergen conducted experiments on a variety of different animal species to arrive at his findings. One prominent study involved a common freshwater fish called the stickleback. (Figure 01) Male sticklebacks build a nest to attract females and are notoriously territorial and aggressive towards other males, which are characterized by their red underbellies. Tinbergen was able to use very unrealistic dummy fish with red bellies to trick stickleback males into ‘attack mode.’ Concurrently he was also able to trick them into thinking models with large bellies (like egg bearing females) were real, getting them to invite the dummy into the nest, sometimes even choosing the fake over a real egg-bearing female. (Barrett, 2010)

It is easy for humans to look at animal behavior, sexual or not, and scoff at its ridiculousness until one really considers the full extent of our own ‘weirdness’: after all, just how different are “our endless wars, our modern health woes, our romantic and sexual posturing?” (Barrett, 2010, p. 3) When reading about Tinbergen’s experiments and the idea of supernormal stimuli one can’t help but draw parallels between human and non-human animals. Is this idea of the ‘fake,’ the exaggerated and the unattainable not at the center of the fight for more realistic beauty standards in the fashion industry? Does cosmetic surgery not reap the benefits of low self esteem and feelings of inadequacy? And could this same idea not be applied to the staged scenes portrayed

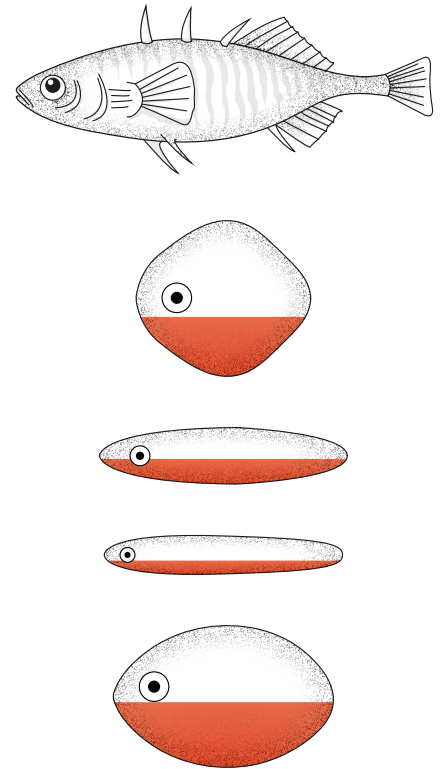


FIG. 01
Models used in Nikolaas Tinbergen’s experiments with sticklebacks. The highly territorial males would rarely attack realistic models if they did not have the signature red underbelly of a male. However, they did aggressively react to even the most unrealistic of shapes if the models had red undersides.

in pornography? Do we not exaggerate our own features and behavior by modeling them off culturally propagated standards? It is important to realize that supernormal stimuli are simply taking advantage of things which are already there, we have instincts that are drawn to specific traits and when these traits are amplified in any capacity it is easy to fool animals, including ourselves. (Barrett, 2010)

3.3. EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY Evolutionary psychology is an approach to psychology where principles from evolutionary biology are applied to how one looks at the human mind. "In this view, the mind is a set of information-processing machines that were designed by natural selection to solve adaptive problems faced by our hunter-gatherer ancestors." (Cosmides & Tooby, 1997) While many people, including Darwin and Tinbergen, helped pave the way for this line of thinking, it was anthropologist Don Symons, psychologist Leda Cosmides and anthropologist John Tooby that nurtured the groundworks of the field. Evolutionary psychologists take a very pragmatic approach to our thoughts and feelings, seeing them as the result of different chemical reactions happening inside our brain, a physical system. Our minds are made up of highly functionally specialized neural circuitry with each circuit being responsible for its own actions. Some of these circuits are in charge of sexual attraction and they "govern what you find sexually arousing, what you regard as beautiful, who you'd like to date, and so on." (Cosmides & Tooby, 1997)

Most evolutionary psychologists will not state that nature is stronger than nurture, instead they take the position of "a false dichotomy: more nature allows more nurture." (Barrett, 2010, p. 27) For evolutionary psychologists the need for 'learning' is a phenomena that requires close examination—i.e. why do we need to learn and why

FIG. 02

Ham the chimpanzee in his biopack couch for a suborbital test flight. NASA. (1961). A Chimpanzee, "Ham," in the Biopack Couch for the MR-2 Flight [Digital image]. Retrieved from <https://mix.msfc.nasa.gov/abstracts.php?p=979> This file is public domain. NASA copyright policy states that "NASA material is not protected by copyright unless noted."



do we have such a high capacity for it. In his essay 'Families made us human' Stephen T. Asma, professor of Philosophy and distinguished scholar at Columbia College Chicago, applies this idea to sex:

Procreation seems like the last thing that nature would leave to the vagaries of cultural education. Yet it turns out that even chimpanzees—not exactly paragons of studiousness—must be shown how to do it. Young chimps in the wild observe sexual behavior and then translate that information into successful copulation once past puberty. In captivity, denied the instructive example of adult sex, chimps become aroused but are unable to engage the equipment effectively. My friend Iner Peterson was the architect and physical engineer who constructed the Bioastronautics Research Laboratory at Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico in the early 1960s. He had the honor of working with Ham, the first chimp that America sent into space. [(Figure 02)] Peterson informs me that when the lab instituted a breeding program designed to create a pathogen-free chimp, they could not get captive chimps to breed properly. They had to import wild chimps from Gabon to demonstrate. That gives us an idea of how deep the roots of culture can go. (2013)

Like our close relatives the chimpanzees who live in social groups and are highly intelligent we too need to be taught some of life's most fundamental behaviors. Unlike many other animals we cannot solely rely on instinct to tell us how to mate. But despite this need for instruction there is still a certain amount of biology at play. The sex drive is "characterized by the urge for sexual gratification" and evolved to "motivate individuals to seek a range of mating partners." (Fisher, Aron & Brown, 2006) Within primates, humans included, it is associated with androgens. Their presence and intensity depend on many factors, including age. (Edwards & Booth, 1994) Even the ungraspable yet powerful feeling of 'love' has the potential to be biologically explained as it is a primary motivation system, a fundamental human mating drive. (Fisher, 2004) The neural state of love not only energizes but guides behavior in the direction of a biological need to both survive and reproduce. (Pfaff, 1999) Like other drives it is "associated with the activity of dopaminergic pathways and a few other specific neural systems." (Pfaff as cited in Fisher, Aron & Brown, 2006)

The argument really isn't 'nature or nurture,' its how much of each and how we cope with different factors our ancestors did not face. Changes in population density have changed drastically since Paleolithic times. Someone living in large and dense urban cities "may walk past more attractive possible mates in one city block than their ancestors saw in a lifetime of wandering the Savannah." (Barrett, 2010, p. 48-9) Additionally, with the aid of technology "we can now connect with one another with unprecedented ease. We can see more potential mates in an hour on Tinder than our Pliocene ancestors encountered in their lifetimes." (McArthur, 2014)

Our brains and neural circuitry evolved for a life of hunting and gathering 10,000 years ago and our mind may often find itself at odds with our present. (Barrett, 2010) Over the years humans have created a great amount of supernormal stimuli which has the capacity to reveal a lot about our underlying sexual instincts. Everything from plastic surgery, cosmetics, pornography, cinched waists, etc. is designed to amplify nature's signaling. In her book *Supernormal Stimuli: How Primal Urges Overran Their Evolutionary Purpose*, Deirdre Barrett, Ph.D., an author and psychologist teaching at Harvard Medical School, talks about the application of supernormal stimuli to sex. She notes that two main types of media for women serve as supernormal stimuli: "1) Images and advice on becoming ideally appealing and 2) romance novels, soap operas, and other media providing vicarious relationships." (2010) I would argue that the same is true for men; for every *Cosmopolitan* magazine there is a *Maxim*, and there are a

plethora of TV shows and books aimed at male audiences. Women may read a best-seller like, *Why Men Love Bitches* (2002) by Sherry Argov, while men may be more inclined towards books dealing with sex and 'pick-up' methods like the ones penned by Tucker Max. Max's books *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell* (2006) and *Assholes Finish First* (2010) sold handsomely, a staggering 2 million copies combined. (Ellsberg, 2012) Both sexes are equally capitalized on and when one method wares thin and becomes ineffective, another will appear in its place. The media is well versed in exploiting what is beneath the surface for financial gain and the advancement of different agendas. This ties back to what was said about supernormal stimuli taking advantage of our underlying natural tendencies; the continuous demand for advice on navigating our love and sex lives is very much influenced by our innate need to learn and keep learning. Issues may arise when what is being taught does not promote positive or realistic ideas and expectations about sex.

Evolutionary psychology is not an area of study, but rather a "way of thinking about psychology that can be applied to any topic within it." (Cosmides & Tooby, 1997) In this approach to human behavior there is a spectrum of attitudes that range from deterministic to more open. They each have different perspectives on the amount of control we exert over our behavior and how this should be interpreted in our daily lives. Evolutionary psychology is a powerful tool for making sense of the inner-workings of our brains and how this manifests itself through our behavior; but no matter how much information there is, we have a choice, or at least a perceived choice, over our actions. As Neil McArthur, a philosopher at the University of Manitoba in Canada, accurately points out, "Tracing your sexual preferences back to the Pleistocene doesn't help you decide between the rough boy in the leather jacket and the nice banker who will help with the kids." (2014)

3.4. SEXUAL SCRIPTING Within cultures different scripts operate on both micro and macro levels; these scripts act as cues for navigating situations (like dating or sex) and are a form of schemata. Schemata are organized patterns of thought and/or behavior that sort information into categories and create both associations and dis-associations between them. (DiMaggio, 1997) Schemata allow us to run on semi-auto-pilot, yet they also have a tendency to be stubborn and unwilling to change, even when presented with contradictory information. (Nadkarni & Narayanan, 2007)

Applying the scripting perspective to sexuality came about in the 1960s and early 1970s with sociologists John H. Gagnon and William Simon being among the first to introduce it. One of the main concepts of sexual scripting is that the actual experience of the sexual, as well as what is done sexually by individuals is a result of the particular learning circumstances of a specific culture. (Gagnon, 1990) The domain of what is learned includes every aspect of the sexual including the reading of physiological events relevant to sexual arousal, sexual pleasure, and sexual climax. "People learn how to be sexual in specific cultures and in specific social groups within any culture." (Gagnon, 1990, p. 4-5)

Scripts are necessary functions that prevent us from becoming too overwhelmed with information, yet they can be problematic when hijacked by rigid and unrealistic portrayals of sex through different cultural outlets (movies, books, TV shows, pornography, etc.) For example, people don't always orgasm simultaneously. Not all women enjoy having their faces ejaculated on. Not all men can hold that Viagra-induced erection that male pornstars appear to sustain. Furthermore, sexual scripts can have unfortunate effects on people's sex lives in terms of overall enjoyment and pleasure. The pressure to conform to a perceived status quo can manifest itself in a woman's

hesitance to voice her sexual needs and boundaries. Dr. Zhana Vrangalova, a sex researcher with a Ph.D in Developmental Psychology from Cornell University and an adjunct professor of human sexuality at New York University, explains:

Unfortunately, we live in a world where women are not taught or encouraged to demand their sexual pleasure from their male partners; we sort of expect that the man knows what he's doing and what's good for him should be good for her, and also that sex ends when the guy comes. Thanks to these horribly harmful social scripts, lots of guys—especially those who are particularly good looking, charming, or well-endowed—never learn to please their partners properly. And each new encounter where the woman doesn't complain or ask for something better further reinforces the guy's sense that he doesn't need to do anything more or better. (as cited in Sciortino, 2015)

While sexual scripts are perpetuated and spread by mass media, people help nurture and sustain them further because they become believed realities. Awareness and dialogue around these issues would most likely help promote a healthier and more empowering approach to sex for people of all genders, ages, orientations, and backgrounds. When people are encouraged to trust their own wants and needs they may be more willing to vocalize them and also listen to those of their partner(s). Breaking or disrupting scripts is no easy feat, and ultimately requires an awareness of it paired with a willingness to change.

