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When Are You Going to Catch Up with Me?

Shu Lea Cheang with Alexandra Juhasz

Abstract: “Digital nomad” Shu Lea Cheang and friend and critic Alexandra Juhasz consider the reasons for and implications of the censorship of Cheang’s 2017 film *FLUIDØ*, particularly as it connects to their shared concerns in AIDS activism, feminism, pornography, and queer media. They consider changing norms, politics, and film practices in relation to technology and the body. They debate how we might know, and what we might need, from feminist-queer pornography given feminist-queer engagements with our bodies and ever more common cyborgian existences. Their informal chat opens a window onto the interconnections and adaptations that live between friends, sex, technology, illness, feminism, and representation.

Keywords: cyberpunk, digital media, feminist porn, Shu Lea Cheang, queer and AIDS media

Shu Lea Cheang is a self-described “digital nomad.” Her multimedia practice engages the many people, ideas, politics, and forms that are raised and enlivened by her peripatetic, digital, fluid existence. Ruby Rich described her 2000 feature *I.K.U.* (Japan) as “a phenomenon that wants to refuse definition and to a certain extent succeeds in that effort, even as it crosses all categories—geographic, physical, conceptual—with a demented flourish.”¹ That description would also be true of Shu Lea. She was born in Taiwan and came of age as an artist in the 1980s in New York City. She has settled in Paris and works in Germany, the UK, Austria, and many spaces in between. Hers is a transborder life, just as her engagements with media are adaptive and in flux. She began as a video artist also engaged in local public-access television programs and then directed of an early queer feature, *Fresh Kill* (US, 1994), which addresses gay rights, environmentalism, and government intrusion in a surreal, family-driven narrative. At the same time, she was coming out as a lesbian of color; she now identifies as gender-fluid. In the 1990s, Cheang transitioned into new media art, making some of the first and finest digital art

¹ B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Duke): 77.

installations fusing real space and virtual networks. Since 2000, Cheang has continued to produce net installations, mobile games, and performances while making films with a shifting focus on deconstructing the economic machinations of the Internet. This theme drives her second feature film *I.K.U.*, a cyber-erotic remake of Ridley Scott's 1982 science fiction classic *Blade Runner* (US). The performance and game *UKI* (2009–16) is a sequel to *I.K.U.* in which Cheang continues to imagine the evils of the GENOM Corp., an Internet porn enterprise. With *DICRÉAM* (Dispositif pour la Création Artistique Multimédia et Numérique) script development funds from France's Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée, she is currently developing *UKI* as what she terms "feature-length interruptive cinema," a feature film accompanied by a mobile app game. In 2017, she premiered her third feature, *FLUIDØ*, a "cypherpunk film" that imagines a "post-AIDS" future in 2060. In 2019, she presented *3×3×6*, a large-scale mixed-media installation representing Taiwan in the Venice Biennale.

In the spring of 2018, following *FLUIDØ*'s premier at the Berlinale, Cheang reached out to her friend and colleague Alexandra Juhasz, a scholar, maker, and champion of feminist-queer media. Cheang told Juhasz that she was having no luck finding a premiere for her newest film at American film festivals or any American screening venues, for that matter. With others, they sent out queries to a range of American platforms for independent media: from colleges and universities to microcinemas and indie cinemas. After many nos, Flayr Poppins, festival director at the MIX Queer Experimental Film Festival, organized a welcoming New York screening where the audience could "experience collectively the raw, uncensored body power" of the film.

The next day, Shu Lea and Alex recorded a short conversation in which they considered the censorship of the film, particularly as it connects to AIDS activism, feminism, pornography, and queer media. They discuss changes in technology and the body over the duration of their

professional friendship and debate “not porn” and how might know it when we see it.¹ They conclude by considering contemporary feminist-queer engagements with bodies given our cyborgian present, opening a window onto the interconnections and adaptations that live between friends, sex, technology, illness, feminism, and representation.

Alex Juhasz: Let’s talk about your new movie *FLUIDØ*. Can you describe the film for readers who won’t get to see it?

Shu Lea Cheang: *FLUIDØ*, set in a post-AIDS future of 2060, is a transfeminist science fiction film reflecting on the relationships between sexual politics, capitalism, and the management of the AIDS crisis. Genderfluid ZERO GENs are biodrug carriers whose white fluid is the hypernarcotic for the twenty-first century, taking over the white-powder highs of the twentieth century. The ejaculate of these beings is intoxicating and becomes the new form of sexual commodity. The ZERO GENs become caught up among underground drug lords, glitched super agents, a scheming corporation, and a corrupt government.

