Electronic Literature and the Effects of Cyberspace on the Body

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Abstract: In their article "Electronic Literature and the Effects of Cyberspace on the Body" Maya Zalbidea and Xiana Sotelo discuss how new technologies are facilitating the emancipation of subjugated subjects aimed at transforming unequal social relations through an intersectional and performative approach. This perspective is discussed through the exploration of the so-called intersectional approach described by Berger and Guidroz, Haraway's situated knowledges, and Butler's performative agency based on transgressions. Framed within the posthuman, post-biological deconstruction of social and cultural hierarchies, Zalbidea and Sotelo argue for the value of a conjuncture between post-colonial post-modern/post-structuralist literature and the field of feminist cultural studies. Based on previous theories of gender and bodies in cyberspace, Zalbidea and Sotelo develop ideas about bodies, gender, and anxieties, and how these theories may be illustrated metaphorically in electronic literature and new media art works.

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Thematic Issue *New Work on Electronic Literature and Cyberculture*. Ed. Maya Zalbidea, Mark C. Marino, and Asunción López-Varela

Maya ZALBIDEA and Xiana SOTELO

Electronic Literature and the Effects of Cyberspace on the Body

After years of doing research on third-wave feminist theories, cyberfeminism, and women authors of electronic literature, we have realized that we need to create innovative theories of body and gender from a present day perspective. We think that it is time to move forward with awareness of the psychosomatic effects of cyberspace in our lives, accept new changes in our reading and writing habits, and explore how our body is adapting to new technologies in the same way as it adapted to modern inventions. We have interited a fear of machines from the Industrial Revolution, because they can replace human labor. The same idea is connected to panic around images of cyborgs and robots: we fear an artificial body replacing a natural one. Despite these fears, the twenty-first century human is surrounded by machines. Computers, cell phones, cars, washing-machines are all essential for life and work. Human beings make machines, and then these machines substitute human's work: "in cyberspace and electronic literature the reader and writer become posthuman. Machines become writers and writers can become machines" (Zalbidea 244) and in computer generated writing even the human writer disappears: the machine creates writing without human action.

Before developing theories on how bodies are affected by the use of the new technologies such as websites, online communication, cell phones, and various social networks of communication and image production and consumption and how these effects are reflected on electronic literature in the context of gender, it is necessary to discuss previous theories of embodiment in cyberspace. The deconstruction of identity has become proxy of transgression if we understand transgression as the capacity to deconstruct and alter traditional gender roles. This empowerment stems from an intersectional and performative gender agency in new virtual and digital scenarios. That is, how historically subjugated subjects thanks to new media technologies have turned into emancipated cyberbodies (on this see, e.g., Sotelo; Staunae). Over the last four decades the discourse (scholarly and public) over the problematization of social and cultural categories of identity has triggered the jumbling of the boundaries and the collapse of fixed categories of meaning. Our purpose is to show how feminist insights have evolved to accommodate the challenges of engendered bodies in cyberspace and to highlight how the rise of virtual possibilities of self-identification not only indicates a shift in the organization of social relations, but potentially becomes a new source of empowerment and agency.

Moving away from a conception of cyberspace initially described as "consensual imagination" in the cyberpunk fiction of William Gibson, a new epistemology of networked complexity began to emerge in different disciplines theorized by scholars such as Donna Haraway, Katherine N. Hayles and George P. Landow (on this, see, e.g., López-Varela 7). Postmodern feminists combined criticism of an androcentric subject of modernity with an emphasis on partial, fragmented identities mediated by highly technological and virtual scenarios (see Zalbidea). Haraway opened debates on primatology, biology, and technology with regard to human-machine relations and her cyborg represents the postmodern utopia of a world without gender or genesis (see "A Manifesto"). From Haraway's point of view, the cyborg is unchained: it is released from god's demands or parents' weaknesses. Cyborgs are influenced by militarism, patriarchy, and socialism, but they are above the traditional Western polarity of public and private properties. They tend to present a politically united front without innocence. Society is reconstructed, mutating its economic, cultural, political, and family environments ignoring the given heritage from patriarchal capitalism. For Haraway, a cyborg has a changing identity and feminists should create coalitions based on affinity rather than on identity. Haraway supported Chela Sandoval's theory of oppositional consciousness arguing that feminists had suffered breakdowns because of insisting on the idea of unity rather than on multiplicity (see Sandoval 199). This new digital context is defined by Haraway as a tool for analyzing reality and the complex interactions between the body and technology. Hence, the figure of the cyborg emerges from such interactions to call into question the binarisms that have structured Western thought, such as body vs. mind or human vs. machine.