3.5. PORNOGRAPHY Depictions of the human body and sex are nothing new, they have been around for thousands of years since man was painting on walls in caves. (Pickrell, 2004) What is problematic is that a culture saturated in sex displays a pervasive hesitance to talk openly about it, making it unsurprising that porn has become de facto sex education for younger audiences. (Gallop, 2009) In her 2009 TED Talk Cindy Gallop, an advertising executive and healthy sex advocate, expressed her growing concerns about the sexual climate pornography is contributing to. Gallop (born in 1960) has a tendency to date younger men, something which allowed her to see first-hand how much they modeled their behavior in bed on what they saw in porn films, an issue she confronted by simply communicating her preferences. Her worries were predominantly focused on the “young girl whose boyfriend wants to come on her face [...] and hardcore porn has taught her that all men love coming on women's faces, all women love having their faces come on, therefore she must let him come on her face and pretend to like it.” (Gallop, 2009)

The effects of pornography on “attitudes, behavior, life and relationship satisfaction are difficult to study.” (Konnikova, 2015) The kind of issues that Gallop talks about are personal and sometimes people may not be fully aware that there is a ‘problem’ in the first place. This is why anecdotes and personal observations can be used as indicators of an issue that is almost certainly wide-spread to any culture that has been highly exposed to pornography and other pre-conceived ideas about sex and relationships propagated by the media.

Human beings are very visually motivated creatures, as opposed to many scent-driven animals for example; understandably we have a tendency to gravitate towards photos and videos. (Barrett, 2010, p.31) This relates to what was previously mentioned about supernormal stimuli and their capacity to exploit our existing underlying instincts. It is our inclination towards visual stimulation that motivates us to use images as a modelling tool. Images have the ability to hold more “information in a more compact form. A split-second look at an image can convey more information than a split-second look at words. Words are often perceived as opinions while im-

Figure 03 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

FIG. 03

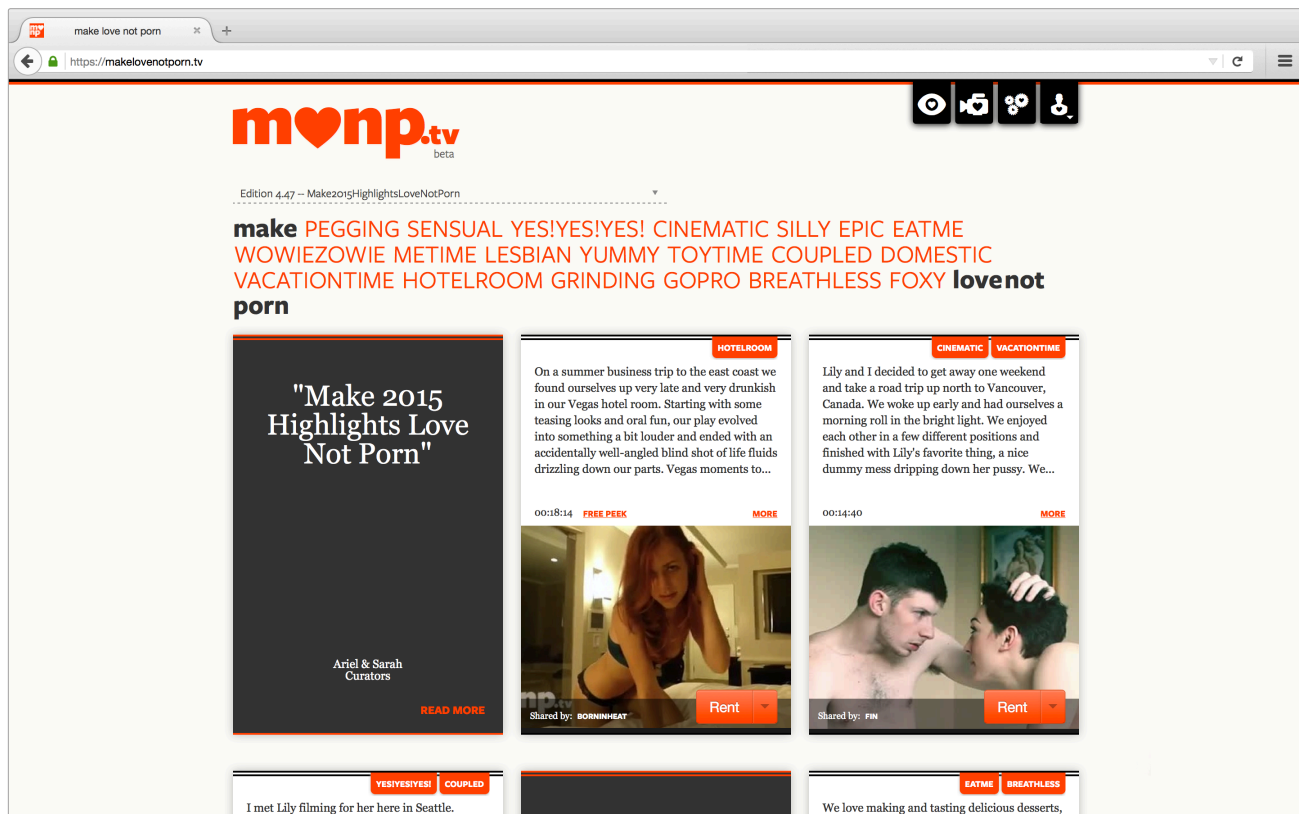
Sex acts, like 'rosebudding,' which were once limited to the more obscure niches of pornography have now made their way into more mainstream productions and culture. The information removed is a pornography DVD cover showing rosebudding prominently advertised. The film was produced by Evil Angel, an American porn production company which is known to be one of the top grossing studios and one of a small selection of companies that dominate the distribution of hardcore porn in America. (Kick, 2006) [DVD jacket of Evil Angel's 'Deep Inside Sheena Shaw' pornography film]. Retrieved from <http://www.vice.com/read/a-rosebud-by-any-other-name-would-smell-like-shit>

ages are often perceived as events or facts." (Layden, n.d., p.1) Pornography can act as a powerful teacher of behavior and beliefs because it creates an ideal ground for learning to occur by providing "images, arousal, reinforcement, the example of others, and reward." (Layden, n.d., p.2) When pornography films bring in new trends they can make images that were once scarce become common and more normalized. This has the potential to carry over into real life by people demanding more from their partners or simply becoming dissatisfied with the normal and 'boring' sex they are having. Pornography does not show the preparation that performers may go through before filming a scene. For example, an anal sex scene may seem effortless and carefree on film, but in many cases the actresses or actors have prepared for the 'event' extensively. Eva Angelina, an American pornographic actress explains the preparation she goes through before shooting an anal scene:

I was still getting my routine down on how to prepare for an anal scene. Typically, I'd eat a light dinner the night before, and then take ammonium pills, which stops your digestive system. Then, I'd do an enema. In the morning, I'd take another ammonium and clean out my ass more so I can coast. Then, I go through the whole day with a butt plug. My ass is really tight and the second you take out the butt plug it gets tight again. So the plug helps make it a little looser. (as cited in Sokol, 2015)

The omission of the 'behind the scenes' aspect of pornography is understandable, as we don't require it from the film industry. Some accountability can be put on the audience as they should be aware that they are observing a staged performance and that perhaps what they see on screen may require discussion and preparation in 'real life.'

The pornography industry has seen a rapid expansion with the advent of technological advancements like high speed internet; it is more explicit, readily available, and affordable (or free) than ever before. Some companies are already working on immersing users into a 360-degree sensory world, with unprecedented graphic detail,



even depicting extreme subtleties such as signs of vaginal wetness. (Snow, 2014) The escalation of what is shown in porn films is partly linked to the internet's rise; while these acts may not be novel to certain niche communities, their encroachment into mainstream culture is quite new. One example of this is a sex act known as 'rosebudding' which is essentially "caused by an anal prolapse—a medical condition in which the inner walls of your rectum collapse and slip out of your buttock, the bright red internal tissue blooming out of your anus like a desert rose." (Lhoq, 2014) (Figure 03) Common side effects of this are disrupted bowel movements, anal tearing, and constant leakage that may require surgery. The huge quantity of 'amateur' and professional porn videos available online for free via streaming sites have disrupted the commercial industry's business and forced many to go to extremes for a competitive edge. As Vice magazine writer Michelle Lhoq puts it:

Why would you reach into your wallet to purchase a film when thousands of videos of couples banging in their bedrooms are just a few clicks away? In response, the industry has turned towards niche markets that can't be found easily online, for free. After all, the average girl next door might be able to take dick like Sasha Grey, but she most likely won't be able to rosebud on command. (2014)

The lines between 'real sex' and 'porn sex' have a tendency to get blurred, but pornography is here to stay and that may mean understanding it as a performance could be key to coexisting with it. My work seeks to look at pornography as a cultural phenomena and find ways in which design can contribute to a dialogue around it. I don't take a position of condemnation, but rather a more open and positive approach akin to Cindy Gallop's video platform called MakeLoveNotPorn.tv (MLNP.tv). (Figure 04) For the fee of \$5 (USD) users can pay to stream videos made and submitted by content creators. MLNP.tv's slogan, "Pro sex. Pro porn. Pro knowing the difference." speaks to their non-judgmental take on a subject they are at once trying to raise awareness about yet not condemn because it is not always necessary to discredit one thing to prop up

FIG. 04

Cindy Gallop's MakeLoveNotPorn.tv video platform. In the thumbnails examples of the raw videos can be seen. The submissions are curated and the site asks for users to only upload videos of 'real world sex.' [Screenshot of MakeLoveNotPorn.tv]. Used by permission of Cindy Gallop.

another. The site calls for videos of 'real world sex,' which is, among other things: contextualized, free of porn tropes, consensual, and "messy, silly, sticky, awkward." (Beall, 2012) By creating a site that has videos of people having fun and simply enjoying themselves Gallop has tried to show through image, the aforementioned powerful learning tool, that sex is meant to be whatever you and your consenting partner(s) want it to be, and not necessarily what is shown in porn or even TV and movies.

