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→ Virtual Sex: Pornography, Immersion, and Erotic Environments

Edited by Ihsan Asman, Giovanna Maina, and Roberto P. Malaspina

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Introduction

In a letter published in 1969 in an issue of *Architectural Design*, Donald Kenzotaki, from the Bio-Cybernetic Institute of Tokaida, Japan, details the marvels of his research team's latest invention. This groundbreaking device, known as "Cybersex," is designed to record the multimodal expressions of a sexual encounter, store them on a sort of hard disk, and reproduce the experience for distribution to anyone seeking a multisensory erotic encounter. Users would be able to visit a cybersex studio, select their preferred recording, and initiate a fully immersive experience. The complex computer system would respond dynamically to the user's body, adapting the visual, tactile, and olfactory stimuli of the recording in order to ensure an immediate and erotically effective experience.

A contemporary reader of *Architectural Design* might have reacted with amusement or disbelief, recognizing that this account was, in fact, part of *Cosmorama* – a satirical column that playfully speculated on the future potential of emerging technologies. Nevertheless, this fictional description can be read as an early articulation of what

To quote this essay: Asman, İhsan Can, Giovanna Maina, and Roberto P. Malaspina. 2025. "Introduction: Virtual Sex: Pornography, Immersion, and Erotic Environments," *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 4, no. 1 (2025): 4–10, https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/31474.

we might call a "sexual futurology": the utopian desire to combine technology and sexuality in ways capable of transcending, or at least reconfiguring, the limits of physical presence. Kenzotaki's "Cybersex" anticipated several *topoi* that would come to define the discourse on mediated sex in the following decades. Technical reproducibility, complete multisensoriality, immediacy, interactivity, and telecommunication have remained at the core of discursive experiments, cinematic portrayals, and rhetorical promises of technologies claiming to enhance sexual experience with ever greater efficacy and erotic satisfaction, while combining the rhetoric of "new" media with the indexical instability of the pornographic product.

Among the devices that seem to most effectively embody these long-standing aspirations is Virtual Reality (VR). Since its most recent technological re-emergence in 2014–15 (Evans 2018), VR has opened new possibilities for both the mediation of sex and the porn industry. Indeed, virtual technologies have produced immersive forms that involve both social experiences – such as multi-user sex games and shared virtual environments – and forms of "pure" simulation, as in the case of pornographic audiovisual products. Most pornographic products conceived for VR to date are based on a form of virtual augmentation of the POV (point-of-view) subgenre: even though they are generally limited to 180° or 360° videos rather than actual interactive environments, they combine the strong agency of the first-person shot with the visceral capacities of the body transfer process (Slater et al. 2010).

The (partial) success of virtual forms of pornography raises urgent questions concerning the aesthetic consequences that such images have for visuality and bodily self-perception. On the one hand, VR redefines the compositional qualities and directing strategies of the pornographic image (Evans 2021); on the other, it opens new horizons of social and political agency (Paré et al. 2019; Wang 2021). VR porn may therefore participate in complex biocultural dynamics concerning the politics of bodies and the gendered perception of the self (Tacikowski et al. 2020;

Zhang and Juvrud 2024). Following a somatechnical perspective – which stresses the co-constitution of bodies, technologies, and images (Sullivan and Murray 2014) – VR pornography seems to "excite" with particular effectiveness the primary potentialities and problematics of environmental images (Pinotti 2021), especially in relation to forms of intersectional identity proprioception.

In addition to VR, other technologies such as artificial intelligence (Viola and Voto 2023; Yarmel and Lang 2024), haptic feedback systems (Ley and Rambukkana 2021), and teledildonics (Rheingold 1991; Liberati 2017) are transforming the ways in which sexuality and intimacy are experienced, represented, simulated, and monetized. These technologies do not simply extend the history of pornographic representation by adding new devices to its repertoire. Rather, they contribute to a broader reconfiguration of erotic mediation, in which images become environments, bodies become interfaces, and desire is increasingly articulated through technical infrastructures, algorithmic processes, and networked forms of presence.

This issue takes this constellation of problems as its point of departure. By bringing together perspectives from aesthetics, porn studies, feminist theory, media archaeology, game studies, semiotics, history of sexuality, and visual culture, it investigates virtual sex not as a single technology or genre, but as a field of tensions in which old pornographic imaginaries encounter new environmental forms. The essays collected here explore how immersive, synthetic, interactive, and networked images reshape the relations between spectatorship and embodiment, pleasure and control, agency and objectification, fantasy and technological infrastructure. In doing so, they show that virtual sex is not only a question of technical innovation, but a privileged site from which to rethink the contemporary status of pornographic images and their capacity to affect and transform bodies.

