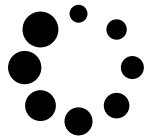


AN-ICON



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in the Metaverse:

*The (g)Ender Gallery*  
by Cat Haines

by Margherita Fontana

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# Digital Heterotopias in the Metaverse: The *(g)Ender Gallery* by Cat Haines<sup>1</sup>



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## Abstract

At a time when the umbrella term “metaverse” seems to have monopolised the discourse on online social presence, this paper aims to explore the possibility of constructing interactive online spaces that challenge the hegemonic structures of heteronormative society. Before describing the metaverse as a futuristic scenario that catalyses technophobic fears, perhaps we can turn our attention to existing metaverses: one example is the sandbox video game Minecraft, which is characterised by great interactivity and manipulability. Therefore, by analysing the immersive and interactive artwork *g(Ender Gallery)* by artist Cat Haines, which was created entirely on Minecraft in 2021, I will explore how the platform can be used to build a playful ground and at the same time a critical arena of gender norms and a deep reflection on trans experience.

## Keywords

[Metaverse](#)

[Minecraft](#)

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## Introduction

Appeared for the first time in 1992, “Metaverse” is now an umbrella term that encompasses dystopian projections of future online social interactions and actually existing applications that allow users to communicate in real-time through avatars moving in virtual worlds. Setting aside the technophobic worries surrounding these scenarios, current modes of online presence give us valuable hints regarding political and anthropological tensions that inhabit such social spaces. In particular, the paper aims to illustrate digital strategies of subverting gender performance adopted by contemporary artists, as is the case of the *(g)Ender Gallery* (2021) by artist Cat Haines,<sup>2</sup> an installation and a performance set entirely on the video game platform Minecraft.

The theory of performativity, which provides gender with a new framework to interpret its cultural and social basis, paves the way for a new understanding of the “performative” possibilities disclosed by the digital manipulation of the virtual self. The “immersive internet”<sup>3</sup> allows us to create a digital body in a new, seemingly borderless space accompanied by overgrown feelings that the age of fixed identities is finally over. However, this enthusiasm must be mitigated by the awareness that the digital space is inhabited by the same structures characterising our ordinary post-industrial reality.<sup>4</sup>

The reconfiguration of one’s identity by embodying an avatar through technologies such as head-mounted displays and tracking devices allows users to model and animate their doubles, giving rise to the so-called “Proteus effect.” Named after the elusive Greek deity who could

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2 On her website, the young artist present herself as “a genderqueer trans girl, dyke, and academic/artist weirdo,” with a research centered on “autotheoretical investigation into [her] body and experiences as a post-surgically transitioned femme,” interrogating “concepts such as the trans body, sexual and gendered difference, and the intersection of [her] identities as a dyke and a trans woman.” See “cat haines,” <https://catemoji.github.io/>, accessed January 24, 2023.

3 D. Power, R. Teigland, eds., *The Immersive Internet: Reflections on the Entangling of the Virtual with Society, Politics and the Economy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

4 For a recent account of feminist subversion techniques in digital environments, see J. K. Brodsky, *Dismantling the Patriarchy, Bit by Bit. Art, Feminism, and Digital Technology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

change into many different forms, this phenomenon, formulated by Nick Yee, Jeremy N. Bailenson and Nicolas Ducheneaut, and fundamental to an anthropological study of online spaces, proved that avatar appearance changes online behaviour: we are not just “dressing up” as someone else, we *are* actually someone else, as if the characteristics of this constructed self could interact with our ordinary selves and contribute to our online persona.<sup>5</sup> From a transfeminist perspective, online social spaces accessible through VR seem hostile to a female audience: evidence of this is the numerous cases of sexual harassment directed at “female” avatars.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, their design is often based on a stereotypical representation of feminine and racialised bodies. Without falling into the temptation of equating virtual and real worlds, the same power structures are repeated, since the technology responsible for virtual worlds is the result of the same capitalist and patriarchal society that is responsible for the struggles of its members in a non-hegemonic position.<sup>7</sup>

Just as in the “real” world, strategies of hacking, distracting and subverting these structures also emerge in the virtual world, as in the installation on Minecraft platform (*g*)*Ender Gallery* by the artist Cat Haines. Here, Haines used the user-interactivity of the creative platform to construct digital representations of her own body, dismantling the “cissexist feminist art canon” while imagining a metaverse where transgender people could feel comfortable, safe and in control: a kind of digital heterotopia.

