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This is the published version of a chapter published in *Executing Practices*.

Citation for the original published chapter:

Juul Sondergaard, M L., Schiølin, K H. (2017)

Bataille's bicycle: execution and/as eroticism

In: Helen Pritchard, Eric Snodgrass, Magda Tyżlik-Carver (ed.), *Executing Practices* (pp. 179-197). Brooklyn, New York: Open Humanities Press

DATA Browser

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:kth:diva-259188>

DATA browser 06

EXECUTING PRACTICES

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Edited by Helen Pritchard, Eric
Snodgrass and Magda Tyżlik-Carver

ISBN 9781570273216

 2017 the authors

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DATA browser series published
by AUTONOMEDIA

P.O. Box 568
Williamsburgh Station
Brooklyn, NY 11211-0568

<http://www.autonomeia.org/>

The DATA browser editorial group are
Geoff Cox, Joasia Krysa, Anya Lewin.

<http://www.data-browser.net/>

This volume produced by
Critical Software Thing with support
from Participatory IT Research Centre,
Aarhus University

DATA browser eries template
designed by Stuart Bertolotti-Bailey.
Layout by Esther Yarnold.

The cover image is derived from Multi
by David Reinfurt, a software app that
updates the idea of the multiple from
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Bataille's bicycle: execution and/as eroticism

Marie Louise Juul Søndergaard & Kasper Hedegård Schiølin

Introduction

Eroticism is an inherent aspect of computational culture and history. From love letter generators in the early days of computer development, through the rise of Internet porn industry in the 1990s, to the neoliberal products of IoT dildos, VR porn and sexbots of the present time, the development of computational technologies has been influenced by human eroticism. Eroticism in computing is all about the lust and pleasure of desiring subjects; corporate visions of increased connectivity and remote intimacy increasingly exploit users' inherent erotic and sexual inclinations. Simultaneously, computational art practices and counter-DIY cultures are hacking into the intimate sphere, exploring how individuation may be challenged through sometimes violent, erotic executions. Through practices of execution, performed through digital means, new powerful and transgressive relations of individuation are emerging.

This chapter questions if and how, a language of eroticism is useful in understanding the unstable, intimate and violent—that is, erotic—aspects of execution? We thus address the inherent, excessive eroticism in computational culture by focusing on execution at the boundary between extreme pleasure and extreme pain as it manifests itself in the experiences of eroticism and realisation of desire in modern digital technology. More precisely, we explore the transgressive potential of the excessive, blurred connection of desiring subjects and executing objects.

Entangling Georges Bataille's (1993) writings on *eroticism* and *excess* with, amongst others, Franco Berardi's (2009) notion of *connected bodies* and Lauren Berlant's (2011) reflections on *cruel optimism*, we question how networked bodies are executed and engage in blurred, erotic processes that transgress a mere voluntary sexuality where consent is sacrosanct. Through a close reading of specific sections in Bataille's novella *Story of the Eye* (*Histoire de l'œil*) (1979), we show how topics central in the novella such as excess, consent, control and unwillingness reflect the execution of our erotic, emotional state in computational culture. We argue that Bataille forms an exploratory taxonomy, or even hierarchy, of human lust and desire, in which the character Marcelle enjoys supremacy precisely because of her unwilling lust. In accordance with this argument, the speculative design *Marcelle*, named after Bataille's character, is our attempt to

further explore the phenomenon of involuntary lust through design. *Marcelle* is a pair of white cotton briefs with built-in vibrators that are executed by the surrounding WiFi network landscape. In our exploring of its eroticism, *Marcelle* becomes a conceptual way of questioning both the limits of design and philosophy.

As we move beyond cruel optimism of the good life (Berlant 2011) and designed, spectacular sentimentality, eroticism is an inherent aspect of the social, political and aesthetic aspects of computational culture and execution. We argue that eroticism is about the transgression of the will, and in computational culture this is also manifested through cases of uselessness, instability and unwillingness. Furthermore, we argue that erotic technologies have economic and commodifying interests, but also violent *and* liberating potentials, that transgress the controlled logic and reasoning of technology. Art and design experiments, such as *Marcelle*, may help us understand this paradox and ambiguous relation.



Figure 1. *Marcelle* (2016) by Marie Louise Søndergaard. All pictures by the first author.



Figure 2. Messy electricity wires and WiFi routers in Seoul.

