The House of Flesh

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INTRODUCTION

Since I started this project it has mutated into something ugly and personal. The house of flesh came out of a desire to believe in queer futurity, and to prototype an alternative form of communication. The physical space is a laboratory for experimentation and creation. It is a space that does not yet exist and a gesture to what is soon to come. Two quotes hit me, hurt me, stayed embedded in me like thorns in my side. In chronological order from where I copied them down in my journal:

19 May 2018. There’s a scene from Waking Life.¹ “This is where I think language came from. I mean it came from our desire to transcend our isolation and have some sort of connection with one another…when I say love, the sound comes out of my mouth and hits the other person’s ear, travels through this Byzantine conduit in their brain, you know through their memories of love or lack of love, and they register what I’m saying and say yes they understand, but how do I know they understand? Because words are inert. They’re just symbols. They’re dead, you know? And so much of our experience is intangible. So much of what we perceive cannot be expressed. It’s unspeakable. And yet, you know, when we communicate with one another, and we - we feel that we have connected, and we think that we’re understood, I think we have a feeling of almost spiritual communion. And that feeling might be transient, but I think it’s what we live for.”

August 2018. There’s something that Alejandro Jodorowsky wrote:² “Later, we will communicate in such a perfect way that all our terrors and weaknesses will become bridges.”

So in the beginning there was the word, and the word came up short. I wanted to create a space - utopia, heterotopia, or just a room in Jewett - that could be a site for alternative communication. For a while, however, I couldn’t pin down just what it was that I needed to talk about. I moved through several different ideas for what to put into that laboratory.

I take responsibility for the dream by recreating it. One morning before writing this I woke up and tripped over myself rushing to get pen and paper. Because I had been dreaming about writing this paper in the sunshine that was really pouring in through my window, and a phrase came to me, and I realized in the dream that I needed to wake up and actually write it down or

else I would forget it. I was dreaming and waking up in the sunshine thinking of the phrase: in dreams begin responsibilities⁴.

The house of flesh is a dreamscape. It is a way to communicate intimate, sexual, secret fantasies without speaking out loud, without attaching your own name, without asking for or receiving anything tangible.

I hope that this dreamscape could allow people who have been made to feel uncomfortable with or ashamed of their own sexual desire, or alienated from their own body to comfortably meditate on what they truly desire. Not what they are supposed to desire, not what their partner wants, nor any kind of expectation. Instead, only simple, grounding attributes: what kind of light do you want to have on? Is there a space that feels especially erotic for you, anything that you want to have nearby? So I could realize my own dream of creating a tool that would be useful. Early on in the process I realized that I wanted to talk about sexuality and desire, as it scared me the most. Queerness for me is so joyful, so necessary and tangible - and yet, woven into those strands is pain and shame. I wanted to look straight on at my shame. I wanted to twist around my shame until I came back into my body. So I had to heal myself, in order to learn how to heal others. Healing is such an important component of the work that I want to do, and the research I did allowed me to reconceptualize healing⁴.

⁴ Hacking with Care, “Hand Massage How-To,” Girls Like Us, 2017.
My research process started at the beginning of the summer with a book by the cyberfeminist collective SubRosa, *Domain Errors*. From there I dove into a web of cyberfeminism, postcolonial studies, and radical queer/trans theory. I was immediately inspired by another collective, VNS MATRIX, which began to feed my original idea of the fictional/false collective.

Will we ever escape from the mirror logic of seer and seen, visible and in/visible? Can difference and visual pleasure find a place outside that binary? Have we learned to challenge, as bell hooks has said, those ‘who think that by merely looking they can see”? Or, will digital communications and biotechnologies, in global pan-capital, merely increase the pace of a chronic and disastrous blindness?5

This quote began the slow return to my preoccupation with the theoretical treatment of visual pleasure. Late in the fall semester, I revisited Laura Mulvey’s canonical text, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which had so deeply affected me my freshman year. It is still a text that troubles me and that is incomplete to me because of its essentialist and trans-exclusive Freudian foundation, but it has been a useful starting point for me in many different projects now.

After *Domain Errors*, I came back to A Lover’s Discourse by Roland Barthes:6

> I want to change systems: no longer to unmask, no longer to interpret, but to make consciousness itself a drug, and thereby accede to the perfect vision of reality, to the great bright dream, to prophetic love. (And if consciousness - such consciousness - were our human future? If, by an additional turn of the spiral, some day, most dazzling of all, once every reactive ideology had disappeared, consciousness were finally to become this: the abolition of the manifest and the latent, of the appearance and the hidden? If it were asked of analysis not to destroy power (not even to correct or to direct it), but only to decorate it, as an artist? Let us imagine that the science of our lapsi were to discover, one day, its own lapsus, and that this lapsus should turn out to be: a new, unheard-of form of consciousness?)