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5 N. Yee, J. Bailenson, “The Proteus effect: The effect of transformed self-representation on behavior,” *Human communication research* 33, no. 3 (2007): 271-290, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2007.00299.x>.

6 M. Ehrenkranz, “Yes, Virtual Reality Has a Sexual Harassment Problem. What Can We Do to Stop It?,” *Mic* (June 5, 2016) <https://www.mic.com/articles/142579/virtual-reality-has-a-sexual-harassment-problem-what-can-we-do-to-stop-it>; L. Blackwell, N. Ellison, N. Elliott-Deflo, R. Schwartz, “Harassment in social virtual reality: Challenges for platform governance,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 3 (2019): 1-25, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3359202>.

7 For an in-depth study of the structurally gendered nature of new technologies, see C. Criado Perez, *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2019); with strict reference to virtual reality see J. Munafo, M. Diedrick, and T. A. Stoffregen, “The virtual reality head-mounted display Oculus Rift induces motion sickness and is sexist in its effects,” *Experimental brain research* 235, no. 3 (2017): 889-901, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00221-016-4846-7>.

## An already inhabited metaverse: the case of Minecraft Universe

Since the *g(Ender) Gallery* by Cat Haines is completely built on Minecraft, it is worth saying a few words about the technological and cultural context in which the artist's operation is situated, namely the video game itself. The artwork has been conceived in the framework of the art residency program "Ender Gallery" sponsored by Mackenzie Art Gallery of Regina, Saskatchewan.<sup>8</sup> Minecraft is a "sandbox" video game, meaning that the user is not limited to a set of activities or to certain purposes, but can freely interact with the almost infinite surroundings. Players, who can access the platform via desktop and since 2016 also via virtual reality, can voluntarily build all kinds of constructions, using textured cubes to be extracted from the procedurally generated 3D environments (in the technical jargon, "biomes"). The blocks, which are similar to a 3D version of the base unit of digital images, the pixel, have different physical properties: they can be used as they are found or actively transformed; construction is then achieved by placing blocks in a fixed grid pattern. Despite its "primitive" and pixelated blocky visual style, Minecraft is one of the best and longest-running games of recent times, precisely because of its interactivity.<sup>9</sup> Another aspect worth highlighting is the simulation nature of the game: Minecraft is presented as a "natural" world, made up of ecosystems and populated by creatures that follow precise rules of development. However, as in nature, the combinations of materials are almost infinite, to the point that many players

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8 The name of the art residency program "Ender," appears in the game in various meanings. The Endermen are a specific type of creatures – in the platform jargon the "entities" or, more specifically, "mob" i.e. "mobile entities" – that inhabit the Minecraft universe. The program is curated by Sarah Friend, Cat Bluemke, and Jonathan Carroll aims to develop Minecraft creative potentialities. For its inaugural year, it hosted, alongside with Cat Haines, the works by Simon M. Benedict, Huidi Xiang, and Travess Smalley. "Ender Gallery," Mackenzie Art Gallery, <https://mackenzie.art/experience/digital-art-projects/post/ender-gallery/>, accessed January 24, 2023.