Eroticism as Excess

Describing eroticism is a complicated matter. It crosses the fields of art, society, health, religion and death, and is historically understood as being largely a “side-effect” of sexual reproduction. However, in Bataille’s terms, eroticism is nothing less than the essence of humanity (1991). As an exuberant energy, that is, as excess, it flows in every corner of society and in all human activities. Contrary to sexuality, which might have productive outcomes, eroticism is “a sovereign form, that cannot serve any purpose” (Bataille 1993, 16). To Bataille, eroticism is excess. Excess is what begins when “growth ... has reached its limits” (1991, 29). When there is too much of something, it does not represent a utility-value, and thus becomes a loss, a something to squander or waste. In Bataille’s general economy, excess as a term defines that which cannot be tamed and transformed into capital. “[E]rotic excess develops to the detriment of work” (1993, 83), he argues, and as such eroticism as excess is evidence of humanity’s uselessness. Consequently, Bataille’s eroticism expresses an implicit critique of the capitalist society where everyone and everything are being judged by use-value. Bataille believed in eroticism’s transgressive potential of unveiling hidden structures and seemingly universal prohibitions; structures and prohibitions that man established in order to separate and distinguish “perfect humanity, for which the flesh and animality do not exist” from “animal disorderliness” (55–56).

However, as eroticism only exists, he argues, in its respect for and possible transgression and deviation of forbidden values, eroticism gains a double meaning as something that both civilises and possibly liberates human beings (57).

Michel Foucault takes a different perspective on eroticism than Bataille. In Foucault's study of the history of sexuality, he breaks sexuality into two segregated historical practices: *ars erotica*, the spiritual and lustful eroticism, and *scientia sexualis*, the truth of sex, the scientific and civilised sexuality as we also find it in Christianity and confessions (Foucault 1990). Foucault criticised the Marxist hypothesis that the rise of capitalism suppressed sexuality and desire, and instead brought forward the argument that capitalist, Western society had invented a new form of sexuality; a scientific sexuality where sexuality is omnipresent in the way we organize society and understand ourselves as human beings. Consequently, Foucault argues that sexuality has not been unequivocally repressed or tabooed, but has occupied different, shifting forms and installations in society.

Bataille argues that not only sexuality but also, and especially, eroticism has relations to both the artistic and spiritual sides of society and its civilized and political sides (1993). Similar to Foucault, he argues that eroticism is not to be ignored in the public spheres of everyday life, and that it is an inherent part and regulator of the norms and laws of society (52). His theory differs from Foucault's in his focus on eroticism as something that relates to subjectivity and corporeality, and not (just) to the social dispositif of biopolitical control. Bataille regards eroticism to have a connection to a *deep sexuality* beyond sexual reproduction. In its nature, eroticism is useless, it is opposed to work and cannot be governed as it is always in excess (52). Although eroticism is civilised by capitalism and different rational discourses, Bataille argues that eroticism is deeply connected to human's object of desire. "Erotic activity can be disgusting", he argues, "but it illustrates a principle of human behavior in the clearest way: what we want is what uses up our strength and our resources and, if necessary, places our life in danger" (104). As such, eroticism is linked to anguish, horror and even death, and its liberating potential is paradoxically released in the transgression of life itself.

An Eroticism of Connected Bodies

Drawing on Marxist and feminist traditions, art and computational culture have mostly dealt with the execution of eroticism as a liberating force, an organisation of power and a political act. However, in the rise of digital technologies, eroticism and sexuality have gained a new value. Already in the 1990s, cyberfeminism claimed sexuality as an "empowering" weapon and argued for its liberating potentials against

technology's patriarchal, dualistic structures and the increasingly governed spaces of the formerly free, distributed network (Haraway 1991; Plant 1997; Steffensen 1998).

In the present tech industry the state of eroticism has, however, changed into a governed, commodified and managed form of sex and intimacy, and thus adapted to a neoliberal Silicon Valley-ideology described by Evgeny Morozov as technological solutionism (2014). Examples include Spreadsheets, an app that tracks the movement, volume and lengths of sexual intercourse; OMGYes, a website that teach users ways of enhancing (women's) pleasure through touchable videos; and Lioness, a dildo that uses biometric sensing and statistical methods to "characterize your sexuality" and suggest improvements. By offering and capturing erotic spheres of everyday life through apps and products, the tech industry thus extracts the maximum value from subjects as they perform emotional labour. Through worldwide marketing of sexual tools that promise to empower (mostly) women, neoliberal start-ups take ownership of what used to be a critical political act, and confuse the rather complex (political) difference between sexuality and eroticism. As a result, eroticism, as it is experienced in present computational culture, expresses the antagonistic conflict of desire-liberation having both anti-capitalist and capitalist interests.

Eroticism may be understood as an abstract principle of political, affective and philosophical processes that already are and also continue to become manifested in concrete material and embodied sites of execution. These sites of execution become part of the economy of eroticism, where everyday affective relations are tracked, managed and sold, gaining value beyond the relation itself. When considering today's neoliberal society surviving on individuals' productive consumption and emotional labour, it is no wonder that a common issue and increasing trend in corporate design is the wish to capitalise and rethink eroticism and sexual activity under capitalist terms.