Haraway argues that in the age of globalization and under the impact of technology, cyborg bodies are marked by a set of mediations that somehow bridge the increasing overlap between human and

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technical dimensions. In our digital era (in the West, that is), there is therefore no unmediated relationship to experience. In this sense, Haraway follows Michel Foucault and his approach to the discursive construction of bodies within social systems and it could be said that Haraway redesigned Foucault bio-politics for the technological era. By the mid- and late 1990s, Foucault's analysis, framed for post-industrial societies, had become obsolete. A cyborg gender identity implies the affirmation of provisional positions, rather than those which are essentialist and unitary: cyborg gender identity is not determined by dichotomies and rigid binaries. Fuelled by complexity, but also by particular meanings, new postmodern bodies become the embodiment of a situated knowledge in which "identities seem contradictory, partial and strategic" (Haraway, *Simians,* 155). On the one side cyborg gender identity recognizes the "politics of location" (see Rich) as the specific and always partial positioning on the self. Moreover, it celebrates the interlocking and contradictory nature of gendered identity. Additionally, the cyborg recognizes a subject able to negotiate "strategic alliances" (Hill-Collins 226) on the basis of concrete interactions and the dissolution between the physical body and identity therefore provides an opportunity for the conventions underlying the construction of gender and other social categories to be subverted.

In her reading of Haraway's work, Rosi Braidotti asserts that cyborg theory emphasizes that multiplicity does not necessarily lead to relativism**,** since it enables Haraway to think with enough flexibility to belong to multiple positions while at the same time while seeking to articulate specific meaning from particular locations*.* The dualist relationship between body and machine is not only "a gesture of separation and of hierarchical coding" (Braidotti 108), but a celebration of intersectional relationship. Braidotti notes that "Haraway argues for a multifaceted foundational theory, for an anti-relativistic acceptance of differences, so as to seek for connections and articulations in a non-gender centered and non-ethnocentric perspective" (210). And Sadie Plant has defended the importance of women's historical contributions to the technological revolution and uses the figure of Ada Lovelace to vindicate the importance of women's contributions to new technologies. Further, Sandy Stone analyzes models of gender in cyberspace, according to her every user in cyberspace can change gender constantly, what she calls "computer dressing," on the net there is no physical body, only gendered communication (Stone 506). For Stone, individuals lose their flesh in cyberspace, the Platonic idea of the soul's jail would disappear in virtual life, but all the same, gender differences remain. Stone senses that the concept of body is old and Cartesian and therefore women and minorities are not interested in the disappearance of the body. On the contrary, feminists are interested in their visibility in public spaces. Hayles sees humans as a distributed cognitive system, wherein part of the intelligence lies in the human brain, part in intelligent machines, and part in the interface between them (*How We Became* 7).

