

The Cyborg Collars and The Cyborg Project

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By Donna Barrett

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“As we interact with and internalize the city, the state and the image-stream, the cyborg expresses the engineered fabrications we carry around within.”

Randy Lee Cutler, “Warning: Sheborgs and Cyberfems,” The Uncanny: Experiments in Cyborg Culture, ed. Bruce Grenville (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery and Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001), 191.

“We feminist-socialists need a myth to believe in, a mirror to look in that reveals our power to survive the diaspora. The cyborg is a figure of hope.”

Jeanne Randolph, “Looking Back at Cyborgs,” The Uncanny: Experiments in Cyborg Culture, ed. Bruce Grenville (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery and Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001), 182.

“...we must look to the image of the cyborg as a cipher, effectively shifting and evolving with our own anxiety and desire so that we may give meaning to the technological ethos in which we live.”

Bruce Grenville, The Uncanny: Experiments in Cyborg Culture (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery and Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001), 47.

“Being a cyborg brings many benefits. We could all say, Let’s have sex with Meg Ryan!” Kevin Warwick, named by a panel at Oxford University as one of the ‘Thirty Great Minds of the Future’, in discussing why DVDs will become old technology, as cyborgs will enable us to live experiences instead of just watching others act out our desired experiences.

Allen Abel, “2065, Guess What’s Coming to Dinner? Robots will rule. Let’s hope they get the kinks out and that they like us.” Maclean’s Magazine, vol. 118, no. 41, October 10, 2005, 130.

WHO IS THE CYBORG?

Contrary to cultural critic and feminist philosopher Donna Haraway, who defines the cyborg as a gender-less identity existing in a utopian future¹, I define the cyborg as a female existing in a decidedly non-utopian reality. Is the cyborg a cipher of deep-seated feelings of estrangement? Is she a manifestation of a desire to become embodied perfection? Or is she a Meg Ryan vamp-machine, imagined to be completely submissive and highly sexualized? It is the latter representation of the cyborg that I fear most. I fear this fetishized cyborg, particularly how the fetishization will inform, shape and organize women's social reality into the future.

In the "Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway develops an extensive argument for individuals to live on the boundaries and reject the universalizing standards of prescribed behavior. Katherine Hayles, UCLA English Professor and cultural critic, describes the challenges of negotiating prescribed versions of the universal as our history: "We do not leave our history behind but rather, like snails, carry it around with us in the sedimented and enculturated instantiations of our pasts we call our bodies."² Conversely, Haraway re-examines social history and creates a cyborg that subverts notions of universal histories by challenging and transgressing the binaries of patriarchy.

I define and imagine the cyborg as an autonomous female existing in the future but still bound by the historical, social, political and economic conditions of patriarchy and everyday experience.

¹ Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980's," The Uncanny: Experiments in Cyborg Culture, ed. Bruce Grenville (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery and Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001), 141.

² Katherine Hayles, "How We Became Posthuman," The Celluloid Cyborg Course Reading Package, ed. Diana Relke (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan Printing Services, 2005), 5.

Although she transgresses stereotypic gender boundaries, she is still “other,” and she is acutely aware of what patriarchal conditions still bind her. She considers how she negotiates those conditions, which ones she uses to her advantage and which ones she resists. Unafraid of science, technology and invention, the futuristic cyborg can benefit from all manner of device and machine, particularly those that free her from the repetitiveness of domestic labor and factory work. But the opportunities for well-paid work are narrowed by competition from the machine for new jobs. The cyborg herself is not fully a machine, but she is performing to expectations as if she were a machine. The “Cyborg Collars” were not created by laborious hours with a needle and thread; I have created them though mastering a computer program.