The increasingly hyper-connected and hyper-visual character of today's digital culture (Berardi 2009) offers endless space for excessive joy and erotic sharing. We like, connect, match and laugh at kittens like never before. This endless realisation of desire and pleasure in our digitally-mediated social life has led Berardi to reflect on our present emotional state and its relation to economy. "Not repression, but hyper-expressivity", he argues, "is the technological and anthropological domain of our understanding of the genesis of contemporary psychopathologies" (108-109). This, he argues, has consequences for eroticism:

Connected bodies are subjected to a kind of progressive inability to feel pleasure, and forced to choose the way of simulating pleasure: the shift from touch to vision, from hairy bodies to smooth connectable bodies ... The control is built inside, in the very relationship between self-perception and identity. When the info-sphere become hyper-speedy ... we become less and less able to elaborate in a conscious way on the emotional impulses reaching our skin, our sensitivity, our brain. (Berardi 2009, 100)

The disconnection between language and sexuality, Berardi argues, has led to a lack of empathy and a rise of obsessive rituals. Our sensitive organism is subjected to a permanent execution, as our every action is broken down to likes, retweets and emotional analyses. Similarly, our compulsive repetitions of rituals, of liking, swiping, scrolling, checking emails and notifications, point at a state of being where each emotional action does not fulfill its aim. As desiring subjects, we are thus “addicted” to a pleasure that is never fulfilled. Instead, our excessive obsessive rituals and emotional execution serves the aim of larger, hidden infrastructures; the aim of corporate economic structure, gaining value of “an overload of info-neural stimuli” (108) and emotional input to the systems. Although Berardi argues that repression of sexuality is not an issue in present psychopathology, it is exactly in the hyper-expressive and hyper-sexual culture of connected bodies that eroticism is repressed. Following Bataille’s notion of eroticism, eroticism is beyond *desire* and *smooth bodies*, and closer to what Berardi terms “conjunctive bodies”; “the encounter and fusion of rounded irregular forms that infiltrate in an imprecise, unrepeatable, imperfect, continuous way” (87).

The obsession with vision and connectivity does not (only) come down to a critique of porn, VR-porn or Internet connected sex toys; they may or may not lack empathy and context due to a blurred distinction between “natural” and “artificial” sex, but the critique unfolded in this essay has a different focus. We are concerned with the misconception of the essence of human sexuality as expressed through the notion of eroticism, and this leads to deeper, existential consequences concerning humanity itself.

To lay the foundations for this critique, we will dig deeper into Bataille’s eroticism by a close-reading of some central sections in his (pornographic) novella *Story of the Eye*, and eventually connect it to the emotional state of present computational culture.

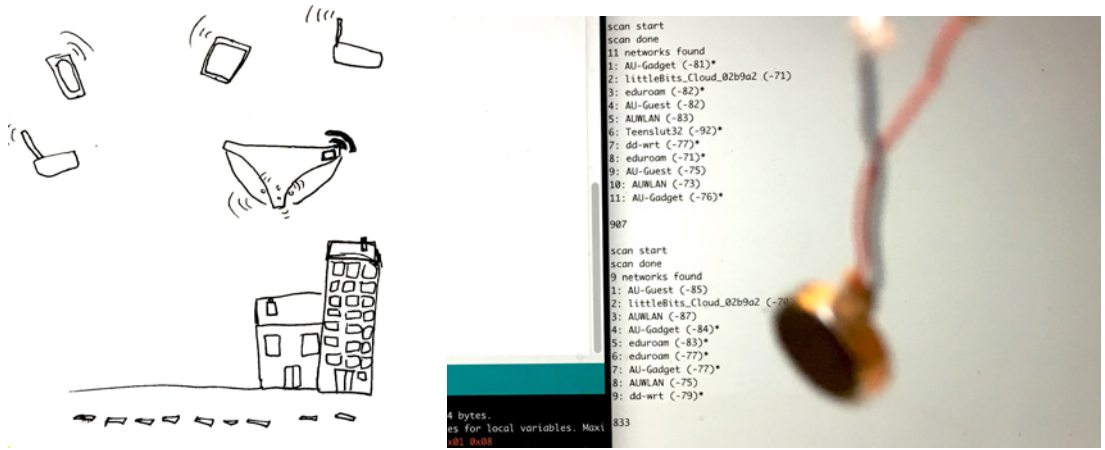


Figure 3. Material practices of wirelessness.