Juhasz: The plot is pretty dense, and so is the film’s form, sitting somewhere between porn, video games, and video art. Would you add anything to that formal description?

Cheang: *FLUIDØ* is virus, sex, hack, drug, and conspiracy. Promoted as a “cyberpunk” sci-fi movie, *FLUIDØ* subverts current data surveillance and ownership issues by engaging in “pissing” cryptography.

Juhasz: Another important way to situate the film is that it is linked conceptually, narratively, and formally to your previous feature *I.K.U.* Many of us queer-feminist media types love that film, and it has gone on to be something of a cult classic.²

Cheang: I showed *I.K.U.* in a film festival in Denmark where I was introduced to Lars von Trier's company Zentropa. At that time, they had a division called Puzzy Power making female erotic films. They asked me for a scenario. So, *FLUIDØ* was written in 2000 right after *I.K.U.* In the end, Puzzy Power went bankrupt, so the film was never made with them. It took me seventeen years to realize this movie.

Juhasz: What is the relationship between notions of “pussy power,” female erotic film—or perhaps just porn—for you and in your work? What term or terms work best for you?

Cheang: *I.K.U.* was made and promoted as a sci-fi porn. The story and narrative structure follow a classic porn's episodic sexual entanglement: without much foreplay, getting down to business. I was fascinated by this genre of sexual expression. But *FLUIDØ* is not a porn. It is sexually, sexual-organ explicit, but its concerns are mainly political. The extreme and persistent fluid ejaculation is an act of reclamation and empowerment. The sexual acts are operational, therapeutical, bringing back the dysfunctional android by sexual interaction. In the film, LICK, a woman's fluid joint, is set inside an expanded vagina with erupting fluids, recalling VNS Matrix's statement in their cyberfeminist manifesto for the twenty-first century, “the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix.”³ Fisting, in the film, allows for a system reboot.

Juhasz: What's interesting to me about your answer—and it is fine if you don't want to call *FLUIDØ* porn—is that it suggests that, because the film has a larger political agenda, it is not

porn. But my definition of pornography would be something else: a work that's first goal is its viewer getting off. Other things (or ideas) can happen too, but in porn there is a primary bargain with audience members to see sex and to respond sexually in return. Is that a useful definition? Because I'm worried that we might have drawn, not a binary, but something close to it about politics and porn.

Cheang: *FLUIDØ* recalls the AIDS epidemic in the eighties when the government failed to release drugs in a timely fashion. But it is not because it is political that it is not porn. It does not follow the episodic sexual encounter structure. It has no specific intention for people to get off. Maybe to get wet? To feel the moisture within? To reconnect with carnal desire? I want the movie to be watched in the cinema where audiences can experience collectively the raw, uncensored body power. By this, I don't necessarily imply the sexual climax so desired by sexual engagement. Still, yes, the film is very sexual.

Juhasz: Very. We see all the parts (breasts, vaginas, penises, dildoes, assholes), in every kind of combination (queer, straight, gay, lesbian, group), releasing reservoirs of redolent fluids (pee, cum, discharge, ejaculate).

Cheang: *FLUIDØ*'s excessive ejaculation celebrates the free flow of body fluids. If one doesn't feel the power of raw body function, one is rejecting something. The ejaculation scenes are prolonged, not in real time, but long enough that one is forced to keep their eyes on the screen or perhaps turn away from it.

Juhasz: Looking at so many vaginas and their fluids, I couldn't help but also think of water, that fundamental fluid, and relate that to your first film, *Fresh Kill*, an early project where you are

already thinking about the toxicity of the landscape, the destruction of Mother Earth's ability to give us sustenance, and queer activists' responses to these corporate crimes.

Cheang: *Fresh Kill* envisions a postapocalyptic landscape strewn with electronic detritus and suffering the toxic repercussions of mass marketing in a high tech commodity culture.⁴

Juhasz: It's pretty tragic to see that in the twenty-five years since, there have been so few films that beautifully engage with these linked feminist concerns regarding the toxic and/or erotic excesses of capitalism and sex. Did you also think about water, the politics around natural resources, the collapse of transnational corporate capitalism in relationship to your new film, so many years later?