From Barthes and SubRosa, I turned to science fiction and utopia. I found Jose Esteban Muñoz’s book *Cruising Utopia* gave words and structure to my impulses. His discussion of straight time and affective worlds generated the spark of the utopian/heterotopian space that I wanted to realize. Then I got into science fiction. The SimStim concept in *Neuromancer*, the magic of language in *Dune*, and the mythology of Ursula K LeGuin’s *Left Hand of Darkness* gave me inspiration for conceptualizing alternative worlds and spaces.

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I began to re-visualize the sex-violence-pain-pleasure collapse/tension that preoccupied me so much. And I fell into a brief obsession with outsider art, returning to Henry Darger and discovering people like Kea Tawana. Small interventions in the mundane world as a site for subversion, resistance, revolution. Similarly I felt deeply inspired by Adrian Piper’s retrospective at the MoMA; I resonated deeply with her meticulously documented methodology that was part of the work of art itself.

I came to the idea of designing a tool. I was terrified of creating artwork and more terrified of becoming an artist. To mitigate that fear and to address my own need to do something useful, I decided to focus on a tool that could be used by queer people seeking that “then and there” of queer utopia. One of the most fundamental structures of this project is the framework of Surreptitious Communication Design by the designer and artist Tad Hirsch. Because I was so hesitant to call my project artwork, it was helpful to use the design framework that I was learning about in my CS classes to construct my project instead as a useful healing tool.

The Surreptitious Communication Design paper focused on how mainstream campaigns to fight sex trafficking were not helpful for sex workers. At the time, I was watching the impacts of FOSTA/SESTA (Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act/Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) unfold on a large and small scale. The assumption that I will make here is that there is a shared understanding that FOSTA/SESTA is in no way effective or useful for those who are being trafficked; instead it is a fundamentally dangerous anti-sex and anti-sex-work push. On a small scale, queer and trans people who did sex work who I had been following on Instagram and Tumblr for years were suddenly talking a lot more about fear. Some of them were afraid for their physical safety while working. Others were having their artwork censored, their platforms taken down, and their livelihoods threatened. People that I knew or almost-knew - in that strange, ethereal way that you know someone through their digital profiles - were very afraid for their own lives. It is something that touches me because so many trans kids engage in survival sex work.

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I felt that I wanted to do work that was inclusive of sex work and that valued sex workers; it felt necessary because I was creating feminist art on the internet, two spaces that have often excluded sex workers with tangibly violent results.

I was inspired aesthetically by two artists in particular: Shu Lea Chang and Micha Cárdenas. Shu Lea Chang’s Brandon project for the Guggenheim as well as her video work highlight digital ideas of hacking gender and sexuality, as well as adversarial design. Micha Cárdenas’ “Becoming Dragon” project was my introduction to her work - the combination of hacking and performance was deeply inspirational for me. I was able to attend a panel at MIT and hear Shu Lea Chang speak, and I was fortunate enough to have funding from the Sober fellowship to attend the Refiguring the Future conference at Hunter College, and hear Micha Cárdenas speak as well. Both the Brandon project and Becoming Dragon were from a different era of internet artwork or internet activism; to see real artists speak on how they have continued to evolve with their work and with contemporary digital structures was revitalizing.

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9 Shu Lea Chang, Guggenheim profile, https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/shu-lea-cheang
10 Micha Cardenas, Becoming Dragon, https://vimeo.com/3874238
11 At the Future Genders event hosted by the MIT List Visual Arts Center
Pages from my notebook during the planning stages.
During and after my research, I began picking at wounds, some of which were very fresh. As I began envisioning and drafting parts of my thesis, thinking about healing tools and digital sex and violence, I was forced to confront the reality of the emotional abuse that I had endured at the hands of a former partner. I was stuck, mired in my own pain: how could I talk about sex and the body when I felt so alienated from my own body and my own pleasure? I rediscovered a text-based game made with the program Twine that I had started as a project about sex in 2016. I remembered myself, and laughed at myself, too. The relief of knowing that I had always been myself was a balm.