Story of the Eye

Blood, sperm, egg yolks, tears, urine, rain, vomit and milk are, metaphorically speaking, dripping from the pages of Bataille's 1928 novella *Story of the Eye*. This is, however, not news. Already in 1962, shortly after his death, Roland Barthes (1979) observed that fluids play a crucial role in Bataille's highly symbolic novella. Barthes' analysis is striking, and has indeed become a central text in Bataille scholarship. However, it literally reduces the *story* (of the eye) to a *metaphor* (of the eye), that is, to a pure linguistic analysis. Initially, Barthes even claims that *Story of the Eye* is "by no means ... the story of Simone, Marcelle, or the narrator"; it is really just, he continues, a "story of an object" (119), that is, a "story" of an "eye", metonymically substituted by other "substitute objects".

But *Story of the Eye* has much more to offer. Contrary to Barthes's refusal of the importance of the individual characters, we argue that Bataille forms an exploratory taxonomy, or even a hierarchy, of human lust and desire, in which the character Marcelle, due to her unwilling lust, is attributed supremacy. In accordance with this argument, the design *Marcelle* is our attempt to further explore the phenomenon of involuntary lust. Admittedly, this is a rather paradoxical endeavour, because design is generally seen as a material way of satisfying the user's more or less articulated will to reach a specific end. However, perhaps design is a more passable way than philosophy to explore eroticism. "Philosophy", Bataille asserts, "cannot embrace the extremes of its subject, the extremes of the possible as I have called them, the outermost [in particular eroticism] reaches of human life" (1962, 259). Hence, *Marcelle* becomes a conceptual way of questioning both the limits of design and those of philosophy. We might say that the two can cross-fertilise each other.

Working with unwillingness is not only a technical challenge, but also an ethical one. Consider, for instance, the dictum “Consent is Sacrosanct” that has become the media’s automatic response to rape; indeed even the popular bondage porn website Kink.com has used it to dissociate themselves from its former employee, the famous porn star James Deen, when female colleagues accused him of rape in 2015. However, since consent is an unambiguous and often legal arrangement between two rational humans, the self-evident and appealing dictum reduces lust to a pure and sober intellectual endeavour leaving no room for accepting the Bataillean idea of transgressive eroticism. This leaves us with two highly contradictory views on sexuality; the one strictly philosophical, and the other strictly normative. There seems to be no easy solution to this conflict, but the speculative design *Marcelle* can be seen as a way of curiously exploring the matters at stake in this inextricable tension on a rather safe ground.

Simone’s Will to Sex

As Benjamin Noys suggests, “certain recurring characters [...] dominate Bataille’s fictions” (2000, 89). This also applies to the main characters in *Story of the Eye*. Following Noys, the 16-year-old Simone is the recurring figure of “the woman of *jouissance*” (90). Noys does not translate the common French word *jouissance*, which literally means “enjoyment”. However, “enjoyment” lacks the explicit sexual connotations evident in French; “*jouir*” is slang for “to come”. It is thus most likely Lacan’s rather famous usage of the word that Noys hints to. For Lacan *jouissance* is the subject’s always painful attempt to transgress the psychological-societal prohibitions that are imposed to its enjoyment (1978). As the Lacan scholar Dylan Evans explains: “The term *jouissance* thus nicely expresses the paradoxical satisfaction that the subject derives from his symptom, or, to put it another way, the suffering that he derives from his own satisfaction” (2002, 93). This definition of *jouissance* corresponds to what Bataille in *Story of the Eye* refers to as *deep sexuality*:

She [Simone] was usually very natural; there was nothing heart-breaking in her eyes or her voice. But on a sensual level, she so bluntly craved any upheaval that the faintest call from the senses gave her look directly suggestive of all things linked to deep sexuality, such as blood, suffocation, sudden terror, crime; things indefinitely destroying human bliss and honesty.
(Bataille 1979, 11)

Again, this definition is resonant in the Bataillean key concept of *eroticism*:

In the very first place eroticism differs from animal sexuality in that human sexuality is limited by taboos and the domain of eroticism is that of the transgression of these taboos.

Desire in eroticism is the desire that triumphs over the taboo.

It presupposes man in conflict with himself. (Bataille 1962, 256)

In these definitions at least one thing is clear: Sex is not fun! Or, rather, sex is deadly serious. This is, however, also why Noys' descriptions of Simone as a "woman of *jouissance*", let alone Bataille's own apparent support of that characterisation, is not entirely correct. To Simone, sex actually seems to be fun; with great ease she plays around with, if not imperative controls and demands, the horrors of deep sexuality, and she does not show any visible signs of pain, or even qualms. Even in its most extreme manifestations, Simone's sexuality is a completely willful sexuality; a sexuality of a woman who knows exactly what she wants: "*I want to have them [the testicles of a bull]*", or, "*I want to play with the eye ... Listen, Sir Edmund ... you must give me this at once, I want it!*" (Bataille 1979, 48, 66, emphasis added).