9 Windows, which acquired the developer studio Mojang and the videogame itself, has recently released also a VR version of Minecraft, accessible through Meta Gear VR and Windows Mixed Reality headset. See "EXPLORE MINECRAFT IN VIRTUAL REALITY," Minecraft official website, <https://www.minecraft.net/it-it/vr>, accessed January 24, 2023.

do not need to concern themselves with the objectives of the video game's "Story" or "Survival" modes, but spend a lot of time shaping the biomes in which they live according to their tastes and needs. Surfing the net, it is very easy to come across real archives of the most incredible creations of users:<sup>10</sup> there is even a series of computers, among which the most technically advanced is the Chungus 2 (Computational Humongous Unconventional Number and Graphics Unit), built entirely inside Minecraft, according to its rules.<sup>11</sup> They are functioning, self-reflecting machines, reinforcing the hypothesis that the sandbox game can be considered the first already inhabited metaverse. Minecraft "doesn't really feel like a *game*. It's more like a destination, a technical tool, a cultural scene:"<sup>12</sup> due to its manipulability, Minecraft has also been studied adopting an intersectional approach, underlining how gender politics interfere, for example, in the modding of avatars.<sup>13</sup> The breadth of the Minecraft universe is also evidenced by the existence of a Wikipedia-like platform, consisting of more than 8000

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10 M. Peckham, "The 15 Best Minecraft Creations (and Wildest Destinations)," *Time* (May 22, 2013) <https://techland.time.com/2013/05/23/the-15-best-minecraft-creations-and-wildest-destinations/>, accessed January 24, 2023; M. Tillman, "32 incredible Minecraft creations that will blow your mind," *Pocket-lint* (March 16, 2022) <https://www.pocket-lint.com/games/news/131364-incredible-minecraft-creations-that-will-blow-your-mind/>, accessed January 24, 2023.

11 "Ohm's 16-bit Minecraft Computer," YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzrFzkb3A4o>, accessed January 24, 2023; "Ohmganessa," Minecraft Forums, August 5, 2011, <http://www.minecraftforum.net/topic/526445-my-alucpucomputer-progress-thread-video-and-worldsave/>, accessed January 24, 2023; K. Wickens, "Someone crafted a redstone PC in Minecraft to play Minecraft inside Minecraft," *PC Gamer* (September 9, 2022) <https://www.pcgamer.com/minecraftception-redstone-pc-chungus/>, accessed January 24, 2023; N. Armondi, "Minecraft giocato dentro Minecraft con Chungus 2, un computer di Redstone che viaggia a 1 Hz," *multiplayer.it* (September 8, 2022) <https://multiplayer.it/notizie/minecraft-giocato-dentro-minecraft-chungus-2-computer-redstone-1-hz.html>, accessed January 24, 2023; CodeCrafted, GIANT REDSTONE COMPUTER THAT PLAYS MINECRAFT IN MINECRAFT, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwHBaSySHmo>, accessed January 24, 2023.

12 C. Thompson, "The Minecraft Generation," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/magazine/the-minecraft-generation.html>, accessed January 24, 2023.

13 Anderson, E., Walker, J., Kafai, Y. B., & Lui, D., "The Gender and Race of Pixels: An Exploration of Intersectional Identity Representation and Construction Within Minecraft and Its Community," *Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (2017, August):1-10, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3102071.3102094>.

entries, compiled by users, which provides information on all aspects of the franchise.<sup>14</sup>

Having said that, it is interesting to note how the artist uses the inherent manipulability of the video game just described, on the one hand to represent the culturally constructed nature of gender performance, and on the other to ironically describe myths and prejudices regarding transgender bodies and experience. Indeed, Haines evokes the ideal of femininity as the result of a process of gender transition, offering a trans\* narrative of gender identity and sexuality. Furthermore, the artist has a fruitful and critical relationship with the essentialist strain of feminism associated with the cissexist canon of “pussy art,”<sup>15</sup> which is a stated point of reference I will discuss in detail later.