The fluidity of power mechanisms which operate in cyberbodies became especially attractive to a poststructuralist-oriented gender theory as its practitioners claimed that a subject is never in a pure state and is always constituted by operating on social codes. It has been particularly interesting to minorities (especially women of color in the U.S) because it meant the recognition that all societal stratums are implicated in the operations of power. Poststructuralist feminist theorists, influenced to various degrees by Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan sought to focalize the center of the analysis to the exploration of subjectivity as an "engendered performance" (Harding and Narayan 82; see also Lozano de la Pola). Human embodiment, therefore, which is passive for mainstream gender theory, turned into a dynamic and interactive constructivist process for poststructuralist gender theory. Further, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler beheads gender coherence claiming that it is "mere fiction" (328). Butler denaturalizes gender categories by proposing that they are performative; that is, gender is part of an overall structure of power that can be disrupted by individual agency: "bodies are materialized as sexed … bodies only appear, only endure, and only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas" (*Bodies* xi). That is, as a way out of regulatory practices, she proposes the concept of performativity. In her opinion, gendered subjectivity is the result of a repeated performance of the discourses of gender. On these grounds, Butler defends the idea that "there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender … identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (*Gender Trouble* 24-25) and "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act' … but rather, as the reiterative practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (*Bodies* 2). In other words, gender is a set of socio-cultural acts that individuals perform. And because gender is performed, it can

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potentially be disrupted. As a result of performative acts; categories of identity are no longer neutral, since identity or difference is therefore mutually constitutive. Butler's main point is the claim that the subject is constituted by power relations is not the same as to claim that is determined by them; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very pre-condition for its agency (*Gender Trouble* 46). Particularly, it is by a continuous re-signifying process of gender identity that social categories of oppression/privilege can be disturbed. On these grounds, the "subject is neither a product or an object but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process … one which gets detoured and stalled through other mechanisms of power, but which is power's own possibility of being re-worked" (*Gender Trouble* 47). Hence, paradoxically, it is only by releasing the category of subject from a fixed referent, by "doing something not authorized," that something like agency becomes possible (*Gender Trouble* 50).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, a growing number of scholars agree with the affirmation that personal agency is intersectional in nature (see Davis 69). Gender, class and race once seen as separate issues for members of both dominant and subordinate groups are now recognized as interlocking (see Crenshaw 540). In fact, how they intersect provides knowledge crucial to understanding an individual's position in the making of social relations. Indeed, social categories play a fundamental role in structuring and representing cyberbodies. Since they are embodied connections of gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so forth, these categories may be approached as interlocking. Intersectionality thus offers us tools for delegitimizing the negative stereotypes as much as the possibility to deconstruct the very mechanisms that maintain gender/class/racial orders. Intersectionality as an analytical category can be defined as the realization that gender is the building material by which many and multiple identity layers (such as ethnicity and race; class, sexual orientation, beliefs) intersect, and the awareness that these social cultural categories are interlocking systems of exclusion and or privileging (see Davis 70). Thus only by treating social categories as relational can knowledge that avoids the reduction of the multiplicity of the self be produced (see Yuval-Davis 202). The challenge for intersectional theory therefore, lies not in finding ways to break out gender constrains so that gender theories become more inclusive, but rather in developing concepts that can allow us to better understand the real material and symbolic conditions that both variously link and affect our lives.

Intersectionality reminds us of and demonstrates both the proximity and indivisibility of gender with other social categories. Intersectionality is also linked to other forms of social and cultural knowledge and these multiple layers challenge any notion of normative cyberbodies in cyberspace. From a methodological point of view, here lies the potential for intersectional analysis: in terms of identity, enclosure baffles regulation and theorizes experience. And it is precisely at this point we draw a parallel with how new media technologies are enabling new imaginaries which disrupt traditional social categories of oppression and privilege. On the internet, boundaries are no longer clear and the fixed distinction between the public and private spheres becomes blurred thanks to the interaction of different technologies which facilitate dispersed, partial, flexible, cyborgenerated bodies and thus lead to new ways of "imagining" subjectivities (Haraway, "A Manifesto" 198). Cyborg-made personal accounts and profiles in e-mail accounts or social network sites and applications are replacing traditional forms of social representation as a regulatory form of identification. Lisa Nakamura recognizes that the diversification of roles that are permitted to users "can enable a thought-provoking detachment of social categories, questioning the essentialness of these categories" (50). The real breakthrough, however, emanates from the realization that cyberbodies can manipulate profile information to either identify themselves on their own terms or create a virtual identity different from their actual identity. In this sense, the possibility of blocking and manipulating information about users' embodied identities and subjectivities is linked to this idea of performing differently in a way the exposes the failure and impossibility of realizing traditional social ideals completely (see Benhabib, Butler, Cornell, Fraser 45). In the user's ability introduce and manage his/her intersectional cyberbody, he/she is also given the power to "not reproduce faithfully" (Benhabib, Butler, Cornell, Fraser 49). From a constructivist perspective, cyberbodies defy the process of becoming subjects by acting through their own intersectional social categories. Traditional social categories are disrupted and the conditions that made individuals "subject to" and "subordinated to" (see Butler, *Gender Trouble*) a kind of master power or system are trespassed successfully. For the first time, the new global citizens of the worlds that intersect and mul-