In arranging an orgy in the beginning of the novella, Simone's sexuality is furthermore displayed as a rather calculating and manipulative will to master and control. By means of an easily won bet, she thus ensures herself as the commander of the orgy:

"I bet", she said, "that I can pee into the tablecloth in front of everyone" ... Naturally, Simone did not waver for an instant, she richly soaked the tablecloth ... "Since the winner decides the penalty", said Simone to the loser, "I'm now going to pull down your trousers in front of everyone." (16)

Later, when the orgy has become more heated, her strong will to sex (and power) remains perfectly intact and even more imperative: "'Piss on me. Piss on my cunt', she repeated, with a kind of thirst" (16).

Marcelle, the Real Women of *Jouissance*

As the above quotes suggest, one can conclude that rather than being a woman of *jouissance*, paradoxically suffering from her own lust, Simone is a licentious and at the same time calculating woman of pure sexual will. The recurring figure of *the woman of jouissance*, however, does occur in *Story of the Eye*, and despite of all the power that Simone's willful sexuality expresses, the painful and unwilling *jouissance* incarnated in the character Marcelle seems even more powerful.

The narrator presents Marcelle as "the purest and most affecting of our friends", and, more notably as having "an unusual lack of will power" (5, 12). Marcelle first meets the narrator and Simone as she accidentally witnesses them having sex on the beach. Marcelle is terrified by the sight but is forced to participate in the actions by

Simone who is “brutally churning Marcelle’s cunt, one arm around Marcelle’s hips, the hand yanking the thigh, forcing it open” (13). From that encounter onwards, Simone and the narrator become completely obsessed with Marcelle and her unwilling lust; “the sight of Marcelle’s blushing had completely overwhelmed us” (15).

Under false assumptions (a tea party), Simone and the narrator succeed in luring Marcelle to attend the above-mentioned orgy, but when Marcelle realises the true purpose of the party, she becomes angry, and in attempting to leave she is stunned by the sight of Simone who simulates a kind of orgasmic-epileptic seizure. This seems to be meant to stop the exit of Marcelle who, like the other guests, is excited by Simone’s explicit show, but instead of joining the orgy, she lets herself into a large wardrobe to masturbate in private. The orgy continues but “all at once, something incredible happened, a strange swish of water, followed by a trickle and a stream from under the wardrobe door: poor Marcelle was pissing in her wardrobe while masturbating ... soon we could hear Marcelle dismally sobbing alone, louder and louder, in the makeshift pissoir that was now her prison” (17).

This scene in particular reveals Marcelle as the novella’s real woman of *jouissance*, who, contrary to Simone, suffers under her lust and her failed attempt to willingly choke it back; Marcelle embodies the paradox of *jouissance*. Moreover, the unwillingness in her lust, and eventually in her orgasm, is emphasised by her involuntary urination that leaks from the wardrobe as a symbolic evidence of her failed attempt to keep her individuality from being absorbed by the shapeless orgy. As the narrator later explains: “Marcelle could come only by drenching herself ... with a spurt of urine at first violent and jerky like hiccups, then free and coinciding with an outburst of superhuman happiness”, or “total joy”, as he calls it shortly after (28). It is this superhuman moment of total joy that captivates Simone, who on the contrary is in full control of her urination and orgasm. She is, however, tragically trapped in her thirsting for this transgressive moment, because as long as she wants it, it remains unreachable; transgression depends on the defeat of will.

Escaping the Penal Colony on Bataille’s Bicycle

No one has described the tragic metaphysical confinement of the will in greater detail than Schopenhauer, and the following quote might thus help in clarifying what is at stake in this important motif of *Story of the Eye*, and in Bataille’s writings on eroticism in general:

As long as our consciousness is filled by our will, as long as we are given over to the pressure of desires with their constant hopes and fears, as long as we are the subject of willing, we will

never have lasting happiness or peace. Whether we hunt or we flee, whether we fear harm or chase pleasure, it is fundamentally all the same: concern for the constant demands of the will, whatever form they take, continuously fills consciousness and keeps it in motion: but without peace, there can be no true well-being. So the subject of willing remains on the revolving wheel of Ixion, keeps drawing water from the sieve of the Danaids, is the eternally yearning Tantalus. (Schopenhauer 2010, 220)

Schopenhauer also discusses at length the possibilities of escaping from this “penal colony”, as he elsewhere calls the world (Schopenhauer 2000, 302), in which Simone the narrator, and the rest of us are imprisoned. While Schopenhauer’s “escape attempts” all depend on a deliberate rejection of the will, primarily through asceticism, he does not address the possibility of rejecting the will unwillingly such as Marcelle practices it in *Story of the Eye*. Bataille, however, does.