Cheang: Yes, with water as medium. In *FLUIDØ*, body fluids are agents of contagion; in *Fresh Kill*, the transoceanic water pollution carries toxic fish. In the middle of editing *Fresh Kill*, we made a short film, *Sex Fish* (US, 1993) . . .

Juhasz: Speaking of pornography . . .

Cheang: You also consider *that* pornography!

Juhasz: Not really. I think that film was too early in your path toward porn or even not porn. Of course, I did engage in sexual acts on camera for you in *Sex Fish*, so it's probably in my best interests to speak of this work as erotica or art video rather than porn. You (or we) have been interested in seeing and showing explicit sexuality for a long time.

Cheang: It was a kind of “impromptu” rebellion: trying to break away from the notion of sex as taboo. Coming from a conservative family, we never talked about bodies; we never talked about sex. *Sex Fish* was made with friends and lovers, intimate sexing bodies flowing in a sexing fishy vibe.

Juhasz: *Sex Fish* was one of several short art porns you made within the collaborative E.T. Baby Maniac with Ela Troyano and Jane Castle.⁵ At the time, many of us were experimenting, taking baby steps really, in pro-sex protoqueer lesbian feminist media practices that were responding to AIDS and the feminist sex wars as well as a world that was being deformed by capitalism and disease and reformed by our own desires. At the time, there was very little feminist-made pornography and even less lesbian-specific work. In *Sex Fish*, sex is literally made fluid; in *FLUIDØ*, sex, or perhaps better put scenes of fluids, are intercut with images of AIDS activism from the 1980s. These are not separate for you: the body fighting via activism, the body resisting via ejaculation. So how would you talk about the fluid lines between politics and pornography moving, say, from *Sex Fish* to *FLUIDØ*?

Cheang: I was living in New York City throughout the eighties and nineties, part of the downtown performance and independent filmmaking community. These were times of protest and street actions, of clubbing, sex, drugs, and the AIDS epidemic. We lost many friends. ACT UP was leading direct action to demand the release of curing drugs. *FLUIDØ* ultimately claims the virus as my own salvation: my attempt at reconciliation with the pain of lost intimacy. Projecting to a future, our bodies are colonized, engineered, reconstituted. We own an empty shell of a body whose data we no longer have access to. *Sex Fish* was intimate entanglement of

sexing bodies. In the “cypherpunk” film *FLUIDØ*, the body is encoded; DNA data can be hacked, altered with code injection.

Juhasz: What do you mean by *cypherpunk*, and, going back to what you said previously, how is that related to pissing?

Cheang: *Cypherpunk* refers to cryptography. In *FLUIDØ*, pissing is a coding act, writing the invisible fluid codes to protect data privacy. Code is rewritten, injected into ZERO GEN’s blood streams to alter DNA data, to subvert the government’s control of the body.

Juhasz: If our innocence is lost, and we’re pissing away those gains, who owns our bodies now?

Cheang: In my current film in development, *UKI*, the Genom corporation occupies the human body and converts red blood cells into microcomputing units. *UKI* is renegade virus, mobilized to infiltrate occupied bodies to reclaim lost orgasm data, I have gone from the prostheses-attached technobody of *BRANDON* (1998–99) to disown a body made up of flesh.

Juhasz: I’m glad you mentioned *BRANDON*—a web narrative and performance that explored what you called the “digigender social body,” inspired by the life and death of Brandon Teena and online sexual violence—a central work in the early history of net art.⁶ Are there connections between *BRANDON* and *FLUIDØ*?

Cheang: *BRANDON* tackles the intersection of human and machine, virtual and actual. *FLUIDØ* explores the notion of the gender-fluid, eliminates the hard-drive body, and dives into the terrain of biotechnology in which bodies are embedded with scanners, zipper tattoos open up as communication tools, and microorganisms, viruses, and BS bacteria command human bodies.

Juhasz: Do you feel like the rendering of the body in *Sex Fish* was the end of something? There was something so idealistic and euphoric in that short and sweet movie, and also perhaps that moment in your life when you were coming into a lesbian sexuality, community, and sensibility. How would you describe the mood of your newer body work?