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tiply on the internet have the power to program their cyberbodies by patching up their intersectional layers of self-representation.

With the aim of creating theories on bodies and gender in cyberspace, we must distinguish between two realities: physical reality—the one that is tangible and in which our body has natural reactions when we are using a computer, typewriting, touching the screen, reading a digital text, watching images, and listening to sounds—virtual reality which has become the projection of our imaginary perceptions of reality, and hyperreality, which according to Jean Baudrillard is "more real than the real, that is how the real is abolished" (81). Our own notion of the body has also changed with the use of new technologies and we attempt to categorize them as the distorted body, the fragmented body, and the narcissist body.

We can find all these notions of fragmentation, invisibility, distortion, and narcissism in our own activity in virtual life. When having a chat through skype using a webcam, sometimes we have problems of connection and then we see the other's face and body in the webcam distorted in a haunting and shocking way. Watching others or our own blurred body and listening to a robotic voice creates a feeling of fear, misunderstanding, and strangeness. The user experience is frightening because it is similar to an altered state of consciousness: the image and sound seem to be an hallucination. In virtual life the body is also fragmented into different self-projections: in the same screen (when using a webcam) we can find our own image and the other's image, and at the same time watch pictures of our self in another window. Just like in hyperrealist painting wherein images are reflected on glasses, our face is always reflected on the computer. Also, we split ourselves in social networks, photo sharing sites, and blogs where we can multiply our identity. Feeling fragmented seems to be a human condition: according to Lacan's idea of the fragmented body fragmentation starts in the infancy, before the formation of the ego. The tension produced by having too many wishes enhances the decentering of the body: the subject "is originally an inchoate collection of desires—there you have the true sense of the expression fragmented body" (Lacan 39). The observance of one's own body which can be modified with Photoshop, distorted in a webcam, transformed into a 3D image in augmented reality, or transformed into an avatar in a video game or emulator can develop a narcissist attitude in the user. Self-promotion (publishing one's comments, writings, images and videos) encourages narcissistic traits. In a study by Elliot T. Panek, Yioryos Nardis, and Sara Konrath we have the example as to how often a group of subjects posted to Facebook and Twitter each day, as well as the time they spent on those sites reading posts and comments. According to the results, middle-aged adults have usually already formed their social selves, and use social media to gain approval from those who are already in their social circles, while young adult college students who posted more often on Twitter scored higher in a measure of certain types of narcissism, which is defined by traits including exhibitionism, exploitativeness, and feelings of superiority.