The cyborg of my imagination is a conglomeration of othered identities: the dutiful daughter, wife, mother, bitch, virgin, spinster, goddess, lesbian, Eve, Barbie, Borg Queen, all fused together. My imagined cyborg is not a robot; she is human. She certainly is not Trinity (the female heroine from the Matrix movies) plugging into the matrix to save the life of “The One.” Nor is my imagined cyborg a Pleasure Model (a robot prostitute from the movie Blade Runner). But she does give birth, give and take pleasure and is surrounded by all the complex and extraordinary conditions of her futuristic existence. I agree with Haraway’s comment that the cyborg does not exist solely in a domestic sphere or solely as a heterosexual mate. As Haraway suggests, “The cyborg does not recognize the Garden of Eden.”³ She is not doomed to failure but she does exist in a social and hierarchical world that dictates what is possible. She is aware of the gender roles that she may assume, enact and replace as if they were masks. Haraway states, “The

³ Haraway, 2001: 141.

cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century."⁴

In contemplating the cyborg's past, present and future, it becomes apparent that the cyborg's life is full of contradictions. Haraway and I agree on the inevitability of having to choose to live with the compromise and contradictions that come with performing gender roles. However, the cyborgian life becomes a reversal of prospects. Technology aids her in every aspect of her life, but her life remains a series of performed stereotypes. But what choice does she have? It is these contradictions that bind me most to the cyborg because these contradictions exist in my own daily life. Just as I negotiate the socially constructed binaries of patriarchy, so too does the cyborg. She has formed her own autonomous consciousness but is still seen as outside of the dominant order because of that autonomy. Her resistance to objectification, submission, and oppression by claiming autonomy for herself, denies her contributions to the governing institutions. For neither the cyborg, nor I, can live outside our social order. We are forced to continually negotiate the binaries of patriarchy and its gendered socialization. And, in doing so, we contribute to our social contradictions and our sense of foreignness.

Haraway's definition of cyborg attempts to take us beyond the binaries of feminine/masculine, female/male:

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short we are cyborgs. The cyborg

⁴ Haraway, 2005: 23.

is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation.⁵

But does this attempt to define us all as gender-less cyborgs change the definition of female or male? Certainly Haraway's cyborg does not change the historical constructs of gender, as she admits that the cyborg is the "...illegitimate offspring of patriarchy, militarism and capitalism."⁶ This is a gendered lineage and a lineage of disempowerment for women. It also entrenches being male as dominant, violent and predatory. By insisting on cyborg embodiment, do we merely create the illusion of a new social space, thereby disregarding the real effect of social constructions on women? In this way, Haraway makes invisible the effects of the authoritative expression of the world as seen through the ideologies of patriarchy. Although men and women may be emancipated by the transcendence of gender roles, the tools that are patriarchy, militarism and capitalism that construct power relations remain. If the tools of dominance remain, there will be the dominant and the dominated. In responding to Haraway's notion of cyborgs, I try to claim a space where these experiences of alienation, contradiction and disempowerment come into view.

⁵ Haraway, 2001: 140.

⁶ Ibid., 142.

THE CYBORG COLLARS

The collars are a series of Elizabethan inspired ruffs (collars) made for various gender performances. I have imagined a cyborg, made adornments for her and I have imagined a past, present and future for this incarnated female. In making the collars, I am attempting to imagine the social conditions that frame her existence, and reciprocally, the effects of those conditions on her lived experience. Through this investigation, I consider the disconnect between what a cyborg (as a symbol of another gendered order) desires for her life, and the life choices she is bound to make within an abject existence. As in my own life, the abject life for a cyborg is often about fitting into a confining set of social orders, which are in opposition to actual lived experiences. As sociologist and feminist Dorothy Smith writes, “The forms of thought, the means of expression, that we have available to us to formulate our experience were made by men or controlled by men.”⁷ In Haraway, I find a positive way to engage my own feelings of foreignness and to reconfigure conventional models of gender roles. I imagined the collars for specific female and stereotypic roles and designed each collar by attempting to create a “...material metaphor for a psychological experience.”⁸ For cyborgs (and myself) choices are often enacted by and through the body. However, the decisions and choices are made in the mind (head). This parallels the Cartesian notion of the mind/body disconnect that has its ties to patriarchy. I have visualized this disconnect at the most obvious physical point for its manifestation, at the neck. I have equated the constricting effect of wearing an Elizabethan ruff to that of a severed head, disconnected from its body.

