

**sex
machines**

photographs and interviews

Like a Loving Machine

Robotic Sex in the New Century

by A. D. Coleman

Stay on the scene

(get on up)

like a loving machine!

– James Brown, “(I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine,” 1970

Timothy Archibald has discovered and explored for us in this book a fascinating U.S. microculture: the seedbed of robotic sex, the contemporary inventors who have dedicated themselves to developing machines whose sole purpose is delivering sexual pleasure.

The idea of what I'll call robotic sex—sex with automated partners or involving mechanical/electronic devices—has its venerable proponents in literature, of course: Philip K. Dick and Isaac Asimov¹ are only two examples. H. R. Giger, Tomi Ungerer, and Robert Rauschenberg are among those who, from the 1960s on, have depicted it in visual art. In music we'd have to consider “godfather of soul” James Brown its most famous celebrant, at least insofar as he burned the phrase “sex machine” indelibly into popular consciousness.

Timothy Archibald is, to the best of my knowledge, the first to approach this subject as a photographer; that in itself makes this project notable. He has opted to treat it as a sociological investigation, employing a set of classic tropes of documentary photography. He uses color film because it provides another layer of information. He works with a 2¼” reflex camera because its negative, much larger than that of a 35mm camera, encodes more data and allows enlargement without the distracting intrusion of visible grain. He lights his proscenium carefully to enable a clear description of what's before his lens. He positions himself at social distance—observational rather than voyeuristic—from his raw material. He involves his human subjects in the process of transactional formal portraiture to empower them, by giving them a degree of control over the photographic occasion and their self-presentation in the images. And he empowers his collaborators further by recording their thoughts on their undertakings and allowing edited transcriptions of these to contextualize and caption his representations of them and their creations.

All of those decisions bespeak an extremely respectful relationship to his subject matter and his human subjects on Archibald's part. In time other photographers will no doubt turn to this same microculture, and will depict it in any number of ways, from the humorous to the lurid, from the titillating to the eroticizing. Nothing wrong with any of those possibilities; one

can see them all inherent here. But we can consider ourselves fortunate that this first scrutiny has come from someone who felt no need to sensationalize or trivialize or snicker, but chose instead to present it to us in as objective and detached a manner as the subjective medium of photography will allow.

Non-mechanical sexual instruments—dildos, anal and vaginal plugs, cockrings and other penile constrictors, nipple clamps, and such—originated centuries ago, some of them even prehistorically. A machine, however, is a different class of object; it's a system of interacting parts, its interactivity powered by some energy source. In some way, visibly or invisibly, it moves. In doing so, it takes on the character of an entity, in the dictionary definition of that word: "An organized array of individual elements and parts forming and working as a unit."

We remain some distance from the "Orgasmatron" of Woody Allen's futuristic sci-fi satire *Sleeper* (1973), a container into which he and Diane Keaton step for a sexual experience evoked entirely through brain-wave modulation via electronic systems. And we remain just as far if not more so from the "replicants" of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, androids convincingly human enough that they can provide not just sexual but emotional and intellectual companionship. Yet just exactly how long a voyage should one predict from here to there?

The creation and production of what Archibald designates as sex machines has a history shorter than that of dildos and such, but still substantial (as a visit to the Sex Machines Museum in Prague will disclose²). Some of that history is intentionally public and official, proclaimed forthrightly in such forums as the U.S. Patent Office's registry of applications³. Some of it is underground, or at least informal and off the record—things made for oneself and one's lover(s), perhaps for one's friends or even to fulfill private commissions, but never intended for over-the-counter sale or mass production and distribution. Undeniably, though, sex machines have become part of the landscape of contemporary culture. So perhaps it's time to acknowledge that and begin talking about this phenomenon.

Certainly the most familiar such instrument is the hand-held vibrator or "personal massager," which in plug-in or battery-operated form emerged into prominent public display in the 1960s, not coincidentally concurrent with the rise of "second-wave" feminism and that movement's insistence on women's autonomy over their own bodies and right to sexual pleasure⁴. Inexpensive and commonly available, the vibrator became the first mainstream sex machine, the one whose presence on a woman's night table quickly lost its shock value. It opened the door for an elaborate range of variations on itself.