In his usual dialectical manner Bataille suggests a unity of apparent opposites, *asceticism* and *eroticism*, which additionally casts light on the essential difference between the lust of Simone and that of Marcelle’s. According to Bataille, both eroticism and asceticism are about “non-attachment to ordinary life, indifference to its needs, anguish felt in the midst of this until the being reels, and the way left open to a spontaneous surge of life that is usually kept under control but which bursts forth in freedom and infinite bliss” (1962, 246f). Elsewhere Bataille refers to this erotic-religious surge of life as “the feeling of being swept off one’s feet, of falling headlong” (239), or rather, “to capsize”, “*de chavirer*”, as the original French wording goes. We find these characteristics in Marcelle and they are in stark contrast to Schopenhauer’s willing subject.

Against the shared characteristics of eroticism and asceticism, Bataille places *sexual cynicism* and *obscenity*, in which Simone and the narrator are recognised. In these categories capsizing is thus an accepted principle. However, according to Bataille, the acceptance implies that the power of capsizing vanishes; capsizing becomes the new normal, and is thus weakened and unexceptional: “Having submitted unrestrainedly to the pleasure of losing self-control it has made lack of control into a constant state with neither savour nor interest” (244). On the contrary, for them (for instance Marcelle), “who have remained pure [obscenity] is the possibility of a vertiginous fall” (244). To Marcelle the fall is indeed vertiginous, and eventually even fatal. This again corresponds to Bataille’s description of the conflict of the tempted ascetic, who had made his vow of chastity. If the ascetic yields to the temptation, as Marcelle does, (s)he will die

spiritually, which is why “the religious would choose physical death to a lapse into temptation” (236). Marcelle’s lust, and her uncontrolled, unwilling orgasm — “*la petite mort*” — thus prompts a highly vertiginous fall, which ends in unbearable madness, and finally in the real “big”, physical death. Simone and the narrator’s obscene lust, on the other hand, only reach *la petite mort*, which they ably control at will.

There is nonetheless one essential scene in the novella in which Simone’s strong will is compromised, and, surprisingly, this scene also offers a remarkable perspective to the philosophy of design and technology. Escaping from a failed attempt to free Marcelle from the mental hospital, Simone and the narrator rush along naked in the night on their bicycles:

A leather seat clung to Simone’s bare cunt, which was inevitably jerked by the legs pumping up and down on the spinning pedals ... she was literally torn away by joy, and her nude body was hurled upon an embankment with an awful scraping of steel on the pebbles and a piercing shriek. (Bataille 1979, 30)

Through the medium of technology — on the bicycle — Simone thus eventually becomes what she constantly hankers after: she becomes Marcelle, the “real woman of *jouissance*”. In this way Bataille deploys the repetitive and circular movements of technology to outplay and absorb the clear linearity of Simone’s otherwise purposive will. This use, or indeed “nonuse”, of technology countervails the predominant understanding of technology that sees technology as a tool that serves a specific purpose evident to the rational user in control of it. As a figure of thought, “Bataille’s bicycle” thus hints to the concealed violent and erotic aspects of technology.

Becoming Marcelle

What would a contemporary version of Bataille’s bicycle look like? A transgressive technology that would allow for becoming Marcelle? As an experiment, or a transgressive exploration into Bataille’s notion of eroticism as excess and the very idea of an erotic technology beyond “use”, we suggest *Marcelle*.

The speculative design (Dunne and Raby 2013), *Marcelle*, uses the language of eroticism to investigate the compulsive and repetitious execution of *smooth* and *connected* bodies in networked surroundings. Bodies are executed in more and more intimate and intimidating settings, connecting emotional data and personal “things” with corporate infrastructures, closed circuits, and unpredictable networks. *Marcelle* explores the intimate aspects of network connectivity, and how the interactions between human and non-human bodies subvert and thus transgress the user’s will in everyday life. Inspired by critical engineer Gordan Savičić’s WiFi-connected corsage

Constraint City: The Pain of Everyday Life (2007), *Marcelle* proposes that similar to the structural and political violence network users find in encrypted networks, the pleasure or satisfaction of being online and staying connected is an equally important affective state of today's computational culture, and an equally painful one.

The pleasure of everyday life, however, contains the same ambivalence as the notion *jouissance* does, because being online and connected is equally painful exactly because of the violent power structures of the contracts we are signing when we are deciding to enter into this life-long relationship, which is exploited by economic models and violated by normative ideologies. An Internet of bodies (as things) is a network that structures, categorizes and manages blurred and unstable relations. In each execution, relations are subjected to structures of power, control, and opaque treatment of consent and access.