⁷ Dorothy E. Smith, The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 51.

⁸ Jessica Bradley, Jana Sterbak (Regina: MacKenzie Art Gallery and University of Regina Press, 1989), 46.

As a sign of wealth and position, the elite of Elizabethan times wore a number of restrictive and elaborate garments. The Elizabethan ruffs of the 1620s created many physical restrictions for the wearer. The wearer is unable to see below the ruff and movement of the arms and head was greatly constrained. But in Elizabethan times, a servant would do all manner of tasks for a person incapacitated by her/his garments. The more elaborate the Elizabethan costume, the higher up the court hierarchy the wearer was perceived to be. The garments of this period were confirmation of the wearer's station in life (both economically and socially). My version of a cyborg does not have the luxury of a servant, financial wealth or social position. (In Haraway's Manifesto, she describes a futuristic egalitarian society but contradicts herself by stating that issues of class, race, and gender will still be present.) Instead she is left alone with the burden of restricted movement as dictated by the collar's elaborate design.

Through their simulated textiles of detailed pattern, the Cyborg Collars have the aura of luxury – although this is merely a façade. Elizabethan ruffs re-direct the eye away from the body and exaggerate an independent head and face. The collars that I have created replicate this effect on the wearer. More specifically, the armatures of my collars are fashioned from industrial materials including steel and aluminum. The metal material that comprises these armatures emphasizes a sense of entrapment of the body; the metal armatures do not function as a support for the nearly weightless digital prints. The first collar I created was for an imagined mother burdened with guilt and simultaneously exalted for her self-sacrifices. This collar's pattern is made from the carved details of tombstones arranged to mimic Elizabethan blackwork lace. But underneath the richly patterned surface of the collar is a stainless steel ring that tightly encases the neck. From

the ring, over five hundred thin steel rods protrude, alluding to a densely filled pincushion, albeit a decorative one.

The digital prints placed on the metal armatures have the appearance of intricate lace patterns and pleats. But in fact, by manipulating my photos of tombstones, frost and urban buildings I create the detailed pattern of an elaborate textile. These source images are tropes and the illusion of the textile details could be created from many different sources. The original inspiration came from my desire to combine unlikely images, to transform them into something they were not and separate them from their origins. All of the digital prints are constructed on the computer using Adobe PhotoShop. The collar patterns are then printed on an industrial backlit film (white plastic film) used for backlit vending machines. I have employed the false reality of photographic manipulation to achieve the appearance of textiles. However, the process is more closely aligned with the processes of drawing and collaging than photography. Within the manipulation of the original photos, I have restricted myself to isolating elements and then altering scale and multiplying selected details from the source images. I have not used colour manipulation or included other source image material. I have done this to retain as much of the original photo information as possible. Thus, the design of the patterns and pleats rests solely on my ability to interpret and create a convincing appearance of a textile. The manipulation of the photos denies the actuality of the source, allowing me to recreate the photo as something altogether different. The final form of the collars transcends the origins of the photos to create an improbable object. This is a metaphor for how I imagine the cyborg existence to be a new form of gender performance.

I have resisted treating the collars as traditional gallery sculpture. Instead, the collars sit on metal forms that are attached to a steel pipe that spans the distance between two pillars in the Snelgrove Gallery space. I have selected steel pipe not only for its structural strength, but also as a reference to the masculine. I have kept the display device as minimal as possible to allow the space below it to be visually open. My intent is to have the collars themselves as the focal point, thereby allowing the viewer to approach the collars at very close proximity but not pass between them. I envisage the viewers imagining themselves experiencing the physical restriction of the collars.