I wanted to go back to the sex project. There was something unfinished there. I wanted to pull on the thread dangling from this project and unravel the whole thing. So I plunged into it. I abandoned the fictional collective idea, and for a moment floundered, without a story to drive me. Remembering that I needed a character, a narrative, saved this project. I had an idea: to create a small fantasy intimately with another person, by filming them as they took nude photos

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of themselves. I was going to set this idea in a world that didn’t exist. I would transform my installation space into a bedroom of a young queer person from an alternate universe who filmed their friends and ruminated on sex in their spare time. I was thinking about the aesthetics of Rookie Mag, the DIY bedroom pop/Soundcloud rap moment of my adolescence, and felt a sense of relief at putting a narrator who was not myself back into the project. Ultimately, I abandoned the idea of the nudes series, but it informed the aesthetics of the final work enormously.
ITERATION ONE: NUDES SERIES

After I struggled for a little while without a central wound or thesis to tie together all my research, I came to the idea of a video series. I would film friends while they took nude selfies in a world of our collaborative creation. In the footage that I shot in the fall, I collaborated with my subject to provide her with props and lighting, and she fashioned her own little world using candles, rope, and a fake sword. I filmed on a handheld camcorder while we blasted music in the lighting studio. I wanted to create a fantasy and a tool for healing. Sharing an intimate yet platonic fantasy with another person was an incredible experience. I knew almost immediately that the nudes series could not be the center of this work - it was too reactionary to my own experiences that semester, and didn’t feel like the culmination of my academic work. But the return to the nude image, the voyeur, and Mulvey’s outline of visual pleasure was the bedrock of the final work.

18 October 2018, mood board for the nudes series.
IN-BETWEEN ITERATIONS AND NOTES

Throughout this process I collaged obsessively as a form of automatic writing. I could get my thoughts and feelings out and see them visually. I incorporated these collages into the final version of the project by pasting them onto the door of the installation. These collages were a way for me to communicate my ideas, and ultimately another experiment in alternative methods of communication.

Clockwise from top left: expressing an early rough sketch of the space, communication comes into play, 12 October 2018; detailed step-by-step of the user’s path through the digital space and aesthetic ideas of the space, 3 February 2019; sketch of glyphs to express intangible emotions, 21 September 2018; aesthetic mashup and explanation of the feeling of the text-based-game idea for critiques, November/December 2018.
The digital space is running on two machines: a Raspberry Pi Zero hooked up to a monitor, keyboard, and USB mouse; and a Raspberry Pi 3 B also hooked up to a monitor, keyboard, and USB mouse. I created the digital space, the house of flesh, using an API called Evennia, which runs on Python. Evennia is an “open-source library and toolkit for building multi-player online text games.” These text-based games draw from early-internet games/communities called MUDs, or Multi User Dungeons, that were often accessed remotely over programs like telnet. The house of flesh was created in equal parts working with and hacking up Evennia in order to achieve the small-scale, not-really-a-game experience that I intended. I was drawn to the format and community of MUDs after researching the Daedalus Project as well as reading various articles tracing the history of MUDs. There was a wealth of analysis about communication and interaction from the young people who were actually using and building these communities:

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There has been mainstream media attention to "social problems" on MUDs (this is unsurprising; sex and death in cyberspace sell more papers than database layer debates do). But if would-be MUD administrators think that virtual rape and MUD addiction are the only issues they face, they will be surprised.

Should MUDs be anonymous, or should MUD ID's correspond to real-life contact information? Anonymity may facilitate anti-social behavior, but registered identities remove one of a MUD's most useful features: a veil for the shy. A compromise is to restrict access to identity information to the MUD administrators, but anything saved in a file is not as secret as one would wish.

Who gets to build? Restricting building to a particular theme or layout excludes people with different ideas, but uncontrolled building makes it impossible to locate anything or explore the database. A bloated MUD is no fun for anyone.

Who educates new users? Should abusive users be punished on the MUD, or will there be real-life consequences? Can you know anyone's real-life identity for sure? Transplanting your institution's code of behavior to a virtual environment will not work. Notions of "property" and "person" that apply in real life may not in virtual life. Text interaction is simpler than real-life interaction, except that without tone and expression, it may be impossible to tell what effect words have on another person. If one user bombards another with random messages so that she or he is unable to use the MUD, has the offender committed an act of insult, assault, or social inconvenience?

Even simple issues, like namespace management, can defy an easy answer. How many people named Dave can one mud support? Will assigning unique alpha-numeric user ID's to players kill the social atmosphere?