In the process of communication in online communities, the user can play a different gender from the one she/he has. Therefore, there are different possible states of gender in cyberspace, including genderless (wherein the user does not permit the others to know his/her gender), the subversive role (wherein the user plays a female role being a man or the opposite), and the transgender role (wherein the user forges his/her identity using a male name and image and saying that she is a man or that he is a woman). When navigating in cyberspace, the user feels three different types of anxiety which all have their origin in the loss of natural and instinctive feelings. First there is the anxiety of lack of nature, in which the individual feels alienated when using the computer for having used it for an excessive length of time and needs to take fresh air and feel the sunshine. Then there is the anxiety of lack of touch: for instance, the user of a webcam can watch and hear the beloved person but cannot touch him/her, and this provokes a feeling of despair. The user may touch the screen, trying to feel closer to the other person, or dream about the possibility of touching the other's hands when typing on the keyboard or touches his/her own body to replace the reciprocal physical contact. And the third and last kind of anxiety is the anxiety of loss of human/gender recognition: if a user only communicates with another through writing he/she may suspect that he/she is talking with a computer or that he/she is lying about her gender. Our objective is to show that the processes of the types of body listed above—the distorted body, the fragmented body, and the narcissist body—and the three types of anxieties are reflected in electronic literature, new media artworks, and digital performances and we present the following examples:

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The new media artwork *Dollspace* <http://dollyoko.thing.net/title.htm> by Francesca da Rimini, consists of two web pages in which we find images taken through a fisheye lens (on da Rimini's work see also Paniagua Zalbidea <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1799>). One is the distorted belly and face of a young boy (see Figure 1), and the other is the face and body of a Japanese girl (see Figure 2). This hypermedia brings the reader to the cyberworld of LambdaMOO users who chat online sharing their obscure fantasies. This image permits the spectator to watch the distorted and fragmented object of desire (boy and girl) as if it were through a peephole in a Japanese peepshow.
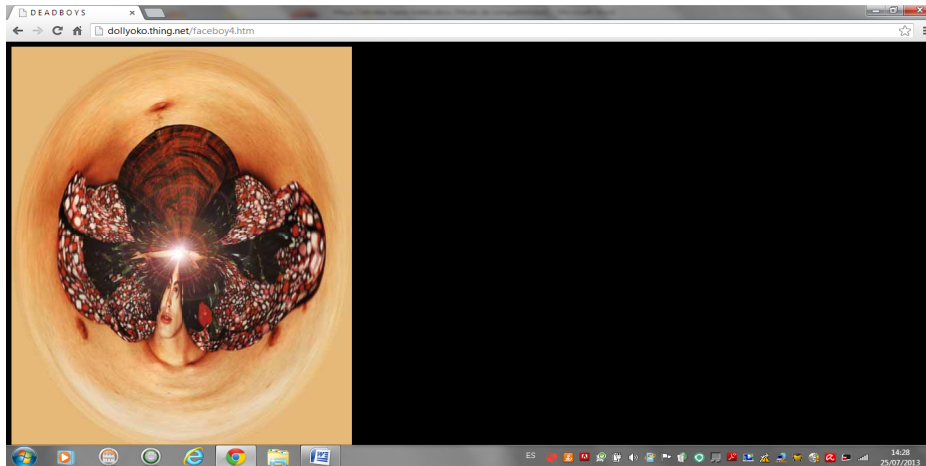

Figure 1: "DEADBOYS," Francesca da Rimini, *Dollspace* <http://dollyoko.thing.net/faceboy4.htm>. Copyright release to the authors.
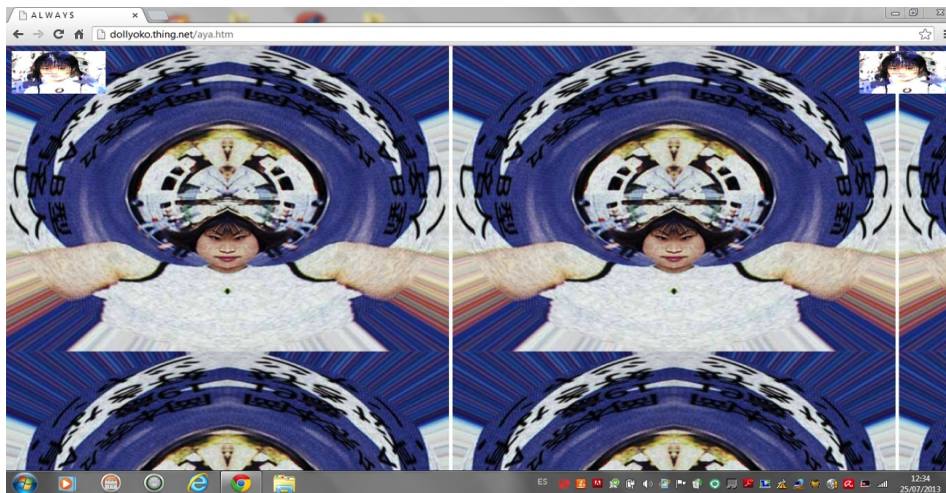