THE CYBORG PROJECT

Through my re-defining “cyborg” and my imagining the life of this cyborg, I began to create a pseudo-autobiographic narrative. In imagining the cyborgian narrative, my concept of the collars moved beyond their art object form and into the more public arena of billboards located in downtown Saskatoon. I began a new critical process of challenging my notions of the sculptural object as a final form. Through the use of photography and digital manipulation I have played with the notion of transformation as a central element of my artwork. The combination of sculpture, photography and PhotoShop allows me to manipulate the two-dimensional artwork and three-dimensional object and instead to play with perception itself, especially with the space between the real and illusion. This transformation parallels my own consideration of the possibilities for a new personal sociology. I must disagree with Haraway, who says at the end of her essay, “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess,”⁹ because I do not wish to be either. Instead, I find hope in an earlier quote from Haraway that has been overshadowed by the

⁹ Haraway, 2001: 175.

often-quoted goddess statement. In it, Haraway describes the cyborg as "...an imagery (that) can suggest a way out of the maze of dualism in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves."¹⁰ The cyborg is a locus from which I can examine my experience, assumptions and embrace my feelings of foreignness. It allows me to re-imagine the possibilities of my life and my art.

The digital process used to create the "Cyborg Collars" marks a significant change in my studio practice as I employed new print technologies to create these artworks. The subject of the cyborg dictated that I use new technology, especially to take advantage of the possibilities available in large-scale digital printing to create the collars. The most dramatic and straightforward transformation occurs in my billboard project, where I have converted the photos of buildings into the appearance of pleated fabric and lace collars, which are worn by two different models. The photographs of the models are commercially printed, cut out and placed on a specifically designed armature. The final photo of the model wearing the digital print/collar renders the three-dimensional aspect of the sculptural object flat. The illusion of the digital print/collar as a garment becomes more believable through its representation in a two-dimensional form; the images are transformed through the viewer's expectation of the final photograph as a *visual truth*.

To further de-stabilize the notion of photographic truth, I have selected to exhibit the completed photos of the models wearing the collars on two billboards in downtown Saskatoon. Each billboard is located in front of each of the two original buildings used as photographic sources for

¹⁰. Ibid., 175.

the corresponding collar. The destabilized reality that this billboard installation/situation provides parallels the instability of gender portrayals within patriarchy. My decision not to add any didactic text to the billboard further complicates the reading of these images. The billboards provide no clues, no answers; just questions. These commercial venues are a recognized form in which to advertise a message or promote a product. I am advertising my collars, but have provided no contact information that promotes my exhibition or myself. I have only provided two images of models wearing strange versions of Elizabethan ruffs.

Each model has a directed gaze; one looking across the street at the opposing model and the second model looking with diverted eyes toward the intersection and those of us passing through it. The gaze of the models is directed toward us yet remains non-confrontational as their expressions are thoughtful, not intimidating. We are conditioned to recognize the female model as a form for attracting attention in advertising, but these real-life models do not ooze sex appeal. Quite the opposite occurs. These two billboard images are photographs of real people who have not been digitally airbrushed. Both models are local Saskatoon residents, not professional models. They were chosen because of their similarity in size, skin and eye colour; as well, both have appeared in the public realm in other aspects of their lives. (It was extremely important to me that the models were comfortable with being recognized and had considered how this might potentially affect their lives.) Neither model could be described as an idealized beauty model. By defying traditional advertising methods utilizing the female, I further complicate the viewer's interpretation of these billboards.