A little thought will suffice to show that every social problem cannot be addressed by a code patch. An administrator of a MUD for college undergraduate students might be tempted to install filters to suppress

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certain words. Students will discover new ways to insult each other faster than the server can be hard-coded for politeness. Since some people can be driven to tears with a few simple English words, speech of any sort would become impossible in short order. …

"We, the MUDers of the world, in order to form a more perfect database, establish connectivity, insure the availability of the kill command to the competent, provide for a backup MUD in the case of net death, promote the proliferation of clues and secure a site for ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of Virtual States of Reality."

Finding this manifesto of sorts from 1993 took me by surprise. In 2019, I had been asking myself the same questions. In January, I was taking a class at MIT, 24.132: the workshop in ethical engineering. That class gave me a framework of stakeholders and impacts, and a series of questions to ask myself and others to consider the tangible ethical weight of my design choices. The anonymity of the house of flesh came out of that class, as well as the non-persistent logins, lack of personal identifiers, and the decision to moderate the space rather than allowing complete freedom for the user. It was the first time that I was able to see the real-life consequences of design decisions that seemed small, and shifted my focus from just writing any code that worked to trying to intentionally create an interface that felt safe, intriguing, and pleasurable.

Instead of destroying visual language, I was rejecting it entirely, and starting from the margins. I was returning to old projects, and I had a desire to escape both the physical space that I was in and the digital methods of communication that prevailed over my life. I also wanted to return to an internet that was anonymous, anti-surveillance, and built by and for sex workers. With the censorship on Instagram and the surveillance of especially queer and trans black and brown bodies on all mainstream social media platforms, I wanted to create a tool/channel/method of communication that could be useful for resistance. Because the space and time frame I was working in was so limited, I gestured towards a possible future, and especially a possible future of my own.

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16 The Childlike Empress, sextechspace Issue #4, SESTA/FOSTA. https://www.sextechspace.com/
15 Owen


The house of flesh is named after a phrase from *Left Hand of Darkness* - “born in the house of flesh.” It exists only in the Jewett Visual Studies Room. It is local, not yet connected to the internet. To begin, the user types “connect.” A unique name is randomly generated; the user ‘becomes’ that name; and they go through the large red door into the debug room.

# Find an available guest name.
first = ["salt", "sun", "moon", "rose", "orange", "dew", "blood", "dirt", "silver"]
second = ["light", "wave", "bloom", "taste", "ray", "drop", "beam", "touch", "core"]

Screenshot of code from the house of flesh: combinations of random user names.

The debug room is so named because of my fascination with the Final Fantasy VII debug room, which is a non-space within the game used for testing, but rendered as though it is still part of the world.
Back in the house of flesh, the user then talks to the server daemon, who gives a brief introduction to what the world is supposed to be. When the user finishes their conversation with the server daemon, the daemon generates a room for the user. They also suggest that the user check out Grace’s room, which is provided as an example. The user can then check out other rooms, or go to their own room and place symbols that correspond to the space of an erotic fantasy. They can also leave notes behind as a method of indirect, asynchronous communication with past and future visitors.

For the physical installation, working in the black box in Jewett was a blessing. It brought me back to the space of the darkroom, which I had physically explored in Berlin and then creatively explored in a previous project called nymphs. The visitor will first notice the door, covered in pieces of all of the collages that I made throughout the process, as well as collages from previous projects that fed into this one. Directly across from the door is a video projection. This tutorial/introduction is a screen recording of myself walking through the steps of the digital space.

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17 Anonymous, “Final Fantasy VII Debug Room.” The Cutting Room Floor. https://tcrf.net/Final_Fantasy_VII/Debug_Room

18 https://graceowen.net/nymphs/
One machine is set up at a desk loosely modeled on the aesthetics of the Internet cafe; the other is set up in a corner with a beanbag, lap desk, and pillow. Below the video projection, there are the castoff remnants of previous failed experiments, as well as the audio source. The audio is running off of two tapes, and is primarily sourced from a 2013 album from a friend of mine, Internet Kiss by Being Gigantic. I also sourced music from the soundtrack to Kenneth Anger’s Scorpio Rising. I wanted ambient noise to create a richer, textured auditory background for the environment, and the distortion caused by recording from my laptop onto the tapes felt perfectly suited to the aesthetics that I was working with. Another source of noise and light is the overhead

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projector, which provides additional clues to the commands and symbols available for the user to work with.

While this project was always imagined as an installation, the fantasy it is made of has changed many times over. While this is its final form for now, the house of flesh is only the first of many future prototypes.
Scorpio Rising, Directed by Kenneth Anger. 1963. USA.