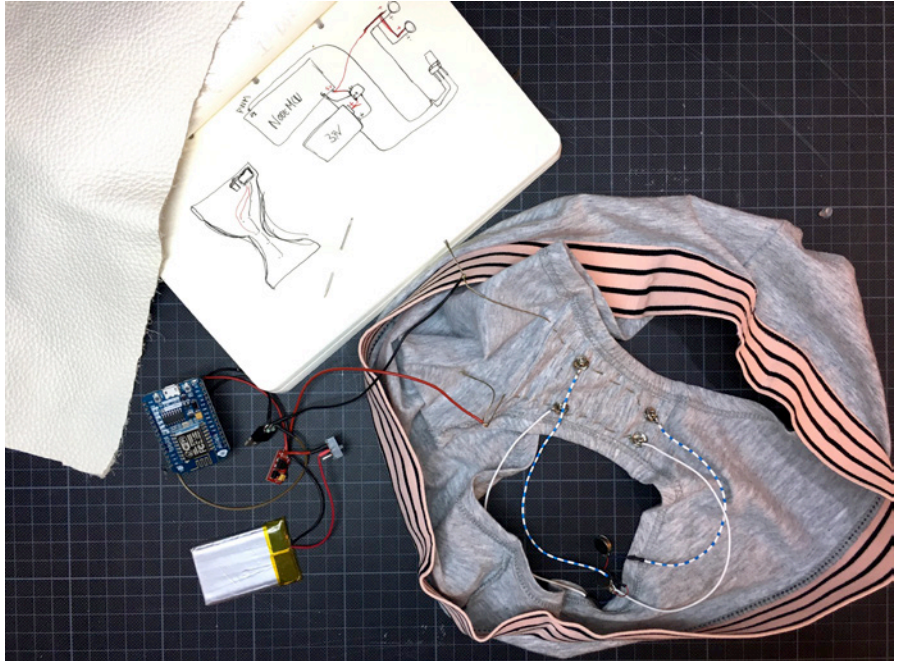


Figure 4. Paper, diagram, transistor, conductive thread, NodeMcu, battery, leather, cutting mat, wires, vibrators, networks, circuits, panties.

As a culture-critical and partly fictional design (Bleecker 2009), *Marcelle* aims to go beyond 1990s cybersex and teledildonics and present neoliberal Internet of Things designer vibrators, in order to question *what if* eroticism becomes a restricted action, or a design-erly “problem” to be solved, by applying logics of automation, efficiency, remote intimacy, and control? Presuming that we live in a

computational culture of desire, could we imagine possible futures of erotic execution in the mundane everyday life beyond work, beyond the aggressive will to sex, and beyond rational, consent-driven sex? How do we discuss eroticism in an era of automation and efficiency? With this speculation, *Marcelle* seeks to transgress capitalist commodification of affects, desire and intimacy, and to question the role of eroticism in computational culture by translating invisible wireless networks into intimate vibrations.

As previously mentioned, *Marcelle* is a wearable sex toy consisting of a pair of cotton underpants with modular vibrators that is connected to and relies on network information. As electronics (WiFi chip, battery and vibrators) are sewed directly into the mundane underpants, *Marcelle* is wearable and mobile, and the user can wear it in everyday life situations. The vibrators are made of transparent silicone fastened on popper buttons that may be connected at four different positions in the panties. This makes the sex toy modular, and the user is able to customize it to their own erotic and sexual needs and desires. However, the user cannot easily control the vibration patterns whose impulses are controlled by the number of surrounding WiFi networks. For instance, a space with a variety of different, competing networks, maybe a semi-public space with a variety of social groups and activities, triggers a very high intensity, whereas a private space with one superior network only causes the vibrators to vibrate with a low intensity. As such, the user delegates the control of the vibrators' intensity and rhythm to the networked landscape of autonomous networks, which makes for a partly unwilling, erotic experience characterized by spontaneity, opaqueness, and ambiguity. In other words: wearing the underpants allows the user to become *Marcelle*.

(Design) Fictions and Speculations on Eroticism

Marcelle is a partly fictional design and a philosophical argument in physical form. In its material form, it is present in the actual world, but the premises and narratives surrounding the object point to possible futures in which eroticism could be different and exist in simultaneous and multiple forms. *Marcelle* is *not* a solution to the theoretical paradox of involuntary eroticism or eroticism as excess in a restricted (desire) economy. Neither is it a clear manifestation of Bataille's philosophy, or a technological design ready-to-use. It is a partly fictional design that through a dialogue with Bataille's philosophical and literary writings on eroticism goes beyond eroticism as a theoretical construct, to speculate on the issues of excess, unwillingness, and abjection in a material form. It might indeed be used, but its user is yet to be defined, or more precisely, yet to be *performed*.



Figure 5 and 6. The jouissance of becoming Marcelle in wearing *Marcelle*.