### **A digital heterotopia: the *g(Ender) Gallery* by Cat Haines**

Haines’ *g(Ender) Gallery* can be seen as a traditional online exhibition that exploits the creative potential of the Minecraft universe: the artist’s setup combines a performance, an exhibition space with both iconic and textual works, and a social space designed to host discussions, meetings and parties. There is even an ice skating rink, which is not melting despite the sunny climate.<sup>16</sup>

First, visitors are welcomed in an informal atmosphere in a two-storey building where they can rest or refresh themselves (or their avatars). The facility has a large terrace with views of the surrounding landscape. One’s attention is immediately caught by a large blue phallus built

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14 “Minecraft Wiki,” Fandom Games Community, [https://minecraft.fandom.com/wiki/Minecraft\\_Wiki](https://minecraft.fandom.com/wiki/Minecraft_Wiki), accessed January 24, 2023.

15 This irreverent phrase refers to the art historical tradition of feminist art that deals with the female anatomy, especially the representation of the female genitalia, as a way to increase the empower women and rewrite history. Furthermore, Haines theoretically explored the relationship between difference feminism and trans studies in her master’s thesis entitled *Transmisogyny and the Abjection of Girlcock*. See C. Haines, *Transmisogyny and the Abjection of Girlcock*, MA dissertation (Regina: The University of Regina, 2021).

16 In this sense, it could be argued that Haines’ work perfectly fits in the strand of “playground” works, which is often attended by contemporary artists. For example, the word “playground” is interestingly adopted by Claire Bishop in her *Installation Art*, with reference to contemporary artist Carsten Höller. C. Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Routledge, 2005): 48.

into the wall of the mountain in front of it. It is here that the inaugural performance of Haines' work begins: the artist sets fire to it to make way for a monumental vulva, constructed from the artist's custom-made textures, created from photographs of her own genitalia (fig. 1). Even though the artist literally builds this biomorphic structure out of "pieces" of her body, it is not intended to mimic the artist's sexual organs. Its paradoxical monumentality, combined with the conspicuous performance, is indeed satirical in its intentions: its aim is to address the obsession with the trans\* body, fetishism and objectification. The artist's gesture consists in the reappropriation of the same construction of her genitals: recalling her experience of undergoing surgery, she recalls that she had no choice as to her preferences for the external characteristics of her vulva, that there was "no lookbook" to choose from, meaning that the surgeon had to have in mind an idealisation of female genitals, which are in fact can be very different.<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 1 Minecraft customized block textures by Cat Haines.

To access the actual exhibition venue, visitors pass through this genital simulacrum and then through a vagina-like tunnel. Here the creations are presented in a more traditional way using Minecraft's design tools: in a space that at times looks like a fortress, the artist presents a selection of photographs that are highly relevant to her personal experience as a genderqueer, lesbian femme.

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17 Excluding mainstream pornography, which tends to emphasize only certain stereotypical configurations, the lack of media exposure to female genitalia leads many women to view their own configurations as abnormal or aesthetically unpleasing. Speaking of "lookbooks" of female genitalia, in recent years there have been artistic and photographic projects that have highlighted female diversity in order to dispel the myth of the existence of a perfect form. See for example L. Dodsworth, *Womanhood: The Bare Reality* (London: Pinter & Martin, 2019); H. Atalanta, J. Whitford, *A Celebration of Vulva Diversity* (This is us Books, 2019).



They are drawn from the artist's social media and personal phone archive: their pixelated quality alludes their privateness and intimacy. During an interview,<sup>18</sup> the artist declared that she took inspiration from the *Killjoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House*,<sup>19</sup> an art installation by Canadian artists Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue, displayed in October 2015 in West Hollywood. "Designed to pervert, not convert," the installation mocks the hell houses,<sup>20</sup> popularized in 1970s by the televangelist pastor Jerry Falwell Sr. This complex theatrical and immersive experiences were designed to shock visitors by showing after-death hellish scenarios, destined for those who had not fully embraced Christian faith in time. These kinds of disturbing experiences, thought to provide an alternative to the irreverent – and also queer – Halloween parades, often include sexophobic and transhomophobic content and propaganda against reproductive rights. In response to this cultural framework, the immersive installation by Mitchell and Logue was designed to provide a creepy transformative feminist experience. Interestingly, the work was criticized for its essentialist and allegedly trans-exclusive approach: the "Ball Busting" room in particular was considered potentially offensive and non-respectful of trans\* people,<sup>21</sup> since "involved two butch-dyke performers in plaid shirts smashing plaster of Paris balls modelled after truck nuts."<sup>22</sup>

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18 M. Grande-Sherbert, "Arts and (Mine)crafts," *the carillon* (March 25, 2021) <https://www.carillonregina.com/arts-and-minecrafts/>, accessed January 24, 2023.

