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becoming transreal: Micha Cardenas and Elle Mehrmand mix first life with Second Life

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## ***Micha Cárdenas and Elle Mehrmand mix first life with Second Life***

**BY LINZI JULIANO**

“What if you could become anything? What happens after species-change surgery becomes a reality?” These questions open Micha Cárdenas’ blog post advertising announcing her November 3<sup>rd</sup> event at UCLA, entitled “becoming transreal.” This piece is a continuation of “becoming dragon,” a 365-hour piece referencing the 365 days of “real-life experience” a transgender or transsexual person must live through before beginning hormone therapy and/or undergoing a sex-change operation. Hosted by the Center for Performance Studies and cosponsored by the Center for the Study

of Women, “becoming transreal” also exposed relationships among various technologies of the body, from hormone therapy to online role-playing games.

Audience members donned 3D glasses because the performance was streamed live into Second Life, an online universe in which users can create their own avatar with almost limitless options. These avatars can talk, chat, shop, get married—virtually everything present in “first life” is available in “second life.” “becoming transreal” took place before two audiences: physically present and virtual. The first life (physically present) audience could see both the live performance and the

second life (virtual) audience watching the virtual performance. The setting for the first life audience was a dark room, while the setting for the second was a remote, barren environment. The 3D glasses made the virtual audience even more “present” for the piece, pulling their bodies from the realm of the two-dimensional into holographic bodies seemingly stood alongside the live performers.

Cárdenas wore a bra, underwear, high heels, and a virtual reality headset. Her partner, Elle Mehrmand, was also a very visible and integral part of the performance, coordinating avatars on screen and running sound. While Cárdenas flatly

read facts about her mother's illness, her own hormone therapy, the promises of virtual communities and newfound lesbianism, Mehrmand inserted sound effects and repeated certain words and sounds into a microphone, thereby emphasizing them for both audiences. This echolalia, as panelist Amy Sara Carroll later noted, added to an atmosphere of the transreal because the voices blended and overlapped each other in varied forms.

As Cárdenas spoke, she intermittently stood and walked to center stage. Once there, Elle would meet her with a nipple suction machine. Using cups and a suction device, she would restrict the air around Cárdenas' nipples until she made an audible moan, indistinguishable between pleasure and pain. Watching her breasts being pumped into being (a technique used to encourage breast growth for transsexuals) elicited a visceral reaction in some of the audience members: an older male twisted and grabbed protectively at his own breasts. This sexualized pain, as well as Elle's shifting between conductor and echo arguably provided a more stimulating visual than the screen image with its barren landscape and generally respectful inhabitants.

In this piece, Cárdenas addressed three main themes: becoming a lesbian, the failure of the biotech industry to help her mother, and the transreal aspects of her performance that "mixed" the virtual

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with the material body. She suggested that “transreality” is a “post-post-modern” medium to explore the “mysteries and complexities of the flesh, the poetry of the flesh.” Technology has provided a tool to explore flesh, but people also sustain it with their own data input: “Everything we feel is immediately sent into the network.” When Cárdenas explored her lesbianism in bed with Mehrmand (“this is what it’s like for lesbians”) or performed femininity while with friends, she asserted that she felt like an overexcited tourist—trying on identities—instead of someone living in the liminal spaces between social constructs. Cárdenas ended the piece stating that she was “fleeing the regimes of identification...[the idea of a] real woman is fantasy.”

The panel discussion after the performance featured Ricardo Dominguez, Amy Sara Carroll, and Sandy Stone. Referencing his own work in the 1980s with the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) and the Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT), Dominguez noted the “rudimentary forms of a performance matrix that brings data [digital bodies] and real bodies together.” This performative matrix was imagined as a counter to imagined future bodies or bodies given over to a kind of pure machinic. Bodies that fail to be fully machinic add another level of disturbance. Creating disturbance and disturbing traditional notions of body and self were objectives for groups like CAE and EDT, who imagined the performance matrix as being a configuration between bodies with organs, bod-

ies without organs, and organs without bodies. Transreal performance is a space not only in which these various configurations of bodies and organs could appear but also a way to find organs outside of the previous three. Transreal performance seeks “the surprising organ, the surprising organism.” Pieces such as “becoming transreal” and “becoming dragon” create a discourse for a new corporeal perspective: the data body and real body encountering itself. Dominguez also suggested that becoming transreal—or acknowledging the transreal aspects of participating within an economy of virtual capital (things like credit cards, online spaces such as *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft* as hubs of fake currency with very real counterparts)—would allow for different shapes and gestures to appear and interact with themselves.

The second respondent, Sandy Stone, stated that as performances incorporating new media have become more sophisticated, they approach a point where the discourse itself becomes more palpable. This discourse takes on a life of its own that is partially grounded in the performance. Incorporating the “real body” and the techno/digital body through motion-sensor capture resulted in a digitized puppetry (the body with organs, alongside the body without). Engaging in and engaging with these performances, whether in first or *Second Life*, takes the “audience”

into a different form of viewing/participating and altering notions of what constitutes bodies. Stone introduced the three Cs: Code Creates Community. “Code” does not connote social code but programming code (“digital aura and manipulation”) that creates environments such as *Second Life*. The three Cs represent the actual making of the world through imperative gestures, which lead to multiple worlds, as well as their organic and inorganic dimensions.

Amy Sara Carroll, the final respondent, discussed the use of echo in the piece. Echolalia is the automatic and immediate repetition of vocalizations made by another person; in this case, Mehrmand’s echo of Cárdenas represented the fluctuating power and control over voice. Using echo and silence and capitalizing on technical difficulties, the performers called attention to the subtle distinctions between ordinary voice and transreal voice. Carroll suggested that the text itself moved between various voices and realms (the medical, the public, the private) and between different realities. Cárdenas’ relationships with her mother and with Mehrmand, which might be considered “private,” were made public, transversing those boundaries.

In the final question and answer portion of the event, Cárdenas responded to the possible conflation of her transsexual transformation with her projects in *Sec-*

*ond Life*. To this, Cárdenas answered that her idea of transreal is “responding to the criticism.” Although some claim that Cárdenas’ body or gender is not real, she responds, “Well, neither is theirs. It is totally constructed...real bodies don’t exist.”

The question remains, What if you could become anything?

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