3.6. THE 'SEX MYTH' The 'Sex Myth' is an important theme that has guided my work and was recently popularized by journalist Rachel Hills in her book *The Sex Myth: The Gap Between Our Fantasies and Reality*. Hills suggests we find ourselves in the midst of the Sex Myth where sexual behavior is regulated despite it seeming we are more sexually liberated and free than we have ever been. (2015a) The media has successfully painted ours as a hypersexual society, setting bars which humans with unique lives, problems, and emotions try to rise to, and when they fail they castigate themselves (and others) for it. The sex myth consists of two main layers. The first is the idea perpetuated by the media that we live in a hypersexual society, where to be sexually liberated means that you should be having sex, and be having a lot of it, and be having it in certain ways. The second and less obvious layer of the sex myth is "the belief that sex [is] more special, more significant, a source of greater thrills and more perfect pleasure than any other activity humans engage in." (Hills, 2015a, p. 8)

Hills admits that sex will always be a subject that speaks to us deeply as it offers a means of intimate connection, sexual release, and for the reproductive consequences of heterosexual intercourse. Sex is an act bound up in symbolism and emotion; for single people sex can act as a measurement of self-worth by reflecting one's attractiveness and their level of engagement with life. Meanwhile, a couple may use sex as an indicator of the relationship's health. (Hills, 2015b) These insecurities are monetized on by different media outlets, they'll tell you how much sex one should have and they'll tell you the sex you're having probably isn't interesting enough to satisfy your partner's needs—or to secure a partner in the first place. (Hills, 2015b) When individuals think they are not adhering to pre-defined scripts that are culturally propagated they may be both psychologically and emotionally affected as a result and experience feelings of inadequacy and disillusionment in both themselves and others. (Hills as cited in Bielski, 2015) Placing sex on a pedestal is disadvantageous for everyone as it neglects the reality that everyone is different and has different needs and desires. People should be encouraged to find what pleases them instead of succumbing to the trappings of a culture that dictates even the most intimate aspects of our lives.

4. Research Parameters

4.1. RATIONALE My research involves the production of a series of explorations that seek to generate reflection and dialogue around the influence of popular culture and media on our sexuality. Despite what our sexually saturated culture would have one think, sex is still somewhat of a taboo and people don't feel particularly comfortable "sharing things with others, especially certain types of sex." (Dr. Zhana Vrangalova, as cited in Kale, 2015) The disconnect between how sex is portrayed and how it is experienced and talked about can lead to many feeling unsatisfied with themselves and their partner(s).

There is no shortage of available information about sexuality as it abounds in large quantities both on and offline. The issue is that many of the sources take on a prescriptive and sometimes insidiously authoritative tone; meaning, they leave little room for the viewer/reader to question the information they are being confronted with. Media channels like books, movies, TV shows, talk shows, and magazines all promote or endorse specific views and perspectives on sex. Tucker Max's book *I Hope They Serve Beer In Hell* would be an example of this, it touts passages like this one, "she was quite promiscuous, to the point where dating her was similar to the experience of sitting on a warm toilet seat: [...] you knew that someone else had been there only moments before you arrived." (2009) Quotes like this coming from a man who is a self-proclaimed womanizer promotes antiquated double standards and feeds into an already problematic culture of 'slut-shaming.' What is troubling is that Max's audience consists of "primarily [...] young men, some of whom have come to view [him] as a paragon of masculine achievement." (St. John, 2006) But regardless of Max's views on sex and women, the issue as it pertains to my work is that opinions like his are oftentimes perceived as 'truths,' as something to aspire to, as symbols of what it means to be contemporarily sexual. Alternatively, academic publications like *The Journal of Sex Research* may present valid, neutral, and peer-reviewed perspectives and ideas regarding sexuality, but may not be most people's 'go-to' for everyday advice on dealing with sex because the language and scenarios are too far removed from 'real life.'

The primary goal of the research is to design objects and experiences that would add to the current discourse around sex and allow people to share their honest, sad, funny, messy, and raw stories. Dr. Vrangalova recently surveyed the readers of her site 'The Casual Sex Project' to find out why they were visiting. She found the most common reason was because they were interested in reading about the sex lives of others, but also because doing this "helped people make sense of their own sex lives—the whole, 'oh, so other people like that too, it's not just me' aspect." (Kale, 2015) It is important to create and foster spaces where honest accounts of human sexuality can happen in the hopes of creating a more realistic portrayal of its diversity.

The research process will also seek to explore diverse graphic languages and mediums as they pertain to sexual matters. Sexuality is wrought with symbolism, making it hard to stray from visual tropes. A more diverse and multilayered approach to designing sexually related content could encourage more people to engage with the messages and ideas put forth.

4.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How can critical design be employed to elucidate the state of human sexuality in contemporary Western cultures?
- How can discursive objects be used as a means of establishing dialogue around individuals' sexual experiences?

4.3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To understand the influences and roles of contemporary factors in the formation of our sexuality.
- Explore how design's unique attributes can be used to encourage dialogue around the ways culture and biology intersect to influence our sexuality.
- Find more open ways of provoking discussion around sexuality with a focus on the unique contributions of individuals.

5. Framework & Methodology

5.1. CRITICAL DESIGN Critical design is more an attitude or an approach to design, rather than a definitive method, its popularizers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby explain:

Design can be described as falling into two very broad categories: affirmative design and critical design. The former reinforces how things are now, it conforms to cultural, social, technical and economic expectation. Most design falls into this category. The latter rejects how things are now as being the only possibility, it provides a critique of the prevailing situation through designs that embody alternative social, cultural, technical or economic values [...] Critical design, or design that asks carefully crafted questions and makes us think, is just as difficult and just as important as design that solves problems or finds answers. (2001, p. 58).

The purpose of critical design is to create arenas for discussion and debate “amongst designers, industry and the public.” (Dunne & Raby, 2001, p.58) It may even seek to “entertain in an intellectual way like literature or film.” (Erlhoff & Marshall, 2007, p. 94) Given the overwhelming amount of information available about sex that paints itself as being representative of reality, the goal was to create objects and experiences that rely more on interpretation and interaction, that make propositions and ask questions as opposed to giving ‘answers’ or ‘solutions.’

Affirmative design sees its “consumers as obedient, largely uniform, and predictable whereas nearly every other area of culture acknowledges people as complicated, contradictory, and even neurotic.” (Erlhoff & Marshall, 2007, p. 95) Opposingly, critical design seeks to cater to the “complex emotional and psychological landscape of people.” (Erlhoff & Marshall, 2007, p. 95) It is within this acceptance of people as intricate beings with unique world views, personalities, experiences, and backgrounds that my work finds a home.

5.2. RESEARCH THROUGH DESIGN ‘Research through design’ (RTD) is a research methodology that is led by the design process itself, it looks at “the tools and processes of design thinking and making within the design project, bridging theory and building knowledge to enhance design practices.” (Anne Burdick as cited in Martin & Hanington, 2012, p. 146) RTD allows the designer to explore different approaches while critically recording and communicating the different steps taken along the way. (Martin & Hanington, 2012) The main outcome of RTD is “knowledge about how a design intervention and a phenomenon interact, accepting that as the two meet, they are both transformed.” (Storni, 2015) RTD does not seek to follow a Cartesian division of the subject and object of study as this way requires minimal interference because the very act of designing does not allow for this kind of separation. Designing seeks to elicit some kind of change by design and makes it incompatible with an epistemology of separation; instead it finds a more suitable home with the epistemology of interaction in which the assumption is that to “gain knowledge about something ‘out there’ you have to interact with it, even at the cost of changing it.” (Storni, 2015) The acceptance and welcoming of the designer as being close to the subject matter being researched was a particularly appealing aspect of RTD considering I have vested interest in what I am studying; many of my inquiries about contemporary sexuality arose from personal motivations and inclinations. Additionally, the RTD format has the ability to teach the designer how to navigate unfamiliar spaces, an aspect of the methodology that lent itself well to my greenness to critical design theory and practice (relating to the areas of human sexuality I set out to explore) required a steep learning curve in a short amount of time. RTD allowed for several smaller explorations to be undertaken in search of what they succeeded in but also in their individual shortcomings.

Pillow Talk

||| About Submit

Whenever I fall asleep during sex I just tell my boyfriend I'm too high. In reality he's just terrible in bed and I get bored.

I lie to my boyfriend when I tell him he has the biggest penis I've ever seen. It's average, but he gets so cute and excited.

My ex boyfriend asked me if I thought about girls during sex. I lied and said I haven't.

I have to lie and fake moan during sex with my bf. he doesn't make me feel good but I don't want to hurt his feelings.

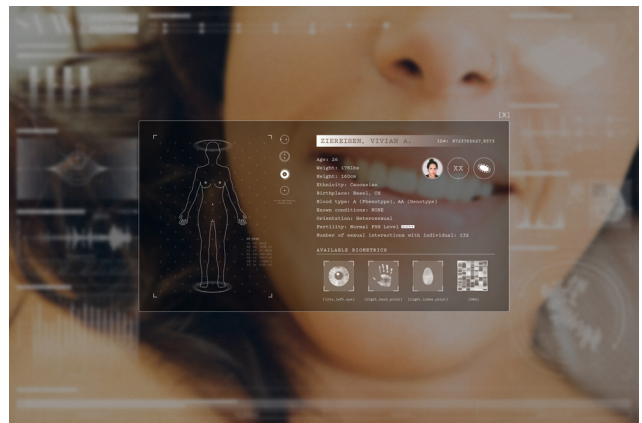
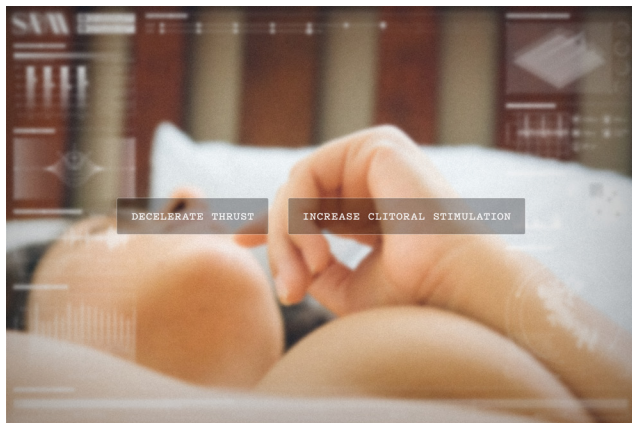
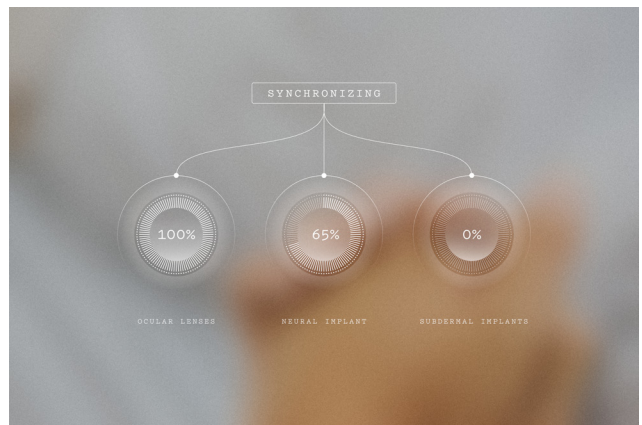
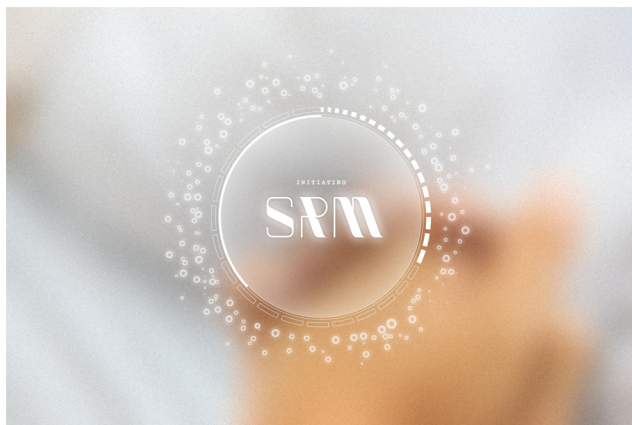
I lied to my ex and said he made me feel good during sex. He never gave me an orgasm.. Not even once.