Of all the possible (immediate) reactions from the public regarding the billboards, I hope that the question “Why?” is the most contemplated. If the viewers ask themselves why, it will follow with an expanding series of questions. Through this process, the viewer may return to the location to see the images repeatedly, perhaps to investigate and confirm what *is* and *is not* apparent in the billboards. By this continued investigation, the viewer may recognize a resemblance of colour between the collars and the buildings located behind the billboards. In presenting images of models wearing the “Cyborg Collars” on public billboards I am not attempting to advertise a theoretical or philosophical stance. I am attempting to provide a visual metaphor that sensitizes the viewer to consider their own perceptions and expectations of the gender portrayal of women in society and how that portrayal is further mediated by advertising. My choice to complete this installation in a public venue was necessitated by the question of how women are understood to function in and occupy social and public spaces.

THE PRIVATE CYBORG

Haraway discusses the cyborg as existing only in the public sphere. I think of the cyborg existing much as I do, with a public and private life. The billboards present the “Cyborg Collars” embodied and activated, worn as a garment but selected for the gender performance we masquerade to others. Although the “Cyborg Project” (billboards) and the “Cyborg Collars” illustrate the public aspect of a cyborgian existence, the “Despair Wallpaper” is the private moment away from these complexities when no gender performance is required and the cyborg can return to her interior life. The wallpaper illustrates the effects of living in a non-utopian reality: it is confusing to one’s self to live as both an object and a subject. As Dorothy Smith

states, “We have learned to enter our subjectivities into the sentence beginning with ‘he’”¹¹ By repeatedly fitting into a society and a history that is dominated by the stories of men, the cyborg’s own identity is slowly subsumed and replaced. Performing and simultaneously reinterpreting stereotypic gender roles attempts to break away from and remake a gendered space that is re-imagined and re-configured. The tears that the cyborg sheds are not made from water held within her body. Through osmosis, her body has absorbed the metal from her collars and reformed it as lead tears. The cyborg releases the burdens of the lead tears through crying. She becomes weightless and floats as her body rids itself of all that she has held inside her.

The images of the cyborg’s tears appear more like a beautiful beaded curtain than an accumulation of sorrows. The cyborg, even in a moment of utter hopelessness, creates her own contradiction. This is the very essence of the cyborg experience. She uses her body to create order from her own inner turmoil from a less than ordinary life and re-organizes it into an extraordinary release. As curator Jessica Bradley writes in a discussion of Jana Sterbak’s work, “...the body’s feelings: its fears, its desires, its sensations, all seem to offer ways of understanding the complex psychological and social processes through which our experience is constituted.”¹² The behavior of the cyborg is at odds with her appearance and the results of her actions. The accumulation of tears is the material evidence of the imposition of the ruling apparatus on the cyborg’s body and psyche.

My artworks and the notion of the cyborg have become a way for me to interrogate the binaries

¹¹. Smith, 74.

¹². Bradley, 8.

of patriarchy. As University of British Columbia cultural and critical studies professor Randy Lee Cutler suggests, “Since its publication, Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* has become a user’s manual, a metaphorical map for how to embody and embrace the emancipatory potential hidden within contradictions.”¹³ Haraway’s essay was key for me to remove myself as subject in my artwork so that I could instead explore the formations of my consciousness. This is a necessary process for an artist in order to understand the connotative and denotative aspects of evocative artwork. Haraway’s essay has also provided a lens through which I may examine the deeper sources of my feminist beliefs. As a subject, the cyborg allows me to imagine the philosophical and metaphoric aspects of being bound, fixed and named in a patriarchal space. The cyborg also allows me to understand the circumstances of my *otherness* without reproducing those circumstances in the process. Although I do not agree with Haraway on her projections of a gender-less utopia, I do agree that the notion of the cyborg transcends the strict binary of male/female. With this I am able to re-tell the stories of my existence and re-shape them to create my own origins and belonging. My intent for the artworks is to create a psychological space for the viewer to reproduce themselves within their interpretation of the art, thereby providing a circumstance that begins to create associations for the viewer to question their own ontology.

¹³. Randy Lee Cutler, “Warning: Sheborgs and Cyberfems,” *The Uncanny: Experiments in Cyborg Culture*, ed. Bruce Grenville (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery and Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001), 190.

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