19 A. Mitchell, C. McKinney, eds., *Inside Killjoy's Kastle: Dykey Ghosts, Feminist Monsters, and Other Lesbian Hauntings* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019).

20 I. Monroe, "Remembering When Evangelicals Tried to Exorcise Gays With 'Hell Houses,'" *Advocate* (October 26, 2016) <https://www.advocate.com/commentary/2016/10/27/remembering-when-evangelicals-tried-exorcise-gays-hell-houses>, accessed January 24,

2023; J. Zauzmer, "What's scarier than a haunted house? At Judgement House, it's eternal damnation," *The Washington Post* (October 30, 2016) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/10/30/whats-scarier-than-a-haunted-house-at-judgement-house-eternal-damnation/>, accessed January 24, 2023; T. Dart, "Welcome to a Texas hell house, where wayward Christians are scared straight," *The Guardian* (October 31, 2015) <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/oct/31/halloween-texas-hell-house-wayward-christians-scared>, accessed January 24, 2023.

21 kwazana, "Ball Busters and the Recurring Trauma of Intergenerational Queer/Feminist Life," *Bully Bloggers* (February 20, 2016) <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/author/kwazana/>, accessed January 24, 2023.

22 C. Hajjar, "Inside Killjoy's Kastle: Dykey Ghosts, Feminist Monsters, and Other Lesbian Hauntings: Allyson Mitchell and Cait McKinney," *c mag* (July 15, 2020) <https://cmagazine.com/articles/inside-killjoys-kastle-dykey-ghosts-feminist-monsters-and-other?fbclid=IwAR3pabo2gx1py4zV8gqBnn-Irj0JPMv2d0Pdl6YqsVpXIIWGE21IxcSLOE>, accessed January 24, 2023.

In this sense, Haines' installation can be read as a trans\* response to Mitchell and Logue's piece, imagining a digitally enclosed space – the gallery – this time focused on trans\* narratives and counter-narratives.

Cat Haines uses resignification techniques here: the case of the first photograph encountered in the virtual dungeon, entitled *Lesbian Wedding*, is very clear (fig. 2). The photograph is taken directly from her wedding album and portrays the artist and her then wife. This classic shot is then part of a narrative about gender and sexual orientation: in the artist's experience, also through the influence of lesbian mainstream pornography and popular culture, the idea of participating in the same narrative of lesbian relationship came before her self-identification as a trans\* woman, recognising a lesbian intent in her relationship of that time.<sup>23</sup> In the book placed in front of the work of art, it is possible to read a text by the author explaining the profound meaning of the image:

The first lesbian wedding I attended was my own. I just didn't realize it at the time. It wasn't until many years later talking in bed at 2 a.m. with my wife about transition and life and living and changing and we realized we're wives and so we kissed our first kiss as wife and wife.



Fig. 2 C. Haines, *Lesbian Wedding*, 2012, courtesy of the artist.

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<sup>23</sup> Haines quotes also the impact of the character Lisa a lesbian-identified man, portrayed by Devon Gummersall in the popular in US series *The L Word*, who appears during season 1 from episode 1.07: "Losing It" to 1.10: "Luck, Next Time."