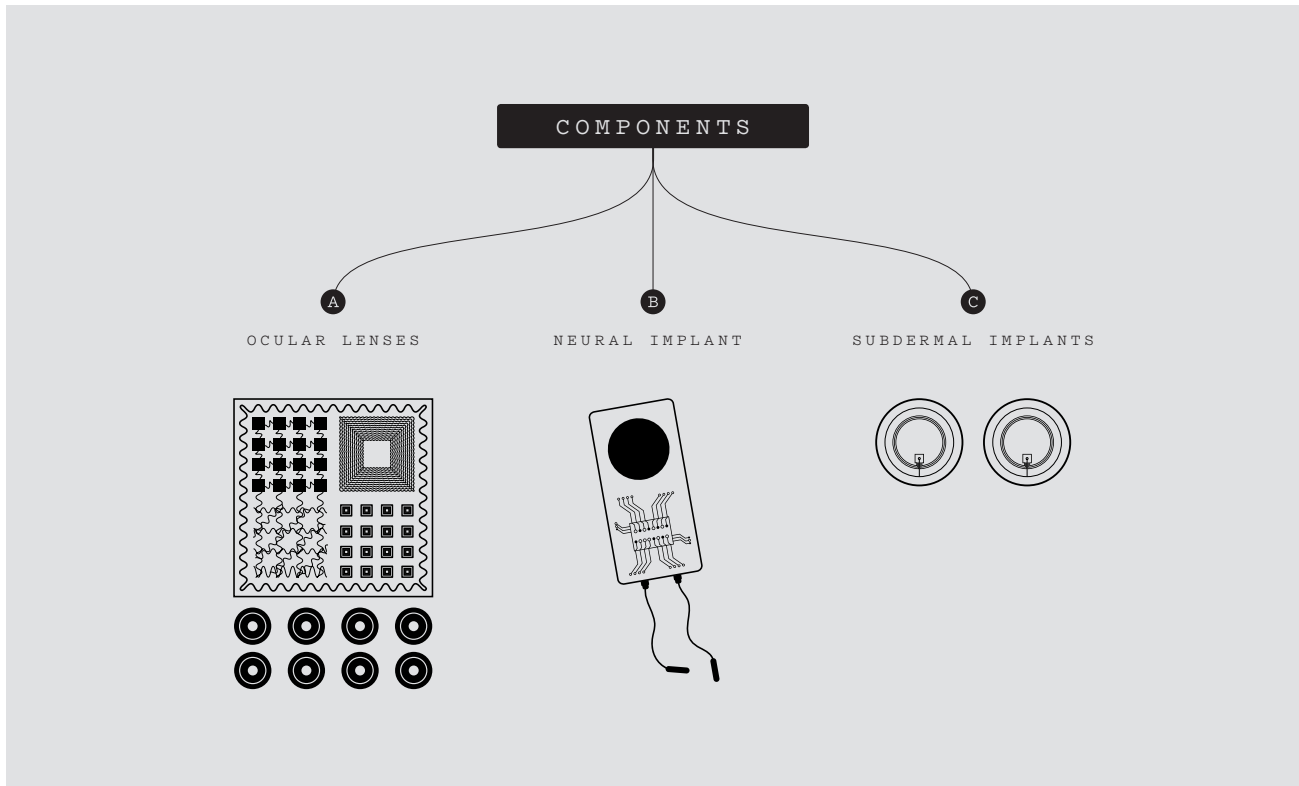
I once lied to a guy and told him he was my first because I started my period while we were having sex.



6.1. INITIAL EXPLORATIONS The initial stages of the research were focused on developing a tone for the work, to find ways of interpreting and expressing key ideas about the state of contemporary sexuality in visually engaging ways. An iterative design approach allowed me to execute a series of exploratory projects that would help guide future directions. They were smaller in scale and used as a means of familiarizing myself with the area of critical design, of assuring my proposals remained just that: proposals as opposed to propositions of truth. These individual ventures were unified under the aforementioned overarching themes and let me respond to them with different approaches. They included: *Pillow Talk*, *Just the Tip!*, and *SRM*. These initial explorations and the subsequent larger ones outlined in this section contribute to a growing number of initiatives that are seeking to create more realistic portrayals of sexuality.

The media is well versed in the art of packaging complex subjects into neat packages; TV shows, movies, documentaries, and the news will often take tiny fragments from the issues they seek to portray and will make them seem representative of a whole. As an example, a recent Netflix porn documentary *Hot Girls Wanted* (2015) continues to perpetuate the same sensationalized facts of yesteryear, that women cannot possibly enjoy sex enough to want to do it on camera for money. This habit of oversimplifying creates enhanced and standardized ideals of what sex should be; it acts as supernormal stimuli and feeds off our innate desire to learn and our yearning for instruction to navigate an increasingly complex world where technology, population, and denser urban cities are all affecting our interpersonal relationships. *Pillow Talk* proposes a website that acts as a compendium of anonymous, sexually related confessions pertaining to non-disclosures or omissions about sexual experiences where the person did not communicate their feelings with their partner, whether they were asked to do so or not. The site would act as an open and ongoing portal which through its short and to the point submissions reflects the diversity of people's sex lives and highlights the highs, the lows, and anything in-between. *Pillow Talk* relied on people's submissions to create a collective statement and thus would only work if people adequately engaged.





The next project took a different approach from *Pillow Talk* because it put forth a scenario for people to react to as opposed to relying on submissions to shape it. *SRM* (*Sexual Response Monitor*) was born from an explicit interest in exploring the effects of technology on our sexual relationships. We evolved for very different lives from the ones we experience now and new technological advancements like wearable health monitors and smartphones give us information about ourselves and others that wouldn't have been available even fifteen years ago. *SRM* proposes a future scenario where reliance on data and constant feedback has infiltrated our bodies and our most intimate moments. This project depicts a fictional commercial product that would be able to feed us live data during sex through an ocular lens. Microchips surgically implanted in our brains and bodies would monitor physiological and neurological changes and relay the information to our line of vision. (Figure 05) To illustrate what this technology could look like a series of conceptual screens were created to allow the viewer to see from a point-of-view perspective how each partner would experience *SRM* and be able to rely on data and prompts to find out how to best please the other, possibly eliminating the need for direct communication. *SRM* provided an opportunity to explore a common critical design tool known as a diegetic prototype, "The idea being that by experiencing objects from another world, we can sort of extrapolate in our minds what that world must be like. The object is our 'in' to a different way of thinking." (Revell, 2013) A more developed version of *SRM* would see the screens move from static images to moving video, showing the ebbs and flows of the data over moving bodies. This approach would provide a more impactful and immersive design proposition.

FIG. 05 (above)

A. A series of subdermal implants work together to give feedback on different changes around the body. The main microchip is placed under the skin inside the user's back, this chip acts as the control center for the other eight smaller ones placed symmetrically along each side of the body. **B.** A neural implant monitors activity in the right and left brain to provide feedback on different neurological activity. **C.** Removable optic lenses allow for the information to be wirelessly transmitted from the implants, allowing it to be overlaid onto the user's sight.

METROPOLITAN'S
**Just the
Tip!** WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

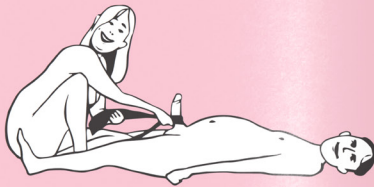
BDSM is so hot right now, but what if in addition to whipping his cheeks raw and chaining him up, you could do the same to his emotional state?! Our sexperts give you 8 new ways to send both of you to the ER and the therapists office. Plus, a bonus tip to show your man, talk about bang for your buck!

THE 'VOLLEY'



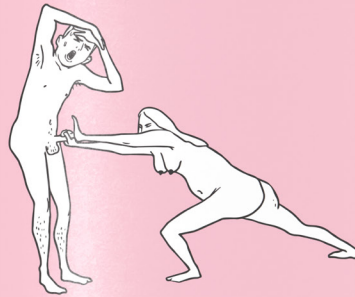
Hold his penis in one hand and lightly slap it with the other... you can tap it back and forth like you're volleying a tennis ball and lightly pinch the skin on his shaft and testicles. Many women make the mistake of being too gentle.

THE 'TIE JOB'



Tie his silky tie loosely around his penis, then roll it up and down for a silky handjob.

THE 'PUSH IT...PUSH IT REAL GOOD'



Firmly hold the bottom of his shaft in one hand and slowly push it towards the base (imagine you're pushing his penis into his body).

Similar to *SRM* the third project aimed to make a statement employed the use of satire. I worked with Vancouver illustrator Tor Aunet to create *Just the Tip!* through which nine real sex tips from magazines like *Cosmopolitan* were brought to life in illustrative form. There is a monthly influx of magazines for women and men that regurgitate the same old tricks from so-called 'sexperts' to help people bring excitement into their sex lives. Cate Campbell, a relationship counselor and psychosexual therapist, fears that repeated exposure to messages about how sex 'should be' may cause individuals to question their sexual performance and even that of their partner(s). (as cited in Steere, 2015) While one would think that women's magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and their male counterparts are blissfully unaware of the outlandishness of their propositions, it seems they are very much in on the joke and capitalizing from it greatly. As a writer for women's interest blog *Jezebel* puts it, "It seems that, like Skynet, *Cosmo* has gradually become self-aware, and rather than shying away from its much-ridiculed penchant for silly sex tips, it's doubled—nay, tripled down and decided to own them." (Ryan, 2014) While this humoristic approach is a step in the right direction through its portrayal of sex as fun and experimental, the monthly reiteration that you should be having sex is still present. It goes in contrast to the reality that not everyone constantly wants sex and that people will go through patches in their lives when, despite wanting it, will simply not be having it. It also reinforces the idea that 'ordinary' sex without the use of props or elaborate sex positions is simply not exciting enough. *Just the Tip!* invites people to question the validity of sex advice and realize that the portrayal of sex in the media usually shows 'larger than life' versions of it. By presenting the tips in humorous cartoon form the move from word to image exacerbates the silliness of the suggestions.

Carrying out different projects to conceptually developed stages gave instructors and peers material to respond to and provide feedback on. It allowed me to find ways of expressing a notion while still leaving enough room for someone interacting with a piece to reach their own conclusions. The general consensus seemed to be that the visual language and presentation of *Pillow Talk* and *Just the Tip!* was most effective; through their simple and colorful graphic language they were able to counteract the cliché visual tropes around sexuality that I intended on straying from. Of the three works only *Pillow Talk* was able to offer a way of monitoring engagement through the submissions, it was decided that providing a platform for dialogue to occur and somehow be documented would need to be incorporated into future directions.

