LONDON CALLING

This time out I’m turning the entire issue over to our London Correspondent, Jerry Denny. Jerry has been in the cyberpunk scene for so long he’s practically a posthuman himself. From his observation post in London he has filed the following reports. Enjoy!

"Cybersex: Cybersalon" at the Institute Of Contemporary Arts: 11/12/00

Academic and digital culture theorist, Trudi Barber’s pubic hair is going gray. It is silvery down the centre line of her pubis. I know this because she has just told us. I’m sitting in the ICA bar with Trudi and Avadon Carrol from Feminists Against Censorship (FAC). I’m hanging with two sex theorists in the hippest arts bar in London. I just love the ICA. This is the place where I met Shinya Tsukamoto and Darren Aronofsky. This is the throbbing core of forward leaning Arts London and I’m at the centre.

I know Avadon from SF Fandom, She’s always been a heavy campaigner against censorship and government intrusion. She’s here at the Cybersex forum because the original FAC speaker Cherie Matrix had a cold and begged off. Lucky for me, because Avadon and I can hang out and catch up on old times.

As we chat the Vid Jockeys are setting up at the bar’s balcony, it overhangs the foyer and they are projecting onto the opposite wall. I’m hoping for some atrocity footage but only get polite (censored) Video bricolage. The whole shebang is late as ever, but as the evening drifts on, an oriental woman leans over Trudy, they get up and make their way downstairs. Showtime.

Despite the event being advertised as ‘seats limited’ the auditorium is only four fifths full. The panel chairman introduces Shu, the crop haired messenger, Trudi and Avadon. Then it all crashes to a halt as the sound crew scurries to work on the hideous squall originating at Shu’s microphone. Finally we can get started.

Shu Lea Chang is a Taiwanese filmmaker; previously known for ‘Fresh Kill’. Her Latest is IKU; a bizarre, feminist-experimental-porno SF thing which takes the last minutes of Blade runner as its jumping off point. "I want to escape the ‘finger fucking’ of the 90’s to get back to the flesh", she announces. It turns out that what she is refereeing to is the practice of text-based cybersex which has dominated the area of remote control erotics throughout the last decade.

Shu is a kind of perky punky, middle aged, cropped blond type, experimental Taiwanese director. You know the sort. She does not vary much from the script; much of her discussion and replies are straight quotations from her own publicity material; "the pussy is the matrix", "My body is my hard drive" etcetera. She’s a Mac user who wants to upgrade her body’s software beyond System 9.

I am a machine", she declares "a wireless cell unit." Eventually it all sounds a bit 1970’s. I’m sure I’ve read this stuff in Joanna Russ novels.

When Shu speaks of the ‘binary code’ she is not talking microcode but Dualisms. This is the other thing she seeks to go beyond; human/machine, human/animal, male/female boundaries. The usual Donna Harraway
territory. So far, so familiar. Then things take a turn for the weird, "I love the corporation, it’s OK to be the Cow, OK to be the sex machine". After that she talks about orgasm storage; consuming orgasms and preserving them for later enjoyment. She’s lost me. I’m not sure if she is talking about some mental technique or of a prospective technology. We’ve stepped over the edge.

Trudi Barber has been collecting stories from people who form relationships over the Internet; in chatrooms, by e-mail etcetera. She’s working on a thesis about the effect of new technologies on sexuality and gender. She also recounts a conversation with the performance artist Stellarc. He speaks of being a ‘Zombi’ on the net, remotely controlled by signals sent to him by visitors to his website. There is no lack of weirdness here too. Trudi begins to tell us that some of her web acquaintances have become so intimate with their correspondents that they are anticipating each other’s replies. Trudi calls this ‘web telepathy’. Once again I am backpedaling over thin air.

Thank the goddess for sanity, for Avadon. She gives us a potted history of the last 15-20 years in erotic technology; the coming of videotape and home porn, the internet, the web and the proliferation of porn genres; the fact that certain fetishes which were once rare and isolated are now finding adherents world wide, and the happy disappearance of the ‘normality’ as a sexual concept. But there is darkness too, as she goes on to describe the measures the British government is taking to monitor e-mail and the measures we can take to resist it.