Figure 2: "ALWAYS," Francesca da Rimini, *Dollspace* <http://dollyoko.thing.net/aya.htm>. Copyright release to the authors.

In the new media artwork *Brandon: Body of Evidence* <http://webart.guggenheim.org/brandon/> by Shu Lea Cheang there are different squares of images representing parts of the body and objects which become part of the body: medical graphics symbolizing the "institutional regimes of gender classification," a tattoo, a piercing, a model wearing a suit, flowers alluding to female genitalia, prosthesis, and a harness (see Figure 3). These objects and body parts represent the body and identity of a transgendered person whose body is fragmented and becomes a cyborg when using a harness to substitute male genitalia. Brandon consists of digital images and hypertexts which make reference to real and fictional narratives of intersex and transsexual people whom society discriminate(d) against. Some of the people were victims of violence and murder like Brandon Teena. However, Cheang's Brandon is not only a web project about victims, but also an homage for those who (like Brandon) subverted rules and conventions to follow their own needs. According to Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders,

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and Rebecca Zorach, "the Website uses his story as a vehicle to explore the broader issues of gender identity and Internet phallocentrism; it interrogates discourses around the intersections of bodies and identities" (237). The project also represents cyberspace as a symbolic place where identities can change without restrictions. According to Verena Kuni, "the Brandon project thematicizes the utopias and realities of transgressing gender boundaries, then it appears to be quite characteristic that as transgender subjects, their real and fictitious protagonists are frequently perceived by society as "monsters"—while they identify themselves in a positive way as cyborgs" (<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/cyborg_bodies/mythical_bodies_II/>). What is the relationship between Brandon and cyberspace? Cheang uses Brandon Teena's story because on the world wide web he has arisen as an icon for transsexual activism. Other cases of victims of sexual assault on the internet are also remembered: "Taking this case into the environment of gender play and multi identity of cyberspace, Brandon extends its case study to include other legal cases where gender ambiguity constitutes points of interrogation" (<http://mediaartprojects.org.uk/brandon.html>).
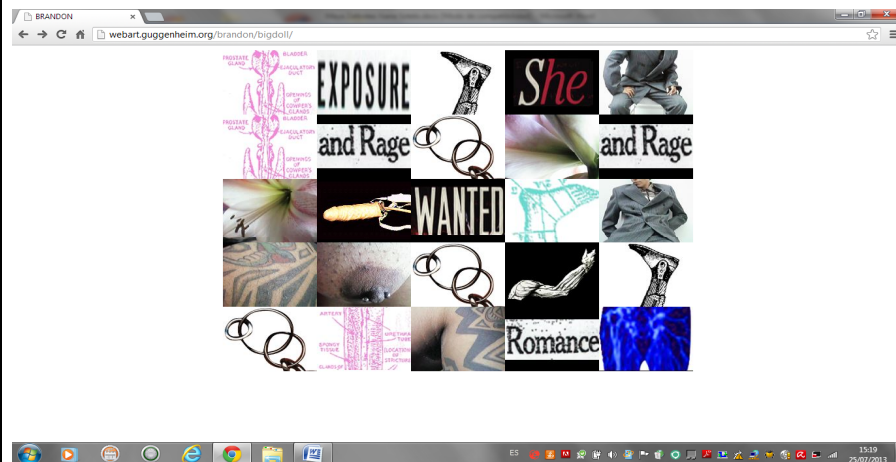

Figure 3: "big doll," Shu Lea Cheang, *Brandon: Body of Evidence*
<http://webart.guggenheim.org/brandon/bigdoll/>. Copyright release to the authors.