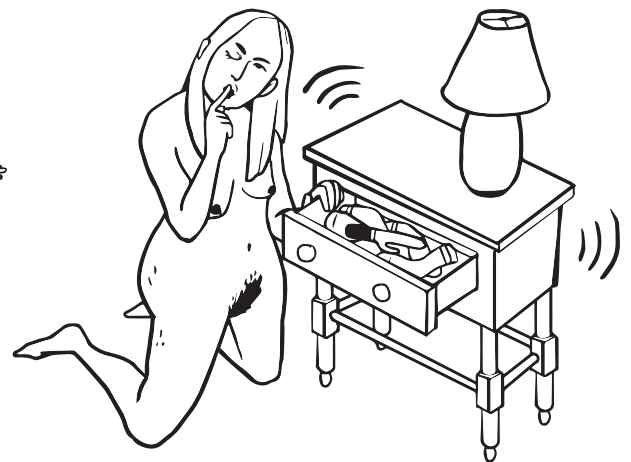
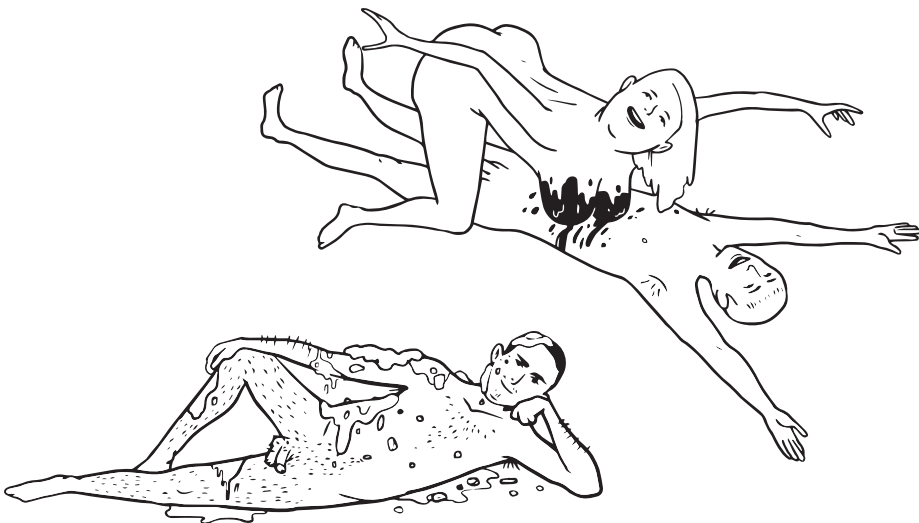
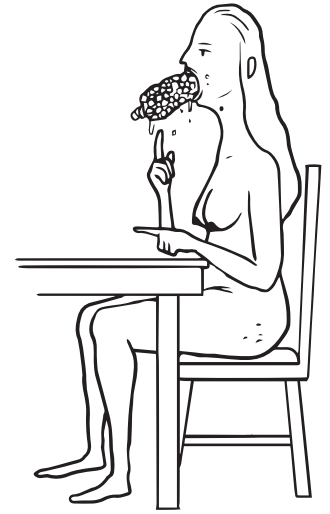
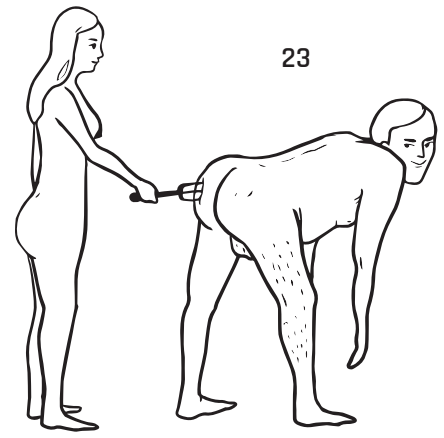




FIG. 06

Digital render of *Hot Commodities* on display in the atrium of Emily Carr University of Art + Design's south building.

6.2. HOT COMMODITIES This project proposes a series of congratulatory offerings, like balloons or greeting cards for example; but instead of birthdays or other celebratory occasions, the objects refer to sexual events both retrospectively (e.g. losing one's virginity) or prospectively (e.g. a request for a threesome). The inspiration behind their creation came from the inflated celebration of sexuality seen in many areas of Western culture, a change of attitude that gained steam with the 1960s sexual revolution. Sex has moved from being "something we are told not to do, or else risk being judged as dirty and depraved [to also being] something we must do, or else be declared pathetic, prudish and undesirable." (Hills, 2015b) The objects in this project are very literal representations of this phenomena wherein the suggestion that to be 'sexually successful' means conforming with a "set of ideals and aspirations around sexual frequency, performance and identity." (Hills, 2015b) It means that the bar for what is deemed 'exciting' is constantly being raised under the influence of magazines, pornography, movies, books, music, etc.

The design of the objects drew heavily from kitsch design, a style usually "considered to be in poor taste because of excessive garishness or sentimentality, but sometimes appreciated in an ironic or knowing way." ('kitsch,' n.d.) The idea behind this was to make them seem innocuous at first glance, as if they could blend in with any of their real world counterparts seamlessly; the cake could sit amongst other cakes without being immediately eye-catching or the greeting card could blend in with others typically found in supermarket aisles. Furthermore, to ensure their craftsmanship and believability each item was designed by myself or special ordered from a manufacturer.

To discover how varying approaches affected dialogue and engagement, different avenues of presentation were attempted with this project. The first was an installation with a 'call to action' approach at obtaining feedback. To prepare the objects for viewing they were photographed in a very deliberate style that drew from both still-life and product photography, done with the intention that they would only be presented

two-dimensionally. The five photographs were on show in the atrium of Emily Carr University of Art + Design's south building for six days (November 12th–17th, 2015). (Figure 06) The space itself allowed for a casual viewing of the work as it is a hallway with ample amounts of foot traffic. During people-watching sessions I noticed individuals do the double-takes I had hoped my work would achieve through its superficially innocent appearance. They glanced while walking, kept walking, then came back for another look upon realizing that the objects portrayed were not as innocuous as they appeared. On a small pastel pink table by the photographs there were cards available for people to take away. (Figure 07) On the back of the cards there were instructions asking people to discuss the work using the #hotcommodities hashtag that would allow me to monitor the online dialogues on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram. Additionally, two prizes (each consisting of a poster, five balloons, and a rosette ribbon) were offered as incentive for participation that had a level of depth and thoughtfulness to it. At the end of the work's time up for public display there was no feedback on social media. This lack of engagement suggested this method may not be conducive to stimulating a dialogue or obtaining any sort of tangible feedback. People may have been discouraged from responding on social media because they would often be using their real identities and the posts would be public and possibly visible to coworkers, family, or friends. The two-hundred cards that were made available had all been taken by day six, yet there was no measurable hint of people talking on the online platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, etc.) I had intended for them to use.

There was a reluctance on my behalf to completely discount the power of social media, even after the first approach fell short of getting people to respond. The next attempt at generating discussion hinged itself on 'meme' culture, a popular way ideas are spread around the web, particularly social media platforms where 'sharing' is both easy and common practice. A meme behaves like a "flu or a cold virus, traveling from person to person quickly, but transmitting an idea instead of a lifeform." (Gil, 2016) People are drawn to humor they think is tailored to them because they feel like they are 'in' on something and 'get' it. Memes usually have mass appeal yet are still able to project "the appearance of an inside joke that everyone is sharing and owning and creating." (Ari Spool as cited in Hellyer, 2015) Instagram is a popular video and image sharing platform where people post their own content as well that of others which makes it a suitable vehicle for memes to spread. I decided to contact one popular Instagram user who mainly puts out sexually related content as her username '@ohmyerotica' would suggest. The account is run by Sloane Steel, who works behind the scenes in the porn industry. Upon sending her the image of the cake she responded immediately and posted it to her page which at the time of writing this has fifty thousand 'followers.' Steel's link to my personal account led some to engage with the rest of the images from this series and they proceeded to 'like,' comment, and share it with friends. Following its appearance on @ohmyerotica the image began to spread but was never credited. I used Google's 'Image Search' tool periodically to continuously find it being reposted on other accounts. By logical deduction I would assume that many more smaller accounts have posted it but I was not able to find every instance of it being posted. Even though the image received a positive and large-scale response, it was lacking in qualitative feedback and did not provide profound engagement that moved beyond sharing and simple short comments.

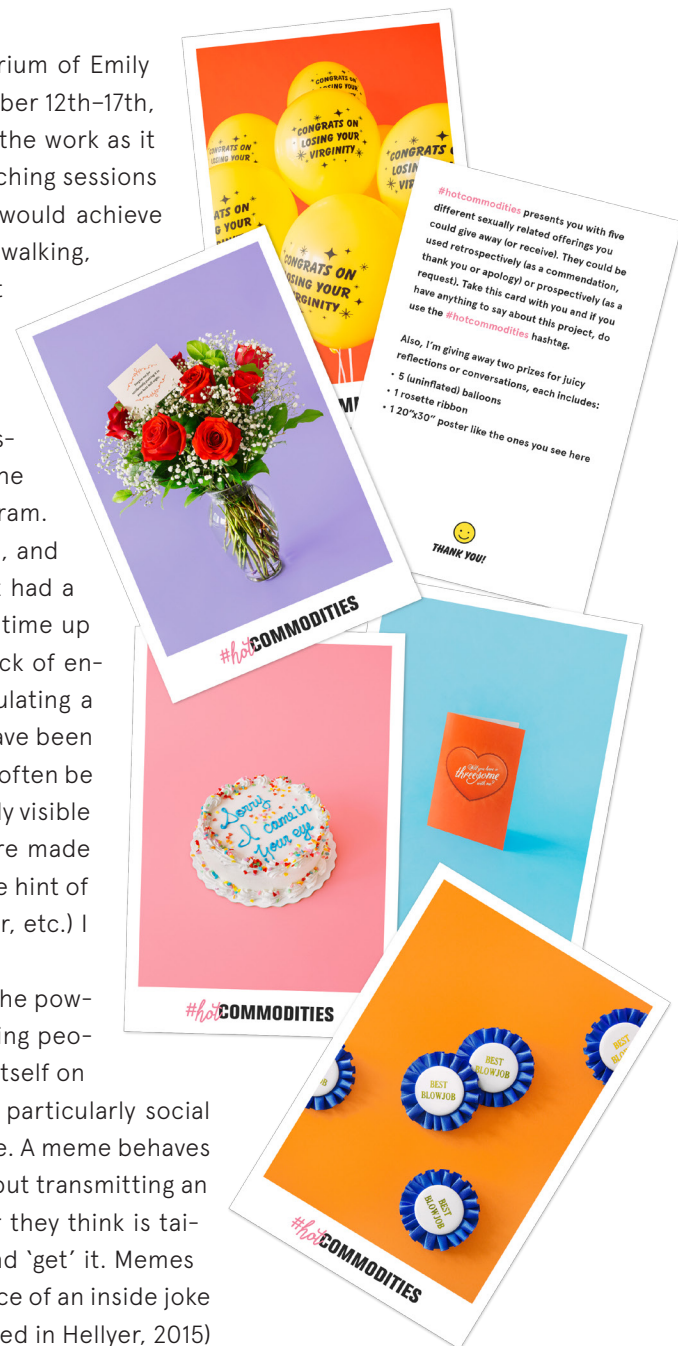
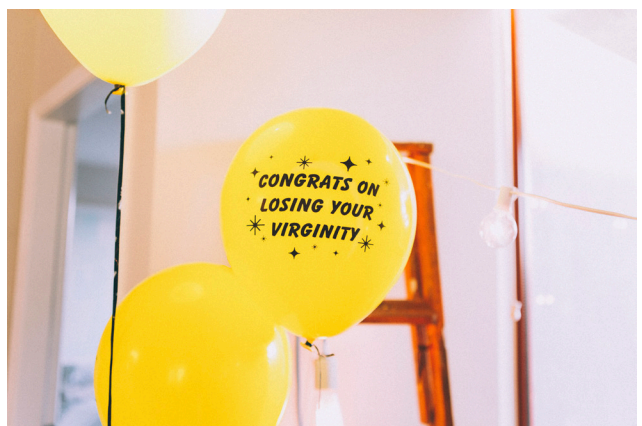


FIG. 07

Five different versions of the cards were offered with each of the images seen on the wall also pictured on the front, allowing people to choose which one they took with them.