Question time is the usual silliness. Many of the questions are of the impenetrable variety from eager students, theory laced statements, which elicit baffled replies from the panel. One interesting fact emerging from the session concerns the fisting in *IKU*. Female hands are obliged to morph into digital dildoes before disappearing into male recta. Shu admits that the Japanese producer was uncomfortable with the fisting and this measure placated him. Avadon found it highly amusing as another incident where an artistic strategy is dictated by a practical and prosaic necessity.

When asked what kind of technological upgrade Shu would accede to she replies, "I’d like a younger slimmer hard drive".

The room is cleared for dancing (and presumably those promised ‘interactive sex toys) as well as VJ San Frandisco’s live remix of *IKU*. I demure and spend much of the night in the bar with a gang of new media pioneers.

Hey cool!

**A review of *IKU***

Early in the 21st Century, THE GENOM CORPORATION advanced the sexual revolution into the GEN-XXX phase a being virtually identical to a human known as an I.K.U. Coder. The GEN-XXX I.K.U. Coders were superior in their harddrive bodies, and at least equal in insatiability, to the programming engineers who created them.

I.K.U. Coders were used in the night-world as XXX data hunters, in the orgasmic exploration and sexualization of other couples. After a non-stop sexing journey by a GEN-XXX I.K.U. Coder team in the night-world, Coders were declared fulldata ready for retrieval. Special data collectors I.K.U. RUNNER UNITS had orders to fuck to retrieve, upon detection, any fulldata I.K.U. Codes.

This was not called love.
It was called sex.

Can porn be art? Can art be pornographic? Who cares so long as the juice is flowing and the hips are going.

‘IKU’ is the Japanese for ‘I am going’; it is the commonest cry of lovers upon orgasm. It is the name of Shu Lea Chang’s latest film. It caused a ruckus in Sundance 2000 and now it here. The narrative opens at the very point where Blade Runner ends. Two lovers trot from the apartment door to the lift, they stumble over a foil unicorn. ‘It’s a pity she won’t live echoes the voice-over’. The lovers enter the lift. But the voice is in Japanese, and the nameless bounty hunter is an African-American With dreadlocks and his replicant lover is a Japanese woman named Reiko.

Reiko, Reiko, Reiko.

We are trapped between mutually reflecting mirrors, oriental and occidental viewpoints, looking at each other. Once inside the lift everything starts going down, the lift, Reiko’s underwear, the bounty hunter on Reiko. This is after all a porno film. The lift stops on each floor down, opening to reveal a different scene of busy copulatory combination.

IKU is a film about the mutability of identity gender and sexuality. Like many porn films it is a take-off on a mainstream film but there the resemblance ends, there is a never ending inventive stream of visual ideas, creative cutting, CGI, saturated colours and movement, It is a porn film but it lacks the rhythms of western porn. It does not have scenes keyed to the cycle of male arousal and orgasm, as a man I was interested but unaroused. It lacks one of the key components of heterosexual porn. The ‘meat shot’, there are no shots of a penis entering the vagina. There are some digitally blurred shots, and in every other way (bar the digital dildo’s during he fishing scenes) it is very explicit giving countless shots of cunilungus, and some straight and gay fellatio.

This ninety-minute cut is exhausting. Hypnotic in its repletion of movement, moving bodies, moving vehicles. It is also a repeating cycle where the Replicant, Reiko changes bodies and seeks different kinds of stimulations in Tokyo, in cars, strip clubs, wherever.

IKU is an art film, it eschews linear narrative for repetition based around central figures, the figures are those moments at the end of blade Runner, ‘do you love me’, the characters ask, ‘do you trust me?’ The repetition of sexual acts, the mosaic of images, builds around these vocal figures.

IKU is a postmodern film. It ends like the original Blade Runner, with the principals escaping to the countryside, but it is a Japanese wilderness and Mount Fuji dominates the background. Then, incredibly it rewinds and gives ‘The producer’s Cut’ which ends with a different pair, Reiko replaced by a Gay man and the two again escaping along the road.

It does not altogether work as porn (to my male libido) but does it work as art? I don’t know, I’ve watched art films for ten years and I still can’t tell a good one from the bad. In the end perhaps there should have been less sex and more narrative, but certainly there is lots to praise here, a new direction for a new kind of pornography and a bolder science fiction.

A review of Steve Beard’s Digital Leatherette (1999)

Whatever failings this novel has, it is not lack of ambition. Back in the nineties, Steve Beard (a prominent journalist with the British style magazines, The Face and I-D), very loudly quit his job to write the novel that
would ‘blow away everything else out there.’ Several years later (with the author back in journalism), the scene remains resolutely unblown (although you might suspect a hand-shandy has been performed).