   In the interactive digital work *Loss of Grasp* <http://lossofgrasp.com/> by Serge Bouchardon and Vincent Volckaert, the user is advised to turn on the sound of his/her computer and to permit the system to use his/her own webcam. In the story, the speaker simulates a conversation between himself and his wife on the day he met her. The words he said are transcribed correctly at the beginning but then become distorted because the protagonist admits he was so fascinated by the woman that he could not say anything coherent. For instance, he first says: "By night they would use mine," but then the moving letters of this sentence become: "I like the way you smile." Bouchardon and Volckaert also show the difficulty of communication at a crowded party. The cyber reader reads the text: "I had to ask questions to reveal her," and slides the finger on the touchpad or clicks on the mouse and draws automatically an image of the wife created by the questions of the conversation (see Figure 4). The configuration of the other seems to be only possible by our own mental perception. At the end of the digital story the wife breaks up with him by sending him a letter to announce him that she no longer loves him, and he asks: "Am I so little here? So easily deformed? My own image seems to escape me." The reader can feel great empathy with the protagonist by watching his/her own image deformed through a fisheye lens. The user can also play with this visual effect, which produces a feeling of strangeness and mystery. A chaotic music included in the interactive work accompanies the user, who experiences the fiction as if he/she were playing a game. According to Bouchardon and Asunción López-Varela, "the sensorial experience conveyed in *Loss of Grasp* parallels the struggle of the narrating subject, seeking to find a sense of self and identity" (<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1793>). In *Loss of Grasp* we find a distorted, fragmented, and narcissist body of a user who contemplates himself and feels identified with the protagonist who feels that he has lost his grasp, he experiences anxiety of lack of touch and the anxiety of lack of human recognition.
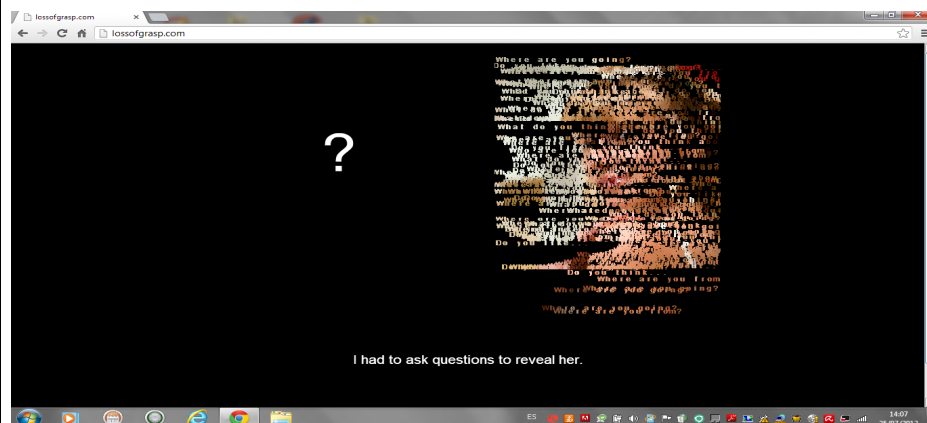
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Figure 4: Serge Bouchardon and Vincent Volckaert, *Loss of Grasp* <http://lossofgrasp.com>.
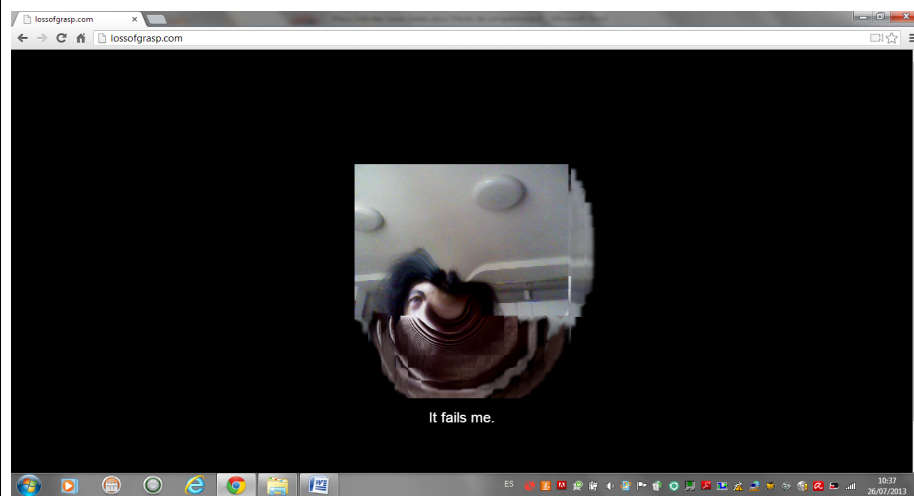Copyright release to the authors.