The issue opens with Paola Zilioli's article, "Feminist gazes in virtual reality: the POV aesthetics of

pornography," which offers a feminist analysis of VR pornography by focusing on the point-of-view format as its dominant stylistic model. Zilioli argues that the migration of POV pornography from 2D audiovisual forms to VR involves both continuity and discontinuity: while VR intensifies the embodied relation between user, image, and device, it also reactivates long-standing feminist debates on the gaze, objectification, and spectatorship. Moving beyond a Mulveyan model of the male gaze, the article develops a neo-materialist account of pornographic experience as an affective encounter among organic and inorganic bodies, environmental images, and VR apparatuses.

Xavier Petit's "Pornoscopy and Video Games: From Modding Practices to Pornoscopic Experiences" shifts the focus from VR pornography to video games, proposing the concept of "pornoscopy" as a way to understand the aesthetic and perceptual experience of pornographic materials after photography. Through case studies such as Skyrim, Baldur's Gate 3, and Subverse, the article examines how pornographic modding, explicit scenes, and natively pornographic games transform the relation between player, avatar, interface, and virtual world. Petit shows that pornography in video games is not merely a layer of explicit content added to gameplay, but a reconfiguration of the rules, pleasures, identifications, and experiential regimes of gaming itself.

Sofia Torre's "'Io sono Valentina Nappi 3D.' Personalization and empathy in VR pornography" investigates VR pornography through the public and pornographic persona of porn performer Valentina Nappi. The essay examines the performer's body as a site of social, political, and economic tensions, asking whether VR's promise of empathy is complicated by the dominance of male POV conventions and by the deliberate staging of objectification as postfeminist agency. Torre reads Nappi's VR performances in relation to her broader celebrity, intellectual persona, and public positioning, suggesting that immersivity operates

not only as a technical effect but also as a form of affective and ideological adherence to a recognizable star image.

Massimo Clemente's "The Capitalization of the Self. The Face Between Seduction and Monetization" broadens the issue's inquiry toward webcamming, OnlyFans, social media, and the economy of self-exposure. Through a semiotic approach to amateur and platform-based images, the article analyzes how intimacy becomes monetizable in digital environments and how the face, body, and self are reorganized within circuits of visibility, validation, and exchange. Clemente traces a passage from seduction to capitalization, showing how the networked self becomes both producer and commodity, both agent of self-management and object of platform capture.

Cristina Voto's "Hallucinated Pornography: AI, Synthetic Erotics, and the Reverse-Engineered Image of Desire" turns to AI-generated erotic images and proposes the notion of "synthetic erotics." Through the works of Arvida Byström and Jake Elwes, Voto argues that AI erotics does not simply continue pornography's traditional pursuit of visual transparency and bodily availability. Instead, it introduces opacity, latency, hallucination, and estrangement as aesthetic and political operations. Her article thus reframes desire as something that emerges not from immersive realism or identification, but from glitches, delays, and failures of algorithmic legibility.

Claudio Monopoli's "Photography and Pornography in 19th Century Italy: A Historical Perspective on Media and Sexuality" offers a media-historical counterpoint to the issue's focus on contemporary digital environments. By examining late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italy, Monopoli reconstructs the role of photography and postcards in the dissemination of pornographic materials and in the public debates that contributed to defining pornography as a social and legal problem. The article shows how pornographic photography not only circulated sexual imag-

inaries but also transformed medicalized or pathologized descriptions of sexual practices into images of desire.

The issue closes with Sveva Crisafulli and Attila Manfredi's "HABBO (M)HOTEL – A Tale on Abstract Sex and Early Digital Girlhood Erotics," a creative contribution not subject to peer review, which combines media archaeology and dialogical memory-work. Returning to Habbo Hotel as a formative environment for early digital desire in the Italian context of the 2000s, the text explores how avatars, private rooms, chat-based interactions, and gamified interiors became spaces for rehearsing intimacy, gender performance, erotic curiosity, and digital self-fashioning. Read against the patriarchal and hypersexualized media landscape of Berlusconi-era Italy, Habbo appears as an ambivalent archive of early post-internet erotics: at once a refuge from familial and social surveillance, a site of disembodied experimentation and queer possibility, and a platform where classed, racialized, and gendered fantasies could also be reproduced under the guise of play.

Taken together, the contributions gathered in this issue approach virtual sex as a crucial perspective from which to rethink the contemporary life of pornographic images. What emerges is not only a history of new devices or practices, but an inquiry into the ways desire takes shape when images cease to be merely looked at and begin to organize the conditions of embodied experience.

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