This is billed as a novel set in a 2012 of fragmented global politics, technology run riot, subcultures breeding out of control, run through with techno mysticism and seasoned with Elizabethan crypto-political history. The whole thing is driven by electronic music; Techno and Drum-and-Bass. Still more bizarre are bears literary stratagems that appropriate the techniques of William Gibson, Thomas Pynchon and William Burroughs.

As late as the 19th century, the form of the novel would commonly emerge as an exchange of correspondence, Beard has appropriated this form and updated it to an exchange of internet files. If you enjoy reading e-mail headers this is the book for you. The files are variously, chatroom logs, screenplay excerpts, and multi-user domain logs.

Digital Leatherette is a compilation of every aspect of alternate culture in the past 15 years; resistance politics, cyberpunk, cyberterrorism, conspiracy theory, dance culture and more, so much more. Beard has read the Turkey City Workshop’s dictum to avoid torturing the reader with the writer’s research (he has, after all read everything else), but chosen to ignore the advice.

Had this book been a coolly distanced non-fiction analysis about the way so many forms of alternate culture are now colliding it would have been an invaluable resource. As it is it only demonstrates that the novel is just not Beard’s strength. The lack of a clear narrative line, combined with the exotic background material makes it painful to read even if you are familiar with both the sources and the technique.

The book is not without its virtues. The Battersea Power Station Rave forms an almost classic sequence. Interestingly it is the one passage in the book most closely resembling straight prose. Still more significantly it was previously published in Sara Champion’s collection, *Disco 2000*. You need not purchase the novel.

Beard makes all of the mistakes so that you don’t have to. The techno-mysticism (astrology, Mayan callendarics, John Dee’s alchemy) is twee and sits awkwardly with the elements from the digital underground. There is an outside chance that this will eventually become a cult novel; perhaps one with a very specialized following, but there is lesson here; when you attempt to write a book that is cooler than thou, it will end up being cooler than its prospective audience.

Steve Beard previously published an excellent collection of his journalism, *Logic Bomb*; buy that instead.

**A Review of *Flex* by Chris Cunningham (15 min.).**

This is like every other film by Chris Cunningham, which is to say it is different from everything else that he has done. The set up is very simple; a man a woman, darkness punctuated by light, which casts deep shadows.

The first image is of an arse from the distance, we close on it, an object in space, it resolves to the figure of a male in a fetal crouch, it rotates, and he is spooning a woman. Flash cuts, almost subliminal, the couple tangling and writhing, they could be fucking or wrestling, either interpretation would work. The technique is a mesmerizing mix of flash cutting and lingering slow or static shots, Some apparently taken in a water tank which slows the movements of the principals down to dream velocity. The use of sound is very strong, the music by Aphex twin is both ethereal and jarring, it is enhanced by the film sound. There is a sequence with the woman breathing that is almost unbearable.
This is an up front work, very confrontational. There are scenes where the woman strikes and batters the man, then the man, in turn, batters the woman and leaves her bloody. This is a film which simply could not have been shown ten years ago because it would have provoked a chorus of protest shouting it down for what would be perceived to be sexual violence. And yes it is explicit; its lingering shots of the man handling his penis, its flashes of violent penetration. It could be argued that this is a film depicting rape, but it somehow appears so much more subtle than this. It is much more like a picture of the violence and tenderness inflicted by two people on each other.

If this film was made to shock, I must admit it did not work with me, perhaps I've absorbed too many autopsy and SM films. But it is startling and very discomforting. So beyond shock what we have are startlingly poetic images, intense and affecting.

**Noted**

"The computer was sort of a metaphor for drug. OK, that idea has been lost, but the computer used to be a metaphor for ecstatic modes of consciousness." - Rudy Rucker

"The movie 2001 could turn into an interesting contemporary film if you subtracted the Monolith.... With the Monolith shoved offstage, a lot of "2001" really does look impressively prescient....you’d have a film in which the year 2001’s business and government people were the central figures. Dr. Heywood Floyd would look just fine in WTO or ICANN. Personally, I’d pay good money to see a movie about those Pan Am stews are up to in their downtime. I’m figuring they’re in Ibiza at a rave, eating sleek little pastel pills and avoiding casual sex with dodgy Eurotrash." - Bruce Sterling