

# The Dynamics of Desire

Judith Barry  
in conversation  
with Sarah  
Perks

Sarah Perks: *Electronic Superhighway* is the first major survey in the UK to consider the relationship between networked technologies and contemporary visual art. It has a tidy chronological span of fifty years. In essence, it charts a new history around the adoption of the Internet by contemporary artists, including pre World Wide Web projects involving computer technology and running through to the more recent terrain of post-Internet art.

Your career begins in the late 1970s; whilst at art school you were testing video games at Atari in Palo Alto. In an interview about your piece *Space Invaders* (1982), you discuss how different video games operate, 'desiring machines' that function as a kind of 'private spectacular theatre'. Do you still believe this now video games have such sophisticated technology, with special effects similar to films?

Judith Barry: I think a lot has changed, so yes, it is a very different kind of immersive experience. For example, the new Oculus technology system may be a potential tech driver for immersive virtual reality (assuming it works as well as is promised) alongside further video game development. But the experience can still be as private or as networked as you wish.

And even without virtual reality, this experience is much more immersive than in the early 1980s. Hyperrealism in graphics, rendering in real time, more sophisticated algorithms, motion eye-tracking capabilities, faster processing, the z-axis – all of this makes for much more immersion than previously. Yet the subjective experience of engaging with this kind of media still operates on much the same principles that earlier forms of film invoke. Hence, there are similarities and differences.

At stake is storytelling, and the question is: have video games found their form? Are designers and storytellers able to take advantage of the possibilities for narrative and immersion that the game engine, branching structure, increased interactivity and FMV (full motion video) make possible?

SP: Artists throughout this survey, such as Jacolby Satterwhite, continue to be inspired by video games, though often the artists are

more interested in the aesthetics enabled by technology than the actual form of the technology itself. Do you recognise yourself as part of this history?

JB: Yes, I am interested in some of these same issues that I saw in Jacolby Satterwhite's work: how might the structure of full motion video narrative keep up with your thinking? How can you make use of your imagination and memory within a game engine structure and all that implies? Might it one day be possible to think the story, and have a fully rendered world appear before you at the speed of your thoughts? *Second Life* seemed to promise this within very limited parameters.

SP: Then pieces of yours such as *In the Shadow of the City... vamp r y* (1982–85) feel much more indebted to film history and theory...

JB: Yes, I was interested in using montage to construct believable, inhabitable space, as well as setting what I call 'subject positions' that the viewer could discover as engaged with the structure of the installation. That work addressed the structure of narrative alongside a variety of spatial tropes and was a way to combine all of my interests into a form that was much less predetermined: installation.

I also worked for Francis Coppola, but as I wanted to be an artist, and not a Hollywood filmmaker, and because I didn't want anything from him, I think I became a favourite of his. He often let me use the facilities at American Zoetrope for my own projects. I also worked in postproduction facilities that gave me access to computer technology and editing. And increasingly, I began to see how performance art could be combined with other media such as video and sculpture, and with my research interests through installation. By the time I made *In the Shadow of the City... vamp r y*, I had decided that I would use a research-based methodology and from that I would determine both the form and the content of each work. Hence I don't have a signature style.

SP: The chronology of the exhibition also echoes a theoretical position that emerged from the end of structuralism, through to the

adoption of postmodernist theory and then into more complex arrangements of subjectivity through identity politics. Computer and networked technologies appear to support the formation of mass consciousness on an unprecedented scale. On the other hand, they also appear to privilege the individual through precise location, sub-culture or even anonymity – effectively offering an ability to represent or recast oneself across multiple platforms and screens. A lot of your work focuses on how we form identities. How do you feel this has been affected by technology and networked technologies over this period?

JB: Structuralism was very much alive all through the 1980s in the US. It ended with identity politics in the 1990s, which on one level was a return to essentialism. Postmodernism trickles into the US from the UK and France. Rhetoric Professor Bertrand Augst at UC Berkeley had a huge influence on the construction of this discourse, regular visitors including theorists Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Raymond Bellour and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak alongside filmmakers such as Wim Wenders, Werner Schroeter, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen.

It was a very fluid moment. Magazines such as *Camera Obscura* started, Coppola was tutored by the film theorist Constance Penley, and so on. Information still travelled slowly, despite the computer, all through the late 1970s and early 1980s. The arrival of the Pictures Generation and its embrace of commercial media represented a shift in attitude towards popular culture, away from the prior distrust of media during the 1970s in conceptual and performance art, epitomised by Jerry Mander's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (1978). When Chris Burden introduces his first video compilation for distribution by Electronic Arts Intermix (E.A.I.) he nervously recounts that he isn't sure that he should even be showing these clips because they are mediated...