Moving to forward in the gallery exploration, one encounters *Psychopathia Transsexualis 1892/2016* (fig. 3): the artist is here portrayed in her bathtub, smoking marijuana from a bong. The title of the image is inspired to *Psychopathia Sexualis: Eine Klinisch-Forensische Studie* by the German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing. Published in 1886, the book is recognized as one of the earliest systematic treatise of homosexuality: words that later came into use, such as “sadism,” “masochism” and the adjective “bisexual,” borrowed from botany, appeared here for the first time. In particular, Haines draws inspiration from one of the book’s several clinical studies. It is the account of a person who might today be called transgender, suffering from gout, who seeks relief from the pain by taking long hot baths while smoking hashish. During one of these baths, the person describes the sensation of finally feeling like a woman, of perceiving her body in a new configuration. This experience, more than a century old, resonates with the artist’s own: hence this kind of re-enactment, a break in the timeline, an unforeseen glitch between different epochs constructed through a bodily sensation.<sup>24</sup>



Fig. 3 C. Haines, *Psychopathia Transsexualis 1892/2016*, 2016, courtesy of the artist.

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24 R. Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, trans. C. G. Chaddock (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, 1892): 207-208.

The exhibition ends with a hidden image that can only be accessed by crossing a threshold: this is not just a ploy to avoid breaking the nudity rules of the Twitch streaming platform, which broadcasts the social events held in the gallery, but a choice motivated by the sensitivity of the content shown. It is a classic mirror selfie of the artist after her operation, still with a catheter protruding from her genitals. It is certainly a powerful image: by separating it from the rest of the exhibition space, the artist invites the viewer to question his or her desire to see, whether it is generated by a simple, objectifying curiosity about the anatomical features of the trans\* body, or whether such a presence can lead elsewhere, to the heart of the political questions posed by her body itself.

### **A feminist strand of immersivity: Haines' work and the cis-sexist feminist art canon**

As the artist states, “trans women’s subjectivity and bodies are abject in society and in feminist/lesbian art and literature – a big way we see that is through... ‘pussy art.’”<sup>25</sup> This last phrase refers to the feminist artistic tradition, which has at its core an aesthetic reflection on female physiology and the cultural processes associated with it. I could perhaps venture the hypothesis that there is a feminist declination of immersivity in the history of art that explicitly refers to the exploration of the interior of the female body, and in particular of her sexual organs, which are precisely internal.<sup>26</sup> This tradition, which dates back at least to the late 1960s and 1970s, still has many representatives.

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25 M. Grande-Sherbert, “Arts and (Mine)crafts,” *the carillon* (March 25, 2021) <https://www.carillonregina.com/arts-and-minecrafts/>, accessed January 24, 2023.

26 Consider some very famous precursors, such as *Hon - en katedral*, the monumental sculpture created by the French-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle in collaboration with Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ultvedt for the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 1966; or the insistence on sculptural variations of the vulva explored by Judy Chicago in the monumental participatory work *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979). More recent examples of this strand will be discussed in the following pages.

Before the official opening, on the International Trans Day of Visibility (31 March 2021), Haines held a studio visit during which she clarified some of her artistic references, thus placing her work in dialogue with this specific artistic tradition.<sup>27</sup> She prepared an ideal gallery for the interviewer, displaying her personal canon of “pussy art:” recent examples of art that focuses on the female genitalia and the political discourses surrounding it, which participate in the feminist investigations of the body, but are at the same time critical of it, offering suggestions on how to move beyond essentialist views. First, Haines includes the contribution of the neurodiverse Lenape and Potawatomi Two-Spirit artist Vanessa Dion Fletcher, who has often addressed the cultural and biological shaping of the female body. Haines quotes her exhibition *Own Your Cervix*, held at the Tangled + Disability Art Gallery in Toronto, from January 13 to March 31, 2017. During opening hours, visitors could book a guided tour with the artist, which included a session of cervix self-examination.<sup>28</sup> Dion Fletcher suggested repurposing the medical practice of exploring inside the body for people with internal genitalia, providing guidance on using a speculum to “own” their own cervix. The speculum, a medical instrument that has been widely cited in feminist philosophy and thought,<sup>29</sup> is here restored to its

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27 “Ender Gallery: Virtual Open Studio with Cat Haines (Minecraft Artist Residency),” Ender Gallery, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXfuRPeBMY8&t=1600s>, accessed January 24, 2023.

