

**Review: *Virus.circus.probe*. Performed by Micha Cárdenas and Elle Mehrmand at GUTTED. Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibition (LACE). Hollywood, CA. 19 January 2011.**

Micha Cárdenas and Elle Mehrmand entered a darkened room lit only by a single spotlight over the testing area. Each took her place, Mehrmand as the doctor and Cárdenas as the patient. The testing began. Mehrmand moved a dildo-turned-scanning-rod across Cárdenas's body as a computerized voice, whose pace fluctuated with the artists' heart rates, told us that she was "testing for viral contamination." Behind the voice the ambient noise of low-pitch tones filled the room, penetrating the exterior of the viewers' bodies and entering our sensory perception through our gut. The pitch of these tones was controlled by Mehrmand's scanning-rod as it moved across the conductive threads sewn into Cárdenas's dress. Once the scanning/diagnostic sequence, or foreplay session, came to a close, what followed was penetration, here enacted as a pseudo-clinical anal probe. We watched as Mehrmand prepared the first dildo for insertion; she slowly slid it in, rubbing Cardenas's thighs. In response, a vibrator was mounted against Mehrmand's clitoris, which was connected to her probing glove through a LilyPad Arduino (a small microcontroller board) and an accelerometer, so that the harder the probe the quicker the vibration.<sup>1</sup> In this explicit and yet tender scene we began to understand more fully the implications surrounding the sexualized relationship between doctor and patient—between technology and the subject—that are being foregrounded.

Performed at GUTTED, LACE's annual performance night benefit show; the duo's piece literalized the evening's call for visceral performance. Part of a series of projects that reimagines the politics of desire through this hyperbolic lens of science fiction, *virus.circus.probe* played with the "frenzy of the visible," which has linked science, desire, and power relations since the late 19th century and the advent of imaging technology (and can even be



Figure 1. *Virus.circus.probe*, Performance by Micha Cárdenas and Elle Mehrmand at GUTTED. Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibition (LACE). Hollywood, CA. 19 January 2011. Photo courtesy of author.

traced to the beginnings of the scientific discipline as Sue-Ellen Case has explored).<sup>2</sup> One can think here, following from the work of Linda Williams, of familiar figures such as Eadweard Muybridge or Jean-Martin Charcot whose works sought to capture the internal workings of the self through its external movements, gyrations and spasms.<sup>3</sup> In *virus.circus.probe*, however, the internal was turned outward through aural means (i.e. the heartbeat), which have been made possible through constant and exponentially increasing technological development. Flaunting this frenzy of the visible, but quite literally turning it inside out, the artists re-cast the technology produced by a patriarchal and militaristic capitalism, wherein science is divorced from desire and the scientist effectively de-sexualized, as subversive strategy.<sup>4</sup> Towards this end, they not only eroticized the sanitizing language of the medical discourse, a re-sexualization of science which reappears throughout the *virus.circus* series, but also, and more clearly here than in previous performances within the project, subverted the ideological force of perspectival logic—our drive to see and know from a singular point-of-view—embedded in contemporary culture.<sup>5</sup>

Playing off of their simultaneous existence as avatars in Second Life (where the aural elements of the “live” were relayed) and avatars within the space of the “live” performance, there was no singular position from which we were able to “see” the performance. It became clear that in our current lived reality, largely defined by our relation to the internet, the on-going desire for singularity *no longer holds up*.<sup>6</sup> Inserting into this dialogue a spectacular sexual display, which provocatively bordered on the pornographic, they emphasized, through hyperbolic means, multiplicity.<sup>7</sup> One of the central questions in this frenzy of the visible, “how can I understand the internal state by what the body is externally enacting” is, thus, also re-cast, becoming instead “what is the relationship between what is occurring internally and externally and, moreover, how does this play into my desire to see?”

In this turn of the question, I, as the viewing subject, became implicated, so that viewership no longer served as a safely-removed territory wherein I could separate self from other. This way in which *virus.circus.probe* brought out the frenzy of the visible in me was perhaps the strongest element of Cárdenas and Mehrmand’s performance, for it exposed by means of subversion not only the ways in which these connections between science, desire, sex, sexuality, and power have become internalized in me, but also the culturally constructed desire to make visible/visual the most intimate process of the body, which has increasingly come to mediate our interaction with, experience of, and relation to pleasure. In a world where visibility reigns, I have come to expect that by seeing, I can somehow understand, or “be sure,” and in this sense of understanding I become excited by my own feelings of mastery. Cárdenas and Mehrmand’s performance, in contrast, stirred an excitement in my inability to see from a singular point-of-view, my inability to master their desires through my visual perception. Playing not only with the possibility of a technologically-controlled orgasm and, by extension, the hybrid organism, but also the line between the visible and the invisible, *virus.circus.probe* invited the viewers into the duo’s speculative world of cyborg sexuality wherein the viewer’s relation to his/her own desire was, if only for a moment, reflected, re-cast, and aroused.

- 1 For more information on the technological aspects involved in Cárdenas and Mehrmand's *virus.circus* series see their, "Technésexual Interface: Erotic Mixed Reality Performance," *DigiMag* 56 (July/August 2010), < <http://www.digicult.it/digimag/article.asp?id=1847>>. (accessed 26 June 2011).
- 2 Her study, which is largely organized in the early analysis around the concept of alchemy, extends back to include figures ranging from Goethe to Isaac Newton. See Sue-Ellen Case, *Performing Science and Virtual* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
- 3 For what she terms a "prehistory" to the politics of the pornographic as a potentially critical site, see Linda Williams, *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 34-57.
- 4 I am thinking in particular here of Case's discussion of Bertolt Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* (first performed in 1947), as well as later theater performances, such as Timberlake Wertenbaker's *After Darwin* (1998). See Case, 163-222.
- 5 This perspectival logic, as many scholars have described, is our inheritance from the Renaissance. For more on the debates around this system of seeing and particularly the positions of scholars Jonathan Crary and Joan Copjec, see Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1-28.
- 6 For this notion of multiplicity rather than singularity and hybridization rather than binaries, as well as my thinking around lived reality as a "world-changing fiction," credit is due to the visionary Donna Haraway. See her "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181.
- 7 The use of hyperbole is a trademark of the science fiction genre. I am thinking here specifically of the works of figures, such as Samuel R. Delaney, an early visionary in the field of science fiction, who use this literary device to explore relations between and concepts of the self and other. Also see Cárdenas and Mehrmand's most recent text, "virus.circus.mem," in the forthcoming LACE catalog for the current exhibition, *Speculative*.