Cheang: That was a beautiful time. We were all in love. *Sex Fish* was made in great passion with our lovers. Following it, we (with Jane Castle) made *Sex Bowl* (US, 1994), triggering the chain actions of rollover lovers in our intersexing community. All forms of human sport become sites for sexual play and celebratory eroticism. In *FLUIDØ*, body fluid is managed as trade for consumption. I guess the time of *Sex Fish* and *Sex Bowl* was like a puppy love period for me.⁷ Since then, I have rendered orgasm into data, a commodity that is collectable, consumable.

Juhasz: During puppy love, orgasms are frequent, fun, and private. Now, something else entirely! Is it just that we were younger? Or was the time different? We can talk about the sadness as well as the anger that infused life at that moment because of AIDS, but it also produced a possibility for joy and love. In *FLUIDØ*, you look back at that time but not with nostalgia. And unlike so many other films that also look back at the history of AIDS, what Theodore Kerr and I call the recent deluge of “AIDS Crisis Revisitation” media,⁸ in your film we see women! And queers beyond gay men. And while you do say “AIDS is over,” this is not how so many contemporary films of the Revisitation say that, specifically as a biomedical conquest enabled by taking toxic pills every day for the rest of one’s life (plus having to have access to those pills and a stable life that allows for adherence).

Cheang: You are right to see the AIDS epidemic context when we made these small sex films that bond bodies: the swimming fish and entangled bodies, the finger fucking of a bowling ball

that strikes off sexual encounters. *FLUIDØ*, on the contrary, is mutant love. How do we salvage our lost intimacy? In *FLUIDØ*, the government and the pharmaceuticals join with drug lords to commodify body fluids. There are expectations for “NO MORE AIDS” by year 2030. I would like to believe it.

Juhasz: But it’s *already* “over” in regard to (in)visibility if people can’t see this film you made about AIDS! We started out by defining pornography, and you said *FLUIDØ* is not pornography, and yet you are having a very difficult time showing it in the US; that must be because of censorship practices that are linked to porn.

Cheang: I was quite surprised by the rejection of this film in festival circuits (including gay/lesbian/queer festivals) in the US. Maybe because of its explicit sex? We premiered at the Berlinale in early 2017, followed by a screening at Documenta, and in May 2018, *FLUIDØ* was screened at the ICA London with a three-day event titled NEO ULTRA PUNK. The film can’t just be considered a “certified” art film? Maybe the gatekeepers in the US are not letting the film through? I need to find a way to reach an audience who can appreciate the film.

Juhasz: I’ve recently been showing the film I produced, *The Watermelon Woman* (Cheryl Dunye, 1996), for its twentieth anniversary rerelease and remaster. In Q and As, someone in the audience always says, “Oh my God! It is so *forward looking*.” Then I always say, “No it is not! It was totally *of its moment*.” When we look at your work, one might also say: “Oh, it is so *forward looking*!” Meaning, it is not available to most audiences right now (literally in this case, but also figuratively), but, in ten years or twenty years from now, it is going to feel absolutely right.

Cheang: I do get this comment all the time. That I am ahead of my time. And I feel like, well, when are you going to catch up with me?

Juhasz: *FLUIDØ* is representing in the future a set of concerns about living right now that are very present, at least to some.

Cheang: And people ask, “how do you get people to do things like this on camera?” It is easy. These are the lives of these people. Maybe we are just too far off the mainstream. But I never consider queer being of the mainstream. I always turn it around to position queer in the center. We have an open call out now for a speculative *FLUIDØ* sequel. We are seeking gender-fluid humans, nonhumans, trans-gens, retro-gens, junkies, pissers, huggers, cuddlers, and all body-positive sexing creatures.

Juhasz: Are these folks from utopian communities?

Cheang: I seem to be swinging between dystopia and utopia. If resistance is still possible, we can be reassured of a utopian vision.

Juhasz: Would you suggest that the utopian is also imaged through your use of cyberspace: the film’s funky mise-en-scène where the digital and the embodied are no longer distinguishable?

Cheang: The film is not situated in a test tube. It is not location-specific to any city or country. It is transborder in terms of its spatial/set design. It is not “no gender.” Rather it is gender nonbinary. DNA is data, code that can be rewritten. The medium of digital allows entry to the nondefined, no-border inner space.

Juhasz: The film isn't fearful of that, is it?

Cheang: No.

Juhasz: What are your thoughts on technologized bodies?

Cheang: Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto," published in 1984, charts a generation of machine-body interface. The updated Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, has merged human, nonhuman, animal, and plant to reclaim our planet.⁹ I do not feel this body of mine is of specific value as I submit myself to strings of data and codes that recombine a transgenic body.