The excess of vibrations felt when wearing *Marcelle* and walking around, surrounded by WiFi networks is not exactly useful. The uncontrollable amount and intensity of the vibrations is useless compared to the purposeful will that gets pleased by the mechanical and effective s(t)imulations of conventional sex toys. Instead of being executed by the vibrator algorithms, reaching orgasm as a purposeful willing user, the wearer is exposed to the compulsive and repetitive vibrations, which, although increasing and decreasing in intensity, never end. The vibrations only end if the wearer, like Marcelle hiding in the wardrobe, takes refuge in an environment without WiFi, and in our present wireless psychopathology this seems almost unthinkable. Instead, the purposive will gets challenged, possibly transgressed, in this state of execution where neither lust nor desire is executed or relieved but instead lingers in between eroticism and asceticism. Wearing *Marcelle* might thus be compared to participating in an orgy, in which individuality—that is, the individual body and the individual will—dissolves and becomes uncountable. The wearer does not know exactly who, what and how many (s)he is having sex with in this anonymous WiFi-orgy.

When wearing *Marcelle*, consent means to not be in control of your own body and desire. The purpose of wearing it becomes ambiguous, as the outcome is unpredictable and out of control. Thus, when you enter the “experience” you do so with the implicit acknowledgement of not knowing the outcome, and consequently it is questionable whether or not the action actually has an aim, or stays inside the fixed boundaries of consent. This opens up onto a temporal space of permanent, involuntary execution, where the unpredictability and instability enables, if not presupposes, that the wearer elaborates on the emotional impulses and surrender oneself to the non-human activities reaching one’s lower erogenous zones. A truly excessive activity without purpose outside the eroticism of the act itself, the *jouissance of becoming Marcelle in wearing Marcelle* first and foremost arises, not in the execution of desire, but in the affective experience of unwillingness, of transgressing the will.

Just as Simone *becoming* the real woman of *jouissance* depended on the “nonuse” of technology, *Marcelle* seeks to move beyond the critique of disembodied artificial sex—of “using” technology as inter-human sex mediator—and towards the potential of relational erotic (be)coming together of human and non-human beings.

Conjunctive Bodies

The distinction between eroticism and sexuality, as it is understood in how eroticism is treated in contemporary computing is first and foremost highlighted in its focus on sexuality as something belonging

to the intellectual world; a “truth” of sexuality that is controllable and essentially manageable through individual free will. Following affect theorist and feminist Lauren Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism, this scientific and Western understanding of eroticism may be understood as a cruel relation (Berlant 2011). The desire for “the good life” is inherently a *fantasy* of the good life, proclaimed and envisioned by culture, including visions that have been invented by corporate and commercial industry to market their products. It is a cruel optimism because it is an obstacle to our flourishing. In other words, we are *not* getting closer to the “optimum” by tracking our sex life or buying products that simulate how to provoke a female orgasm. These are *happy objects* (Ahmed 2004) directing us towards a very particular kind of eroticism; an ordinary state of desire-liberation that does not lead to excessive eroticism, but proceeds as a dulling, chronic condition of excitation without release. Too little time to feel, too little time to get to know one (others’) body/bodies, but endless amounts of apps and designed sex toys to teach and manage the user’s sexuality. This smooth, connected, happy state of bodies, where eroticism is commodified and sex only happens for a reason, is what we have aimed to transgress in the design of *Marcelle*. Hopefully, it moves closer to the state of *conjunctive* bodies without indulging in a sentimental, embodied lingering for a pure state of desire. Instead it seeks to transgress human sexuality itself in technologically-mediated erotic experiences that are uncontrollable, unpredictable and ultimately unstable. That is, erotic experiences where subjects and objects co-evolve, dissolve and become abject.

Consumption of Bodies (or, a critique of economic notions of eroticism)

The demands of eroticism, the exuberant energy that flows in computational processes are both subjected to and withdrawing from productive consumption and emotional labour. What Bataille would not know in his novella *Story of the Eye*, as well as in his anti-capitalist writings of eroticism as excess, was that eroticism and intimacy became increasingly (also) executed through technology and software, and as such necessarily exchanged and given form. Consequently, eroticism has, like most intimate aspects of living, potentially become just another action of purpose and exchange-value.

In this essay, we have aimed to revisit and actualize Bataille’s notion of eroticism in contemporary computational culture, firstly to revisit if and how the transgression of the will is in evidence in present emotional states of desiring subjects and their use of sex technology. Secondly, to speculate on how the violent and liberating

potentials of eroticism may be a challenge for design.

Highly inspired by the character Marcelle, and the overlooked but truly exceptional status of the erotic technology in *Story of the Eye* — the bicycle — we have proposed that *Marcelle* embodies and manifests the philosophical, theoretical paradox of eroticism, as well as the material and bodily emotional state of present connected and desiring bodies. As we have shown, eroticism of execution, as in the case of *Marcelle*, is a complex, excessive experience that both includes aspects of unwillingness, transgression of prohibitions or taboos and repetitious and continuous (unreleased) desire, in an even more complex fusion of interactions between human and non-human beings of network users, protocols, electromagnetic waves and erogenous zones of the body.

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