28 See the website of the Tangled Arts, “Own Your Cervix Appointments,” <https://tangledarts.org/whats-on/own-your-cervix-appointments/>, accessed January 24, 2023.

29 Feminism and feminist art have a long history of dealing with the oldest instrument of gynaecology and obstetrics, a visualisation device intended for both surveillance and diagnosis, at the centre of the debate on the epistemology of looking inside women’s bodies. As is well known, in 1974 the French philosopher of difference Luce Irigaray entitled her theoretical book *Speculum of the Other Woman*. The instrument itself, perfected in the 1840s by J. Marion Sims, who experimented with it on African-American slaves without anaesthesia, became the focus of second-wave American feminist interest in women’s health. Among those promoting its use as a self-diagnostic device was Carol Downer, a feminist and pro-choice activist and founder of the Self Help Centre One in Los Angeles. See L. Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), trans. G. C. Gill (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); D. Spain, *Constructive Feminism: Women’s Spaces and Women’s Rights in the American City* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); E. Frankfort, *Vaginal Politics* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973); M. Sandelowski, “This most dangerous instrument: propriety, power, and the vaginal speculum,” *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic, & Neonatal Nursing* 29, no. 1 (2000): 73-82, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1552-6909.2000.tb02759.x>.

original and literal function, while encouraging women to understand the political dimension of diagnostics.<sup>30</sup>

Continuing through the gallery curated by the artist, the visitor encounters the work of Australian artist Casey Jenkins, entitled *Casting Off My Womb*. In this performance, the artist spent 28 days – the average length of a menstrual cycle – knitting a white wool thread that she had previously inserted into her vagina: the resulting strip changes colour according to the days on which it was knitted, showing signs of vaginal mucus until menstruation. The work, which is clearly inspired by famous examples, such as Carolee Schneemann’s performance *Interior Scroll* (1975), has been at the centre of a fierce media debate that has brought the taboo of menstruation and its marginalisation from public discourse back to the fore.<sup>31</sup>

Continuing the visit, one comes across the reproduction of one of the new “models,” so to speak, of augmented genitalia. This is an early project by the Turkish-American artist and architect Pinar Yoldas, entitled “Speculative Biologies.” Called *NeoLabium*<sup>TM</sup>, *SuperMamma*<sup>TM</sup>, and *PolyPhallii*<sup>TM</sup>, these are sexual organs “designed to stimulate our biological imagination” and “to challenge the anatomical norms around sex and gender.” Immersed in a conservation fluid similar to that used in natural history museums, but revitalised by small tubes that emit bubbles, the organs float in their glass tanks in a unique state of suspended life. In particular, Haines chooses to quote the *NeoLabium*<sup>TM</sup> (Fig. 4), a “necessary update” to female

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30 In 1990 at the Harmony Theatre of New York, performance artist and post-porn activist Annie Sprinkle performed the historical piece *A Public Cervix Announcement*, during which she invited the audience member to look at her cervix, through a speculum. This is clearly a precedent that cannot be ignored. See N. Aulombard-Arnaud “A Public Cervix Announcement. Une performance pro-sexe et postporn d’Annie Sprinkle (New York, 1990),” *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 54 (2021): 185-195, <https://doi.org/10.4000/cli0.20733>.

31 The work went viral in 2013 when the YouTube video by “The Feed,” dubbed “Vaginal Knitting” reached rapidly 3.5 million views: the comments by audience were for the most part disgusted remarks addressed to the artist herself. See C. Jenkins, “I’m the ‘vaginal knitting’ performance artist – and I want to defend my work,” *The Guardian* (December 2017, 13) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/17/vaginal-knitting-artist-defence>, accessed January 24, 2023.

anatomy, designed to amplify pleasure, in response to its pervasive limitation<sup>32</sup>.