Juhasz: And yet you do have a body; I see it. What do you feel about your body?

Cheang: I feel quite detached: it's a shell, a container that carries data. In the current film I'm developing, *UKI*, I am using bacteria to enter the body, to reprogram blood cells, and the final resistance is carried out by virus en masse.

Juhasz: Is that the abstraction of the body? The dissolution of the body? Is that a political truth? Or a technological truth? Or a social truth? (And I don't really care about the word "truth" here.)

Cheang: During the AIDS crisis, pharmaceutical companies claimed the infected bodies, controlling the release of the curing drugs. The biohackers in *FLUIDØ* reconfigure DNA data to counter the government's control of the body. Our body remains the contested zone, the final frontier.

Juhasz: The resistance would be to claim our bodies back. That was and is fundamental to AIDS politics and activist representation.

Cheang: Yes, as we say in the film, liberate the fluids!

Notes

¹ Justice Potter Stewart's famous 1964 comment about the definition of pornography reads: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced . . . [b]ut I know it when I see it." *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. at 197 (1964).

² For more on *I.K.U.*, see B. Ruby Rich, "The *I.K.U.* Experience: The Shu-Lea Cheang Phenomenon," in *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 76–80.

³ VNS Matrix, "The Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century (1991)," VNS Matrix/Merchants of Slime, vnsmatrix.net/projects/the-cyberfeminist-manifesto-for-the-21st-century/.

⁴ For more on *Fresh Kill*, see Gina Marchetti's eloquent blurb for distributor Video Data Bank's catalogue. Gina Marchetti, "Fresh Kill," Video Data Bank, www.vdb.org/titles/fresh-kill/. Gina Marchetti also dedicated an article in *Positions* to reading *Fresh Kill*. Marchetti, "Cinema Frames, Videoscapes, and Cyberspace: Exploring Shu Lea Cheang's *Fresh Kill*," *Positions* 9, no. 2 (2001): 401–22.

⁵ To see more on lesbian experimental film and video, including *Sex Fish*, see Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

⁶ See *BRANDON*, Guggenheim Museum, 1998–99, brandon.guggenheim.org/. In 2017, the museum restored the acquisition so that it was accessible to the public. Guggenheim Foundation, "Guggenheim Restores First Internet Artwork Acquisition through Conserving Computer-Based Art Initiative," 16 May 2017, www.guggenheim.org/press-release/guggenheim-restores-first-internet-artwork-acquisition-through-conserving-computer-based-art-initiative/. Upon its first release in 1998, it was reviewed in the *Village Voice*. Austin Bunn, "Fanning the Fame," *Village Voice*, 21 July 1998, 33.

⁷ For more on *Sex Bowl*, see Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies*.

⁸ Please see my extensive conversation about AIDS Crisis Revisitation and other periods of AIDS culture, written with Theodore Kerr. Alexandra Juhasz and Theodore Kerr, *We Are Having This Conversation Now: The Times of AIDS Cultural Production* (forthcoming, Duke University Press).

⁹ Donna J. Haraway, “Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–81; Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

Shu Lea Cheang is an artist-filmmaker whose work aims to reenvision genders, genres, and operating structures. As a net art pioneer, her *Brandon* (1998–99) was the first web art commissioned by New York’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Her films *Fresh Kill* (1994), *I.K.U.* (2000), and *Fluidø* (2017) defined their own genres of queer sci-fi cinema: ecocybernoia, sci-fi cyberpunk, and sci-fi cypherpunk. Cheang takes on viral love and biohacking in her current work. Her mixed media installation, *3×3×6*, was exhibited at the Venice Biennale 2019, representing Taiwan. She is currently working on *UKI*, an interruptive cinema, through a CNC/DICRÉAM grant.

Alexandra Juhasz is Distinguished Professor of Film at Brooklyn College, CUNY. Author and/or editor since 1995 of scholarly books on activist media in light of AIDS, black lesbian and queer representation, feminism, and digital culture, Juhasz also makes videotapes on feminist issues from AIDS to teen pregnancy and has produced the feature fakes *The Watermelon Woman* (Cheryl Dunye, 1996) and *The Owls* (Dunye, 2010). Her current work is on feminist Internet culture (fakenews-poetry.org), with a recent book of poetry and related essays, *Really Fake*, with Nishant Shah (University of Minnesota Press, 2020).