The two initial modes of dissemination were successful in that they revealed people were drawn to the work and found it both humorous and relatable, yet any sort of deeper talks were either not occurring or not observable and recordable. Stemming from conversations with instructors and peers it became evident that the objects became too far removed from the conversations they were intending to elicit. By presenting them in a public way without much instruction and seeking an equally public response the work was likely not fostering a comfortable space for people to significantly react to it. One instructor referred to them as 'sites of reflection' and that to improve their efficacy they would need the power of physicality. The decontextualized photographic medium seemed to be creating a barrier, one wherein the objects became secondary to the two dimensional way they were shown, something that was possibly not allowing people to engage with them. In addition the need for some instruction and guidance was becoming increasingly apparent.

To tackle the obstacles the first approaches encountered a completely different way of asking people to engage with the work was undertaken, one that drew from methodologies found in the conduction of focus groups, a qualitative form of obtaining primary data which is usually used to "gain insight by listening to a group of people from the appropriate target market talk about specific issues of interest." (Collins, 2010, p. 126) Focus groups can be particularly useful when dealing with what could be deemed a 'sensitive subject,' one where "the revealing of the 'private' to the 'public' is an expected outcome." (Oliveira, 2011) Asking the participants to engage in conversations about sex and possibly their own sex lives fit in with this definition. Additionally, within the focus group there is a need for a moderator, a person keeping the conversations on track. This necessity helped address the previous lack of guidance, allowing me to ensure the conversations remained relevant to sex and, more specifically, to some or all of my overarching themes. For the purposes of this project the outcomes of the sessions would not be used as a 'pre-design' tool, but rather would be documented and prepared for presentation.

A group of participants within the 20-30 year old age range were invited to partake in what was playfully referred to as a 'Sex Party,' a tongue-in-cheek name that was in keeping with the humor found in the objects yet still alluded to what the main topic of discussion would be. The decision to conduct the gathering outside of an academic or formal environment was intentional. Inviting the participants to my home allowed me to avoid having the conversations be 'contaminated' by the formality of the university environment. The comfortable living room setting adorned with the colorful celebratory objects added a layer of warmth and intimacy to the gathering. During the 'settling in' process I took the opportunity to begin photographically documenting the objects and how people were interacting with them, making sure to exclude faces and other identifying features. Before the talk formally began the participants were assured that they needn't discuss anything they weren't comfortable with, that the purpose of this gathering was to have an unstructured discussion about sexuality and their views and experiences with it. The first topic of discussion hinged on three participants who had initially agreed to attend but changed their mind and decided not to come. This provided an interesting segway to the subsequent two hour non-stop talk, an icebreaker that stimulated a conversation around why these individuals may have chosen to back out of the gathering. One participant noted:

Whenever there is discourse around sex in general people always think it will lean towards the unsavory. They think that they are not adventurous enough to be talking about their sex life or that if they do they will end up feeling horrible about themselves.

FIG. 08 (opposite)

After the party some of the participants posted their photos on the image sharing platform Instagram. The caption below this photograph reads:

"The highlight of today's was taking part in an open, approachable, and often, hilarious, discussion around sex. As part of her thesis research @vivianziereisen opened the floor for conversation around how people are doing it, why they are doing it, and the in between of what people aren't willing to talk about. The following images are the literal icing on the cake. Sorry for bombarding you feeds—it's just too good not to share."

This comment related back to Rachel Hills' sex myth, the idea that there are standards we feel we are meant to live up to, that there is a script we are meant to follow, and not doing so fills us with a sense of inadequacy. As happened with this point much of the talk seemed to naturally loop back to many of the points I had brought up when discussing the overarching themes and it happened without much guidance on my part as a moderator; the topics discussed ranged from the participant's experiences with sex growing up before the advent of the digital age, talking about sex in long and short term relationships, and the influence of culture on us during our formative teenage years. From the beginning of the 'party' until the end there was constant engagement with the objects; people wore them, ate them, held them, took pictures of them, and talked about them directly and indirectly. (Figure 08) When one participant was asked how the setting helped stimulate conversation the response was, "Everyone factored in their feelings about the objects for the discussion and they directly contributed to a sense of purpose and kept us on track."

For the purposes of this document the specifics of the talk are not relevant, but rather I will focus on how the resulting pictures and audio could go beyond the confines of the discussion and become useful to others who would be interested in reading it. The possibility of this 'Sex Party' becoming a replicable model for discussion with varying outcomes began to emerge. Keeping the name and the designer objects the same and limiting the amount of participants to ten people would allow the outcomes to be different every time. The configuration of the participants involved would always lead to new dialogues because each person would bring in their own points of view and background. Furthermore, people would feed off each other's energy and points which would, again, lead to different conversations every time. This session involved a set of participants that were all familiar with one-another. One participant found that this familiarity made the talk more relevant and relatable:

There's two ways of looking at it. If we were all a bunch of strangers it would be a very different kind of...what I would take from this would be very different. It is almost more meaningful when these are the people you're connected with. To hear about their stories almost means more. It's more real to me than if I was to watch a documentary on this. It would be informative for sure, but I don't know if it would resonate in the same way.

To move the discussion and experience beyond the confines of those two hours, the people present, and this document, I suggest that a website could be developed where pictures and key quotes could be encapsulated into individual entries or 'posts;' this would make the happenings of the party available to a greater audience and would allow for the insights gained to reach more people.



BELL 4:21 PM 100%

← PHOTO ↻

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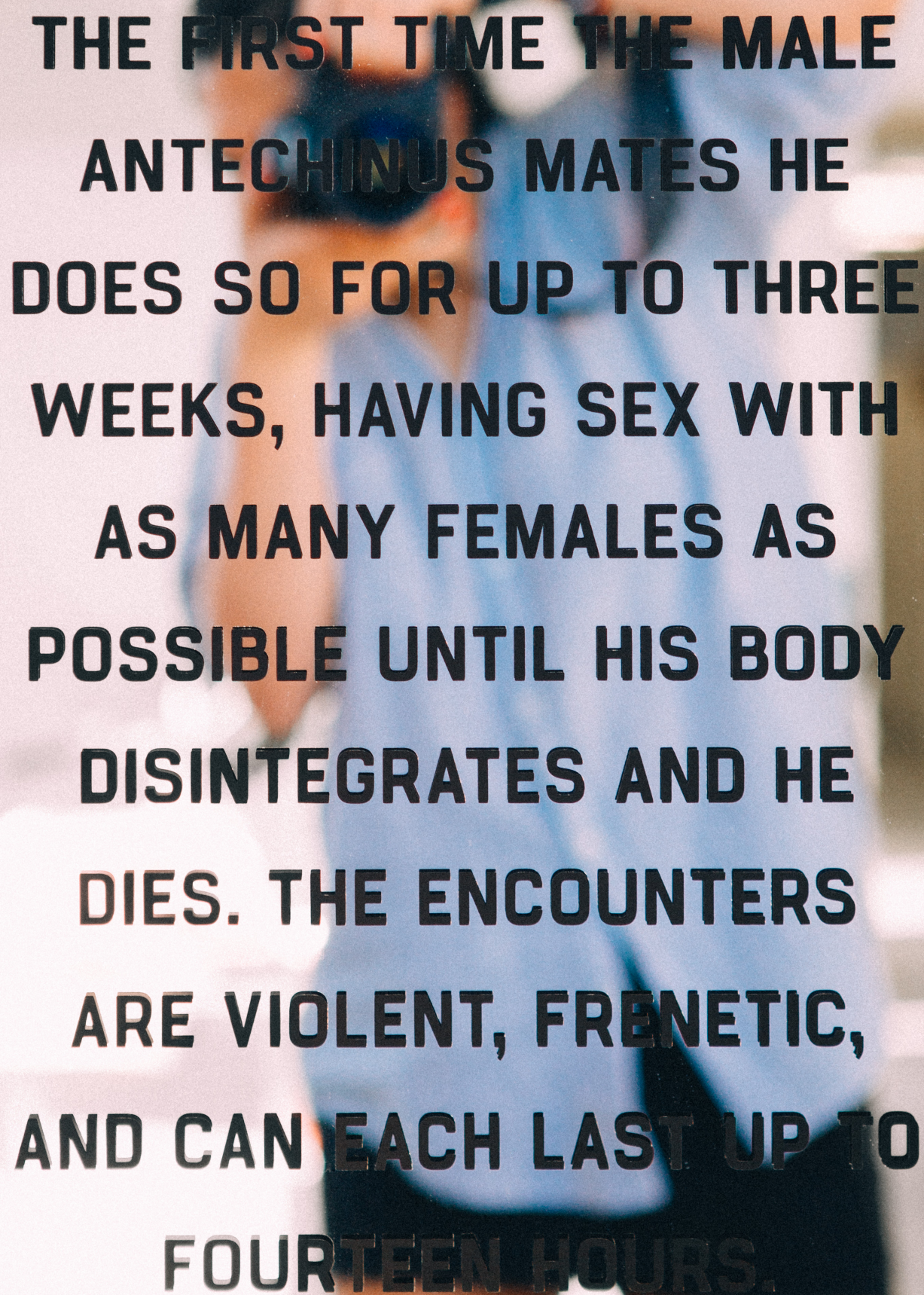


♥ 💬 ↗ ⋮

♥ 39 likes

[blurred name] The highlight of today was taking part in an open, approachable, and often, hilarious, discussion around sex. As part of her thesis research @vivianziereisen opened the floor for conversation around how people are doing it, why they are doing it, and the in between of what people aren't willing to talk about. The following images are the literal icing on the cake. Sorry for bombarding your feeds - it's just too good not to share. #SlayItDontSayIt

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**THE FIRST TIME THE MALE
ANTECHINUS MATES HE
DOES SO FOR UP TO THREE
WEEKS, HAVING SEX WITH
AS MANY FEMALES AS
POSSIBLE UNTIL HIS BODY
DISINTEGRATES AND HE
DIES. THE ENCOUNTERS
ARE VIOLENT, FRENETIC,
AND CAN EACH LAST UP TO
FOURTEEN HOURS.**

6.3. STRANGE LOVE This project intends to provoke dialogue surrounding the mating habits of other animals and in turn how they relate to our own. Humans have a strong desire to make order of things in the hopes of extracting meaning from them and to give us a sense of control, a habit we have applied to our sexual practices. The issue with categorization is that it inevitably has the ability to alienate and cause individuals to doubt their 'normality.' For example, in Western culture having sex in the missionary position is deemed normal, commonplace, and as a result even 'boring' to some. Meanwhile, erotic styles like BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission) are banished into the darker corners of our society and when they are brought into the mainstream arena they are watered down and misrepresented for comfortable mass consumption as happened with the book and movie *50 Shades of Grey*. (Connolly, 2012) Through our need for pigeonholing we have placed our desires and perversions along a very generalized spectrum of acceptability, a 'one size fits all' approach to sex. In contrast, animals are generally more uninhibited in their sexual practices. While some species like our close relatives the bonobo certainly use sex for more than just procreational purposes, it is generally understood that humans have a particularly large emotional and moral investment attached to it. Novelist and artist Ingo Niermann writes of human love but his words ring equally true when applied to sexual practices, "Love and hatred usually help animals decide what to seek out and promote, what to avoid and combat. Human morality, by contrast, elevates itself above emotional instinct and determines what is even worthy of being loved or hated." (2013, p. 10) For many species in the non-human animal kingdom sex and mate choice relies on fairly simple factors like which potential suitor has the biggest feather display or which one can perform the most compelling mating dance. Humans on the other hand have added layer upon layer of symbolism and emotion on to an already complex sex drive.