Fig. 4 P. Yoldas, *NeoLabium™* from *Speculative Biologies*, 2008, courtesy of the artist.

Another interesting example of recent “vulva art” is the work of Japanese artist Megumi Igarashi (under the pseudonym Rokudenashiko, which means “good-for-nothing”). As the word for this, “manko,” cannot be pronounced in public, the artist has engaged in various forms of “manko” art (fig. 5), to the point of spending ten days in jail in 2014 on obscenity charges after sailing in a two-metre kayak designed on the 3D scan of her vulva. Interestingly, the obscenity charge was not for the kayak itself, whose shape and bright yellow colour were not so mimetic, but for the act of circulating the 3D scan itself: she was the first person to be charged with “electronic obscenity.”

Haines’ ideal itinerary ends with a return to the beginnings of this kind of art historical tradition: the visitor is led to Georgia O’Keeffe’s early masterpiece, *Black*

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32 In Yoldas’ words “In a world where sexual pleasure is denied to women under the name of religion, tradition or law the amplified pleasure toolkit of NeoLabium™ is a weapon. The increased enervation of NeoLabium™ is a form of empowerment. Compared to the average female genitalia, NeoLabium™ offers a more accentuated look.” P. Yoldas, “SuperMammal™ Dissected: Towards a Phenomenology for a New Species,” in P. Yoldas, *Speculative Biologies: New Directions in Art in the Age of the Anthropocene*, dissertation (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2016): 43.

*Iris* (1926). In this monumental floral painting, the details of the interior of the flower are magnified in proportion on a 90-per-70-centimetre canvas, suggesting a non-literal understanding of its subject.



Fig. 5 Rokudenashiko, *Battleground Manko Art*, 2014, courtesy of the artist.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical and critical frameworks surrounding the artworks under discussion, I draw on the concept of “poetic operation” recently elaborated by micha cárdenas.<sup>33</sup> Exploring the realm of activist art by trans\* people of colour, the artist and researcher posits that these works embody survival strategies, representing a poetic sublimation of essential needs that aligns with various characteristics inherent in digital devices. This concept holds particular relevance to Haines’ work, especially considering the examples of vulva art I mentioned. The installation uniquely manifests itself as a safe space for trans\* people while simultaneously functioning as a digital reflection of body hacking. With

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33 m. cárdenas, *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2022).



this phrase, I do not refer (only) to the cybernetic movement devoted to body enhancing, but, more precisely, to the convergence of transfeminism and hacktivism. In this regard, “the hacker and open-source software movement has served not only as a means of technical support for transfeminist production but also as metaphors that exemplify the practices transfeminists attempt to carry out.”<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

I hope that the selection of examples I have presented contributes to situating Cat Haines’ artwork within an aesthetic and political tradition, of a feminist nature, that has placed critical reflection on corporeality at its centre. The choice to adapt it according to the narrow logic of a pre-constituted platform, in this case the video game Minecraft, helps to enrich the meaning of the author’s proposal, which focuses precisely on the transfeminist practice of configuring, modifying and augmenting the body, in the context of a still heteronormative society. By situating itself in a virtual elsewhere, one could say a “metaverse,” where social norms can be circumvented and rewritten, Haines’ work achieves its critical potential. This brings me back to the Foucauldian concept of “heterotopia” that I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, which I think perfectly describes the tensions that inhabit the digital space that Haines is leading: it is indeed an elsewhere where heteronormative rules are subverted, but it is also a non-neutral terrain, ploughed by a grid that limits our possibilities. In Foucault’s words:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously

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34 L. Egana, M. Solá, trans. M. Brashe, “Hacking the Body: A Transfeminist War Machine,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1-2 (May 2016): 74-80, 78, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3334223>.

represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.<sup>35</sup>

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35 M. Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" (1984), trans. J. Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22-27, 24.

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