Alongside the Pictures Generation, DIY subcultures from music and punk spread through popular culture as theorised by Dick Hebdige and others. DIY ethos took over – the launch of the personal computer in the late 1980s had a trickle-down effect – and it

signalled the beginning of the end for the large video production facilities. Also, the early 1980s was the time where the differences between high art and pop culture were most dialectical, whereas now artists use the raw material of pop culture just like any other material.

In terms of identity, and the questions around how architecture might function with the advent of social relations lived on the Internet – or in a virtual world – there was a great deal of anxiety about what 'the digital' would mean in terms of producing new forms of subjectivity. Sherry Turkle's work was an important reference for me. I was reading writers like William Gibson as well as *Wired* and other tech magazines, participating in groups addressing issues of networked identity. This was the time of *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari (1980) and the introduction of parametric modelling software, and 3D (meaning the z-axis) was also coming into existence. Just as postmodernism was very differently understood by architecture (a return to ornamentation in architecture) and art (overturning master narratives), the issues raised by 'digital technology' have also played out differently within art and architecture.

Finally, let's not forget feminists and their relation to the question of how subjectivity is constructed; questions of gender (biology versus the social); film theory; the AIDS crisis and queer theory; architectures of the body and work by academics such as Elaine Scarry and many others – while this was not often the overt content of my work, these were issues that informed the work.

SP: In constructing histories and movements, everyone has to fall into either before or after. For example, in a recent exhibition *Take It or Leave It* (2014) at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, which considered a history of institutional critique, your work was positioned after the first generation; here in *Electronic Superhighway*, it clearly falls before the post-Internet boom. Do you approach your work in dialogue with these notions of movements and the construction of history?



Judith Barry, *In the Shadow of the City... vamp r y*, 1982-85  
Installation view. Two-sided side/film/sound projection.

JB: I try to stay informed about current trends in art-making practices. And in the case of the post-Internet, there is a relationship in terms of some of the issues my previous work has taken up. In fact, I was influenced by the first generation of institutional critique artists, especially Michael Asher, who I became friends with, as I found his work very relevant when I was a student and trying to formulate how an art practice might work. The Light and Space artists, who were performing a spatial version of institutional critique, also influenced me. They used space and light to make inhabitable spaces that produced phenomenological experiences. This includes James Turrell, Maria Nordman's work of the 1970s, Robert Irwin and several Michael Asher pieces from the 1970s that also take up these issues, so there is some overlap between institutional critique and the Light and Space artists.

Post-Internet is still a relatively new nomenclature for the many ways to think about artworks in relation to the Internet. I have works that pre-date some of Artie Vierkant's work (artist and author of *The Image Object Post-Internet*, 2010) that might be seen as proto-post-Internet work. Again, my methodology is

research-based, and the interrogation of the digital image and the questions around what forms it might take in the physical world are questions I have addressed in many of my installations even though I do not define those questions as only being about the 'digital'. Net artists, not unlike video artists of the early 1980s, seem to be interested in participating in the mainstream art world, and bringing the work out of the computer and into the gallery is one way of doing this. So far, the inverse – bringing the art world into the computer – doesn't have much traction.

SP: *Casual Shopper* (1981) was your last analogue edited piece. How do you feel about the end of certain technologies? How some almost disappear entirely like VHS, while others are apparently resilient, such as 16mm?

JB: I am not particularly interested in technology for technology's sake. And it is tedious now to be constantly migrating older works using earlier forms of video to more current formats. But it is necessary if you want the work to survive. That said, I do respect the tech requirements of different video and film

formats. For instance, *Casual Shopper* is analogue video, and it looks best when it is projected or played using CRT-tubed projectors or monitors, but I allow the work to be migrated so that it can still be easily viewed. There are many ways to achieve the look of older film stocks using image compositing and processing techniques, and increasingly that is how I am approaching these issues.

SP: In your book *Projections: Mise en abyme* (2001), I was especially taken by the almost-throwaway positive accusation that your work is 'high definition gunk' and how it offers an alternative view of the perceived cleanliness, order and efficiency of technology.

JB: I am sceptical when it comes to technology and its many applications. For some it can be a liberatory tool, and for others it is much more invasive than Taylorism (strict efficiency management system) ever was. I don't believe that technology is inherently good or bad, it is more the application of technology, the uses to which it can be put, and the ethics of the user, that interest me. Within the cleanliness, order, and efficiency embodied by technology, there are many fissures that require further scrutiny. I hope that my work brings some of the issues to the fore, which is why science fiction is a useful foil when considering technology. For example, we used a sci-fi narrative structure for *Speedflesh* (1998) as a way to interrogate the digital in relation to technologies of the body.