Human sexual practices are extremely diverse, especially when one considers we all belong to the same species. This diversity can lead to categorization, segregation, and sometimes judgement. Jesse Bering, an award-winning science writer specializing in evolutionary psychology and human behavior, writes on this matter:

Treating an individual as a pervert in essence, and hence with a purposefully immoral mind, because his or her brain conjures up atypical erotic ideas, or responds sexually to stimuli that others have deemed inappropriate objects of desire, then becomes medieval in both its stupidity and its cruelty. (2013)

It is within this still prevalent idea that people who do not conform with our views of normality are defective or perverted that this project lives. *Strange Love* is an installation that seeks to remind people of their animal origins and asks one to reconsider what we deem as sexually 'weird' or 'strange' and why. The work consists of ten mirrors (15x20in), each displays one animal mating fact applied with matte black vinyl lettering. Through the chosen medium reflection is outwardly called for and a visual link between human and non-human animals is drawn. There was a time when we lived in large hunter-gatherer polyamorous groups wherein people had multiple simultaneous sexual partners. This fact does not seek to discredit the way we live now but merely offer a possible explanation for some people finding it difficult to conform with contemporary ways that encourage strict monogamy and fail to accept that people by nature have different sexual preferences, e.g., some people may be content with engaging in infrequent missionary style sex with one partner while others may be more inclined to seek out group orgies on the weekends. The goal is not to fall victim to a naturalistic fallacy which means that because something happens amongst other animals it should be acceptable among humans, "after all, animals also force themselves on one

**FIG. 09**

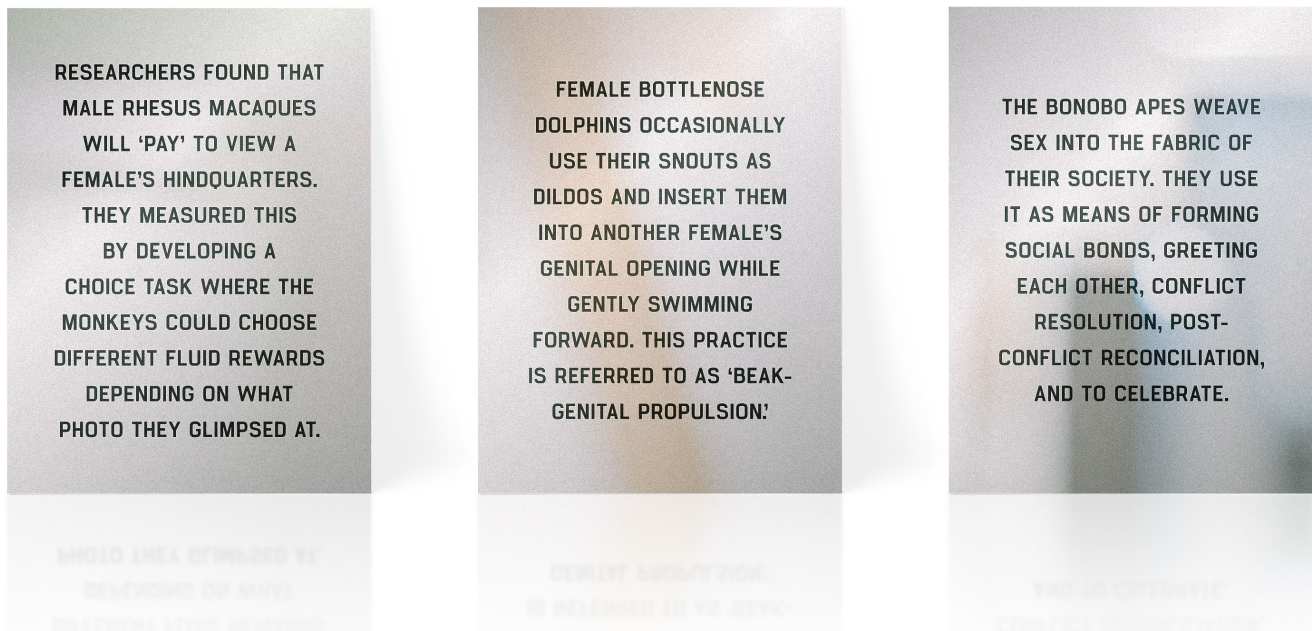
Promotional flyer produced during an 'Art Direction' class that would act as an invitation to the installation. The logo is meant to reflect the strangeness of animal mating and contrast the rigidity of the typography (on the mirrors) and the mirrors themselves. Furthermore, it is an ode to the fluidity of water and the ripples created when something comes into contact with it, a way many animals are able to see themselves.

another, but that doesn't make it OK for men to rape women." (Poole, 2014) This work simply proposes that evolution has played a role in shaping more than just our physical attributes but also our minds and behavior, and that this may at times find itself at odds with contemporary sexual norms.

A great deal of consideration was put into designing the mirrors; their minimalist design meant that dimensions and typography would have to be carefully treated. Their size is approximately that of a medicine cabinet, this means that when an individual is close to them they are the main 'object' being reflected. Due to the size constrictions the typography needed to serve a utilitarian and aesthetic purpose; Manifold CF is a no-contrast condensed typeface that allows for more words to fit into a smaller area and also offers a high degree of legibility. As an accompaniment to the installation I designed a series of promotional materials that include an illustrative wordmark which could be used on flyers or as signage introducing the work. (Figure 09)

During the Fall 2015 'Open Studios' for the Graduate Program at Emily Carr University of Art + Design there was a call to instructors and peers or the public to come and look at the work and provide feedback. *Strange Love* developed multiple discussions around the placement of the mirrors and how both height and location would have an impact on how it is viewed. Due to spacial restrictions the mirrors were placed on the floor and leaned against the wall for the occasion, an inadvertent decision which completely changed how people approached the work. Some enjoyed the effort and inquisitive act of having to bend down to see what was written while others preferred the effect of having the mirrors closer to eye-level. These unplanned discussions provided new considerations for how the mirrors would be exhibited and that the mirrors could be placed at different heights: above eye level, at eye level, or very near the floor.

Bringing the mirrors into their intended physical state allowed for instructors, peers, and myself to better evaluate how *Strange Love* could be progressed and improved. (FIGURE 10) While the chosen medium connected a viewer to the animal mating facts both physically and metaphorically, the message was perhaps too obvious and might diminish how people engage with the content in that it's apparent 'ob-



viousness' wouldn't invite further thought or investigation. Furthermore, it became important to find a way this project could be brought to a larger audience and how a level of interaction could be achieved.

The Emily Carr University of Art + Design Degree Exhibition is an annual event that takes place on university grounds and provided an opportunity to present *Strange Love* to a large amount of visitors. In preparation for the show the installation was reworked; instead of placing the animal mating facts onto mirrors they were printed onto thickened silver foil board. The reflective boards were slightly raised from the wall, allowing a shadow to be cast behind them. This stylistic choice is meant to show two sides of a coin, a carnal and hidden nature behind the light-catching and reflective front, the duality of what is on the surface and what lies underneath. As a means of eliciting response from visitors they were asked to voluntarily fill out a question card which asks, "Describe or name a human sex act you consider 'strange'? Can you tell me why?" These questions, the thought involved in answering them, and the act of writing may encourage people to reconsider what they 'really' think is strange or weird, especially after having been presented with a selection of utterly bizarre animal mating habits. The prompt could also lead to more internal questioning and debate about how we separate our sexual acts and why. Adjacent to the ten boards on the wall a plinth was set up, allowing people to write down their answers and anonymously drop them in the accompanying ballot box.

The installation was photographically documented for dissemination purposes. (Figure 11-13) At the end of the exhibition the hundreds of submissions were extracted from the ballot box. Each will be scanned and published on my personal website wherein a case study for the project will be created and presented detailedly.

FIG. 10

Three of the ten mirrors digitally rendered. They represent *Strange Love's* first embodiment and acted as a precursor to what was shown at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design Degree Exhibition.

FIG. 11-13 (next two spreads)

Revised version of *Strange Love* as seen at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design Degree Exhibition. In this case the logo was directly incorporated into the pieces, unifying them further.



Hippopotamuses engage in dung-showering. When a territorial male is on the prowl the females aren't entirely passive. If a female is interested she will turn around and submissively defecate, using her tail as a propeller to disperse it.

Female-female dolphin sex play can include the insertion of one dolphin's fin or tail fluke into the female partner's genital slit. Beak-genital protrusion is another variant, in this whereby one dolphin uses her snout as a dildo while propelling the other female forwards.

Female garter snakes release a pheromone that indicates they are ready to mate, attracting males from all over hoping for a chance to father their offspring. This results in a massive gathering of snakes that form a swirling mating ball.

Researchers found that male rhesus macaques will 'pay' to view a female's hindquarters. They measured this by developing a choice task where the monkeys could choose different fluid rewards depending on what photo they glimpsed at.

During intercourse the female short nosed fruit bat will often contort herself to lick the shaft of her mate's penis, prolonging the sexual encounter. After coitus the male will usually lick his own penis for several seconds.

Some species of anglerfish practice 'sexual parasitism'. The much smaller male will bite into the female's skin, releasing an enzyme that fuses his body to hers. He will live like this until she dies, providing sperm whenever she is ovulating.

The first time the male antechinus mates he does so for up to three weeks, having sex with as many females as possible until his body disintegrates and he dies. The encounters are violent, frenetic, and can last up to fourteen hours.

Male North American porcupines spray females with urine as part of their mating ritual. When the female is ready to mate, she'll present her hindquarters and curve her tail over her back to avoid impaling the male suitor.

Bonobo apes possess a cheerful sense of general promiscuity, weaving wanton sex into their society. They use it for a multitude of purposes: as a greeting, a means of forming social bonds, conflict resolution, and to celebrate.

Male great bowerbirds are builders, artists, and illusionists. They use a host of visual tricks when building their bowers in order to manipulate the female's perceptions and increase the likelihood of being chosen as a mate.



or tail...
partner's genital slit. 'Be
genital propulsion' is ano
variant on this, whereby
dolphin uses her snout a
dildo while propelling t
other female forwards

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www.pillowtalk.com

Pillow Talk

About Submit

About

Pillow Talk is a compendium of anonymous, sexually related confessions from individuals who wish to volunteer their own unique and generally guarded information. The confessions are limited to ones pertaining to sexual experiences where the person did not communicate their feelings with their partners, whether they were asked to do so or not. For a better idea of the kind of thing we're looking for, please peruse the already posted submissions. Scientifically speaking, pillow talk (or postcoital communication) is usually positive and praising, but in this case we are looking for information that is more revealing, for information you have chosen not to disclose with your sexual partner for one reason or another.


The goal of this project is to illustrate what goes unsaid between people who are physically intimate with one another. Pillow Talk is ultimately a collective statement authored by anyone who makes a submission.

How it works

It's pretty simple. You submit a sexually-based 'confession' about a partner or ex-partner, we review it, and then post it along with all the other submissions. This is, of course, 100% anonymous and your confession won't be linked to your or the person you're referring to (which is why we have a real human reviewing each entry).

What will happen to your confessions

Once you have submitted a confession and it has been reviewed and added to the pool, it will live on this site for any visitor to see. In the future, your confessions may be printed on actual pillows and displayed in a gallery setting, check back for updates as we are unable to contact you directly due to our strict anonymity guidelines which are in place to protect your identity.



www.pillowtalk.com

Pillow Talk

About Submit

About

The goal of this project is to illustrate what goes unsaid between people who are physically intimate with one another. Pillow Talk is ultimately a collective statement authored by anyone who makes a submission. This project is part of a research study at Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver, Canada. The principal student researcher is Vivian Ziereisen (aziereisen@ecuad.ca), under the supervision of principal investigator Celeste Martin, Associate Professor.


