

TECHNOSOMATA

Exeter Phoenix, 13–14 June 2019

PROGRAMME



Centre for Knowledge in Culture, Art History and
In Antiquity and Beyond Visual Culture



PROGRAMME

Luna Dolezal (WCCEH)

João Florêncio (Art History & Visual Culture / Exeter Masculinities Research Unit)

ORGANISATION

Kate Fisher (Centre for Medical History)

Rebecca Langlands (Centre for Knowledge in Culture in Antiquity and Beyond)

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

College of Humanities

Art History and Visual Culture

Wellcome Centre for Cultures and Environments of Health

- 1.00pm REGISTRATION AND COFFEE
- 1.20pm WELCOME REMARKS
Luna Dolezal, João Florêncio, Kate Fisher, Rebecca
Langlands
- 1.30pm **SESSION 1: SEX ROBOTS**
Speaker: Rebecca Saunders (KCL)
Exeter Respondent: Jaanika Puusalu (Egenis)
- 3.00pm COFFEE BREAK
- 3.30pm **SESSION 2: PROSTHESES AND TOYS**
Speaker: Margrit Shildrick (Stockholm University)
Exeter Respondent: Kazuki Yamada (WCCEH)
- 5.00pm WINE RECEPTION

14 JUNE
STUDIO 1

10.00am **SESSION 3: ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES**
Speaker: Sebastian Mohr (Karlstad University)
Exeter Respondent: Zaina Mahmoud (WCCEH)

11.30am **SESSION 4: INGESTIBLE TECHNOLOGIES**
Speaker: Kane Race (University of Sydney)
Exeter Respondent: Charlotte Jones (WCCEH)

1.00pm LUNCH BREAK

2pm **SESSION 5: SEX MEDIA**
Speaker: Clarissa Smith (University of Sunderland)
Exeter Respondent: Kate Elizabeth (English)

3.30pm CLOSING REMARKS

Rebecca Saunders (KCL)

Sex Robots

Sex robots are a powerful signifier: of what we understand as sex, what we seek and idealise in our digital technologies, and how these crucial parts of our culture are intertwined. In this twenty-minute presentation, we'll take a deep, murky dive into the world of sex robots. We'll briefly travel back to eighteenth century Europe and consider what early mechanical dolls tell us about the very human fascination with creating automata in our own form. We play with and marvel at these objects as they appear to take on a life of their own. Clunkily moving and blinking, they proffer a living death that allows us to enjoy simultaneously the magic of their ostensible independence, and our omnipotence as their superior creators. These same ideas - of the thrill at a technology's capacity to imitate and be interpolated into human life, and our power as creators and controllers - are at the forefront of the design and consumption of contemporary sex robots. As the introduction of AI to sex robots means that they are able to talk back to us and offer some semblance of consciousness, they speak of our desire not only to create more complex machinic copies of our humanness, but to legitimise deeper emotional relationships with our machines. We will travel to Nevada, where the first sex robot was made in 2010, and then to Silicon Valley where its most advanced form, the Harmony doll is now being shipped to consumers globally. Drawing in part on interviews with makers and consumers of sex robots, we will explore how ideas of technologized power and control attain highly gendered meanings. The humanoid automata of the twenty-first century speak not just to our fetishization of technology and our existential fascination with constructing 'ourselves', but to the objectification and technologized control of women.

Margrit Shildrick (Stockholm University)

"Feeling technology: the significance of empathy robots"

The use of what are often called empathy robots in the care of the ill, ageing or disabled people has become increasingly common particularly in institutions where affective contact may be limited. I shall focus on the problematic of dementia which conventionally signals a personal status of irreversible cognitive degeneration that results in a developing inability to maintain both the practical functions of everyday living and the markers of normative communicative competence. In short, the subjectivity of the one with dementia is put in doubt. There are, however, many potential biotechnological interventions in the form of mechanical prostheses such as robotic carers or quasi-animal companions that claim to offer to those with dementia some tools for maintaining contact with their previous sense of self. I shall ask what is the status of such prosthetic practices if we think beyond conventional frameworks.

Sebastian Mohr (Karlstad University)

"Affective investments into biosociality – masculinity, masturbation, and sperm donation in Denmark"

Bering a sperm donor is often framed as an easy job. Men only have to masturbate into a cup and receive money in return, at least that's what many people assume. Turning to the

experiences of Danish sperm donors, I argue that this conception of sperm donation as selfish pleasure and commodified practice offers only a limited understanding of what it means to provide semen samples for reproductive donation. While sperm donors' affective investments are most of the time taken for granted and not discussed, they are actually important to consider analytically if biosocial subjectivation—the persistent invocation of the subject in terms of biomedical registers and biopolitical valuations—is to be understood properly. Attending to masturbation as important in its own right, I will look at the making of sperm donors as biosocial subjects through their affective investments when producing semen samples. Based on ethnographic fieldwork at Danish sperm banks and interviews with Danish sperm donors, I will thus explore how men performatively (re)constitute their gendered and sexualised subjectivity in terms of biomedical registers and biopolitical valuations through masturbation.

Kane Race (University of Sydney)

“A lifetime of drugs”

This paper draws on my experience of living with HIV for more than two decades to discuss the forms of anxiety and concern that emerged around the use of so-called “drug cocktails” in the context of the introduction of HIV combination antiretroviral therapy in 1996. It shows how antiretroviral concerns reflect broader anxieties about increasing sexual activity between men at this time. The “Protease Moment” happens to kickstart a problematisation of gay men’s use of recreational drugs (another sort of “drug cocktail”) on the same basis—an imputed connection to sexual risk. The present moral panic over chemsex is merely the latest instalment of this discourse. My paper outlines the analogous character of antiretroviral therapy and recreational substance use in gay men’s practice, arguing that pleasure, self-medication, and experimentation with the conditions of life are concerns that cut across outdated distinctions between pharmaceutical drugs and illicit drugs. The stigmatised and criminalised status of HIV-positive sex, gay sexuality and illicit drug use produces paranoid subjects and effectively endangers the health and wellbeing of those affected. Paying attention to the collective experiments of queers who use drugs is likely to be much more generative.

Clarissa Smith (University of Sunderland)

Sex Media

Sex media have been a ‘battleground on which the sexual revolution took place’ (Shaeffer, 2014: 2) but they have also been a pleasurable mode of consumption and leisure sought in their own right. As the most egregiously sexual of sex media, pornography has had particular powers to engender anxieties about body/tech relations. As a body genre, porn is a technology that moves bodies through its presentation of the ‘frenzy of the visible’ (Williams, 1989), but more recently porn has been described as not merely moving its viewers to masturbation. Rewiring brains, producing ‘addictive’ and ‘compulsive’ behaviours, porn’s effects on the body are no longer described as transitory and possibly pleasurable but are now identified as long-term and debilitating. As the technology develops and promises forms of immersion in synthetic sexual experiences, medical tropes are increasingly used to explain pornography’s apparent threat, shifting dominant responses to porn consumption from a social/moral objection to the ‘devaluing’ of sex, to a more ‘neutral’ concern with ‘health’ and ‘wellbeing’. At a deeper level, the anxieties over erectile and vaginal dysfunction and falling desire suggest acute cultural anxieties about bodies, technologies and sexual pleasures.