Figure 5: A user watching his own image deformed through a webcam. Serge Bouchardon and Vincent Volckaert, *Loss of Grasp* <http://lossofgrasp.com>. Copyright release to the authors.

Other electronic literature shows the same obsession with anxiety of lack of touch: users are made to feel a need to get in contact with reality and have physical contact with other users. For example, in *Toucher* <http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/bouchardon_toucher/index.html> by Bouchardon, Kevin Carpentier, and Stéphanie Spenlé, the user experiences how natural touching feelings are substituted by technological devices, in *A Show of Hands*
<http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/marino_show_of_hands/hands.htm> by Mark Marino human touch needs to be transmitted through words and images of hands because physical touch which seems to be more difficult to enjoy in this era in which we are invaded by the use of new technologies and communicate more often through distance than by having a natural and real body opposite us. And in *Out of Touch* <http://www.crissxross.net/oot/outoftouch.html> by Christine Wilks, two internet users feel anxious because they feel close to each other through a screen, but are far from each other in the real world. They type: "keep in touch" and "you are too touchy texty": they see each other as ghosts and feel panic of losing their touch.

In conclusion, the effects of our changing reading habits and of technology on our bodies is subject to debate. Feminist analysis is useful to theorize about cyborg bodies as the discrepant dislocations which transform static categories into the description of everything that cannot be contained and does not fall under a strict category. This raises the question as to what extent categories can ever grasp one's embodied positioning. We argue that in this new process of web-identifications, performative and intersectional relations have the potential to shed light on the ways in which traditional vectors of representation are being destabilized by a new generation of cyborgs. Both approaches, developed as a way to escape the tyranny of oppressive and discriminating social categories, can be explored as new properties in which feminist theory is illuminating the construction of cyberbodies in electronic literature. What this revisionism aims at challenging then, is the interrogation of whether is

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possible that cultural constructions of gender may disappear in cyberspace or will end up it reproducing the existing ones. Can cyberbodies provide an analytical framework in which the norms and expectations of conventional gender bodies can be undermined, thus enabling [or not] gender identity to be re-conceptualized? As a concluding thought, the guiding question of this endeavor remains: can we keep our senses open to emergent and unknown forms of belonging, connectivity, intimacy, and the unintentional acts of self-representation within electronic literature? Is cyberspace/virtual reality a place in progress with subjects in progress, a trip constantly changing with conceptions and misconceptions about the body, space, and gender: a reflection of our age? Or are we reflecting our age in our use of cyberspace and the internet? Is virtual reality what is changing our daily habits, or is it our mentality which is changing and can be reflected in our digital life? We believe that these questions legitimate new ways of thinking.

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