Pillow Talk is a compendium of anonymous, sexually related confessions pertaining to non-disclosures or omissions about sexual experiences where the person did not communicate their feelings with their partner, whether they were asked to do so or not. Scientifically speaking, pillow talk (or postcoital communication/disclosures) are usually positive, in this case we are looking for information that you weren't able to tell your sexual partner for one reason or another. Essentially, we are interested in hearing about things you didn't say and/or things you said but didn't mean.

How it works

It's pretty simple. You submit a sexually-based 'confession' about a partner or ex-partner, we review it, and then post it along with all the other submissions. This is of course 100% anonymous and your confession won't be linked to your or the person you're referring to (which is why we have a real human reviewing each entry).

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Language, when expressed in graphic, written or spoken form, became an element that required hyper-awareness at two principal levels of the work. The first level relates to the way each outcome is presented to a viewer/audience/participant outside of an academic setting, in its 'real world' and intended form. The second level pertains to how the work is conceptually constructed and developed, as well as its verbal and written presentation, and how it is subsequently discussed, analyzed, judged, and evaluated within the academic community. I'll begin by addressing the implications of language and its effect on how an individual may interact with the work outside of an academic context in its proposed state. *Pillow Talk* had initially used 'leading' language and instruction that influenced and guided the disclosures users were encouraged to submit; the first iteration explicitly asked people to send submissions that focused purely on negative experiences and feelings relating to a partner and 'sexual event.' (Figure 14) Upon further review it was decided that all contributions, positive and negative, should be welcome to create a less directed dialogue that was not fundamentally limited from the start. My personal biases manifested themselves in wanting to provoke a specific response which would inhibit a more encompassing and representative portrayal of sex. A benefit of working with a methodology that allows for multiple approaches to be carried out at varying levels of development is that each can act as a teacher for future attempts. The goal for the subsequent works became to rely more greatly on an individual's ability to interpret information and reach their own conclusions. As an example, in the case of *SRM* where the proposition depends less on user contributions than in *Pillow Talk*, there was no indication of whether or not this diegetic prototype should be seen as 'good' or 'bad,' regardless of my personal opinions and motivations behind its creation.

The value of the RTD methodology further revealed itself by allowing me to address an issue pertaining to the realm of critical design: the need for capturing viewer's thoughts, responses, and engagement at large. In their online manifesto Dunne and Raby write that the main purpose of critical design "is to make us think. But also raising awareness, exposing assumptions, provoking action, sparking debate, even entertaining." (Dunne & Raby, n.d.) Despite these intentions there seems to be no clear-cut or existing way of documenting these variable 'outcomes,' this suggests it is up to the individual working with the approach and methodology to establish ways of bringing what are usually undocumented happenings like conversations or thoughts into a more visible spectrum. The first three projects, predominantly *SRM* and *Just the Tip!*, fell short of creating a space for the responses to be documented. It became a key goal of the two subsequent projects, *Hot Commodities* and *Strange Love*, to explore different avenues of generating discussion but also documenting and recording them. Both projects took different approaches at making this happen. *Hot Commodities* focused mainly on ways of incorporating social media platforms as arenas for discussion with differing results depending on how the responses were elicited. For example, the first attempt which took a 'gallery setting' approach with a delayed online response did not generate feedback, perhaps because people did not want to attach their personal profiles to the subject and because they may have forgotten to respond after leaving the area of the work. This was altered in the way *Strange Love* was presented; the installation asked people to anonymously respond in situ. This allowed me to collect the hundreds of response cards, scan them, and eventually make them available through my website.

It also becomes important to try and keep the discussion on the topic at hand. Works that outwardly identify themselves as critical design projects may run the risk of the intended topics becoming derailed. This was the case with MoMa's online cura-

FIG. 14 (opposite)

The first version (top) of *Pillow Talk* had requested that users only submit negative disclosures. Upon further review with instructors and peers this was amended to make all submissions welcome (bottom). By requesting specific kinds of disclosures I would be shaping the outcome and painting one-sided picture, as opposed to letting the entries speak for themselves.

torial project *Design and Violence* (designandviolence.moma.org); the comments section of the site was meant to act as a space to discuss what each design object was proposing, instead the conversations focused more on the overall validity of critical design and its space in the broader design world. While it was important to identify with this area of design in documents such as this one and other academic settings, I ensured that the focus remained on the themes the works were addressing, not the theoretical frameworks or methodologies that informed them. Being able to use precedents as a means of informing design decisions proved invaluable to the work and highlights the value of critically documenting the steps of the RTD process.

The overarching themes provided material to respond to and because the outcomes were the result of my subjective interpretations it became important to ensure each of the works would be seen as propositions as opposed to statements. A common thread that runs through each piece in this body of work is the desire to never be overtly exclusive with the realization that they are in no way universally inclusive. The reality is that all of the works are inherently 'sex positive' in their message as none of them cater to people who, for personal or religious reasons, would likely be unwilling to engage with the content and themes on any level. The overall goal is to encourage a 'think for yourself' approach to sex by creating subtle messages in the work and leaving them open to interpretation. At no point do any of the outcomes willingly demonize anything or anyone, but rather offer tools that allow for reflection and discussions to occur. Additionally, none of the works aim to promote a dichotomous wrong/right or good/bad approach to sex as this was identified early on as being a main issue with sexual messaging today. *Pillow Talk* encourages feelings of compassion, of relating to others, of understanding that other people's experience of sex may not relate to one's own. *SRM* proposes a scenario where completely plausible technology aids us in being intimate and maximizing pleasure without ever expressing an opinion of whether or not this is good or bad, even if what influenced its creation was a negative view on the matter. *Just the Tip!* re-purposes existing information into visual form by using real and existing content to enhance its own silliness; a person may laugh at what they see but also go deeper and question how sex is portrayed in both women and men's magazines and the broader implications of repeated exposure to sexual messaging which suggests that to be a functioning adult one must be having sex all the time. *Strange Love* uses proven animal mating facts and places them on a reflective medium that allows a visual link to be drawn and is accompanied by a question that seeks create indicate that human sexuality is diverse and that it will vary from individual to individual. And ultimately, *Hot Commodities* created spaces on and offline for open-ended discussions around sexually charged celebratory design objects to occur.

The importance of language further revealed itself in the way the work was presented and analyzed in an academic setting. The 'critical design' label given to the theoretical framework the works draw from frequently dominated and divided conversations. Sometimes these discussions can purposely or unknowingly be circumvented as there are many designers who practice or draw from critical design without identifying as such or even being aware of it. However, failure to identify with an approach within an academic setting is counterintuitive to the judgment of the works and their 'success.' People from different design backgrounds all provided ongoing critique and input, they juggled between directly referring to the works and their ideas to talking about the critical design practice as a whole. It became difficult to navigate and defend an area of design which lacks clear methodological directions and is still finding ways of judging itself, of 'testing' its ability to do something as intangible as sparking thoughts within an individual's mind or generating discussion which

may not always be immediately perceptible or guaranteed. The works I developed ask for engagement with the sexual notions they address but do not seek to establish whether or not an individual demonstrates a change in thought or behavior. I am left in a quasi limbo where I can say people interacted with the work with varying levels of interest and interpretation, and I can say that thought and discussion happened, but I cannot attest to whether or not they were motivated to rethink their evolved erotic unconscious drives and the effect a world saturated in overt sexuality has on them.

A critical theorist and designer may take it upon themselves to interpret the existence and operations of ideology, patriarchy, and the unconscious which do not usually “manifest themselves in directly observable or measurable ways.” (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2013, p. 5) I find there are strong connections between critical design and information design as an aspect of both is to take information and translate it into a way that it becomes more accessible, more palatable. The clear distinction between the two is that information design seeks to give answers while critical design seeks to pose questions. But at the level of skill, both of these disciplines rely on similar tools which are unique to design and those who practice it in any of its varying forms (two or three dimensional, screen or print, industrial or communication). Every designer will have skill sets at their disposal to interpret information and it is within the convergence of their personal paradigms, their know how, and the phenomena that unique results will express themselves. For example, my strengths lie in photography, typography, print and web design; to produce the body of work presented in this document I used a mixture of these skill sets to interpret how media culture shapes sexuality and how we as a collective talk about sex. Perhaps it is within the translation and reframing of complex and obscure phenomena that works drawing from critical design thinking and methodologies can find their strength; to create propositions that allow people to interpret what they are confronted with. It was a personal challenge to stray from presenting supposedly finite products and solutions, to frame ‘outcomes’ as suggestions that have varying degrees of dependence on how an individual may interact with them and make sense of them.

The ‘results’ of the interplay between a design intervention and a phenomena “should always be modest because RTD is not good for producing universal laws or general claims.” (Storni, 2015) The evolving body of work I have produced and will continue to develop has experimented with realities regarding Western culture’s growingly complex relationship with sex. Cristiano Storni, a researcher at the Interaction Design Centre and a lecturer in interaction design in the computer science department at the University of Limerick, notes that due to “the high number of potentially arbitrary decisions in RTD, I believe it is always important to look at the motivations behind design decisions.” (2015) Storni suggests to counteract this by “explicitly discussing embedded assumptions, rationales, and criteria for inclusions and exclusions (of concepts, of particular types of users, of design features, etc.) so that those enjoying the results can better understand where the knowledge came from.” (2015) The creation of detailed documents such as this one is important as it allows for the learning to be encapsulated and for the findings to become generative and possibly useful to others who may ask similar questions and propose their own ideas. Through this body of work I put forth a series of insights that speak to the intersection of sex and design. I propose that an important part of reframing ideas around sex could be to stray from existing visual tropes that seem to populate the mainstream sexual landscape and perhaps limit where and how people engage with sexually related content; that the deliberate deviation from these clichés (through choice of typography, illustration, color, etc.) could allow people otherwise dubious about engaging with ideas

around sex more comfortable through their playfulness. Contemporary media is highly persuasive and efforts to question its effects may need to be equally as entertaining in order to captivate people's attention. Furthermore, public opinions about sex are divided and subdivided ad infinitum; I suggest that one method of mitigating the divisiveness of people's thoughts is to create propositions and move away from the pervasive amount of information about sex that bills itself as true. By 'suggesting' instead of 'telling,' people may be more willing to engage with what is presented to them. None of the works presented purport that they can and will break sexual scripts, but perhaps a collective conversation around sexuality that is not prescriptive can lead to realizations that sex is far more multifaceted than the media would have us believe.

8. Glossary

PORNOGRAPHY "Printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity, intended to stimulate sexual excitement." ('pornography,' n.d.)

CULTURE This term refers to the learnt forces that shape both human and non-human animal communities. These forces are transmissible "and not necessarily dependent on the evolution of language. These traditions or folkways are 'inherited' in the sense that an individual is born into them, but they're not innate or genetic. Humans have culture in this sense and so do other primates." (Asma, 2013)

SEXUALITY "Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors." (World Health Organization, 2002)

MEDIA Within the context of this thesis the word 'media' also refers to 'mass media.' Mass media is a term which is still evolving because new forms of it keep emerging or older ones keep changing. "Mass media in enduring essence, throughout the evolution of mediums is, 'openly addressed content, expanded delivery in terms of durability in time and/or transportability over space, and the suspension of interaction among authors and audiences.'" ('Mass media,' 2010)

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