The subcategory on which Archibald has concentrated his attention comprises what some of his subjects call "fucking machines." They simulate penile insertion, motion within the selected orifice, and, in most cases, an in-and-out movement of a surrogate phallus. In addition to their functionality, and their ingenuity and diversity of design, they constitute a variety of kinetic sculpture, interesting visually as autonomous forms in their own right. One can imagine them in a gallery space somewhere—or, vastly enlarged, gracing an urban plaza or a sculpture garden, like an Oldenburg on testosterone. They are, I suspect, the most inherently photogenic of all current sex machines.

Today the sex machines on the market include vacuum pumps for male pleasure, instruments that deliver calibrated electrical shocks to the nipples and genitals of either sex, lifesize inflatable male and female dolls with penetrable and vibrating orifices, and many other mechanisms. One can also purchase not only an extraordinary range of sexually explicit videos and DVD's but also audiotapes and CD-ROMs designed for subliminal programming of the libido. An increasing number of products use the potential inherent in the computer and the Internet. So it hardly seems far-fetched to propose that —when we factor in advances in digital engineering, innovations in medical prostheses, and research on brain function—within the next decade we will see the emergence of forms of robotic and even cyborg sex that will make what you'll find in these pages seem quaint and primitive.

Be that as it may, this is where it has started as a mini-industry. And it's not surprising that all of these bear the "Made in the U.S.A." label. As an American tradition, tinkering in the home workshop goes back at least to Ben Franklin. If you add to the staggering number of applications received each year by the U.S. Patent Office the countless other inventions whose originators don't bother to patent them, the sheer quantity and variety of devices dreamed up by our citizenry on an annual basis boggles the mind.

Everything from the hot rod to the personal computer to the electric guitar started out with some guy with a screwdriver and a soldering iron messing around in a basement or garage. Yes, it's mainly a guy thing, though whether a tendency toward mechanical problem-solving results from nature or culture I can't say. And while the market for many of the resulting artifacts—battle bots, personal hovercraft—is mainly a male market, the vast majority are not gender-specific. We have women hot-rodders, electric guitarists, and computer geeks nowadays, so these discoveries benefit anyone who wants to take advantage of them.

One intriguing aspect of this cluster of examples that Archibald has gathered is that a cohort of inventors, all male, have spent months and sometimes years dreaming up artifacts intended mostly for the pleasure of women. (Yes, a number of them point out that gay men can use them too, but that seems of secondary concern to them all, not their wellspring of inspiration.) Not only that, but in many cases the women they hoped to satisfy were not abstract or generic, but specific—the particular women in their own lives. This suggests a level of unselfish, generous interest in the happiness of women on the parts of some of these mechanically minded men that may come as a surprise to many. It also implies that these inventors, and the men who participate in the purchase of these machines for use by their wives and lovers, don't feel their masculinity threatened by competition from a simulacrum that can literally "go all night." Perhaps, the stereotypes notwithstanding, more men find joy in their partners' sexual gratification—or take more general delight in participating in women's orgasms instrumentally as well as voyeuristically—than the conventional wisdom acknowledges.

Inevitably, this project leaves a number of questions unanswered. Saying that doesn't fault it in any way; instead, it points us to where Archibald (or another bold soul) might fruitfully look next. Sufficient and satisfying that he has introduced us to unfamiliar people probably not too unlike ourselves, to a microcosm whose existence we had most likely not imagined, and to an individual and collective expression of sexual creativity whose possibilities promise to change the way we think about sex from now on.

1. Dick in his 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (basis for the movie *Blade Runner*); Asimov in some of the novels in his "Robot" series.
2. Go to www.SexMachinesMuseum.com for a brief introduction to this collection.
3. For more on this, see Hoag Levins, *American Sex Machines: The Hidden History of Sex at the U.S. Patent Office* (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1996).
4. For more on the evolution of the vibrator, see Rachel P. Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Studies in the History of Technology, 2001).