SP: 'Desire lines' for architecture are the unplanned paths created by the people not the designers of experience. The geographically specific early group Skype that is Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz's *Hole in Space* (1980) has been a piece that I've returned to frequently, essentially a public Skype between store windows in Los Angeles and New York. For me, it is as if that moment could only occur then, ahead of the proliferation of large digital screens in the urban environment. Architecture and negotiation of space and place remain a constant throughout your practice. Does the interference of computers and their ability to collapse and reorder space change our ability to navigate?

JB: Yes, architecture and the negotiation of spatial constructs is an ongoing theme in my work, as is the notion of the question of representation, which is not always visual. There are many kinds of computer space, and for me the least interesting types of computer space are those that present a mimesis of the physical world – without taking advantage of what the computer can do, and imagining new forms for engagement – such as typing on the computer keyboard, which mimics earlier forms of recording writing such as the typewriter. When the computer launched, this mimesis was useful as it allowed for a much smoother transition from the mechanical to the digital, but now, it is too slow, too linear, and doesn't take into account the speed at which we all think and communicate. And yet no new forms for recording digital written communication have gained wide popular acceptance. Why?

Your question also reminds me of the importance of the media philosopher Friedrich Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999), especially his notion that phonographic and cinematic data streams decentre the channels of literary writing.

SP: The 1990s dot-com boom that is featured in *Electronic Superhighway* feels like the difficult part to me, or at least the chapter with the least common ground between the artists. There is such an interest right now in this decade, and trying to understand the complexity of it. In terms of the work presented in this survey, your *Speedflesh* (1998) appears to demonstrate this. Part computer game, cinematic and narrative enquiry, art installation and immersive experience – it is not instantly obvious whether it belongs to a past or future era.

JB: We were trying for all of the readings you mention, as multiple points of access for the viewer. I still have an indeterminate relationship to what the computer might become – yes, we are all cyborgs, and all post-human, and the computer is one of our many prosthetic devices. There is a lot of anxiety about artificial intelligence overtaking humans. All of this is a subtext of *Speedflesh*. Remember the 1950s sci-fi notion of the singularity – where AI

outsmarts humans? Many current films, such as *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2015, UK) and Swedish television production *Real Humans* (2012), return to this issue, which many in the AI community see as potentially happening within the next 20 to 80 years.

Meanwhile, artists don't seem to be invited to join this conversation, or at least I am not hearing about it. I wonder if there are collaborative labs that are addressing these issues – for instance, the way Bell Laboratories functioned in the 1970s and 1980s.

SP: The singularity is the hypothetical moment where artificial intelligence becomes so clever that it takes over its own development. This also ties back to your interests in the double and the vampire. All three represent different versions of a fantasy for another more robust or stronger self – is it something more dynamic than ourselves that we all desire? Do we want to network ourselves into multiple beings and can technology create this?

JB: I think it can be useful to think about other forms of being in the world beyond the human. And these figures have a long history within popular culture and literature, hence I have found them useful for staging other ways for considering what it means to be human.

I think there are many other ways now for considering these questions. In Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's 2013 edition of *Documenta*, there were a number of projects and discussions about displacing the human as the centre of the world. Donna Haraway's work on inter-species communication and Bruno Latour's work on sentient and non-sentient matter are also influential here.

As Manuel Castells discussed in *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), information now collects in certain geographical nodal points, and this has transformed the way information circulates, and led to an increasingly networked world. Alongside this transformation is the desire to be in several different geographical locations simultaneously. Could the panoptic model of vision be expanded to take into account quantum physics? Or, to put it another way, if atoms can be in two places at once – why can't we? All of which is to say, I think our

identities are constantly in flux, so in that sense we are already multiple beings.

SP: Technology is expanding rapidly as a focus for visual artists and curators. However, I'm also sceptical. I cannot help the part of my brain that truly believes nothing has changed fundamentally with the coming of age of the Internet. Many people live without ever using laptops, tablets and smart phones. I appreciate the speeding up of both communications and information acquisition, but really, do you believe anything has changed?

JB: Things are the same in some instances but different in other ways – so I see it as a difference of degrees. I have fond memories of the time before email, of long letters and even postcards and faxes. I wish voice technology was more prevalent, but voice-activated communication isn't private enough I guess – even though it does a better job of keeping up with your thoughts as they occur – or at least, I don't see it being used very often. But then as we know from the anxiety surrounding social media, technology is insidious – it gets into us, and before we know it, we are different.