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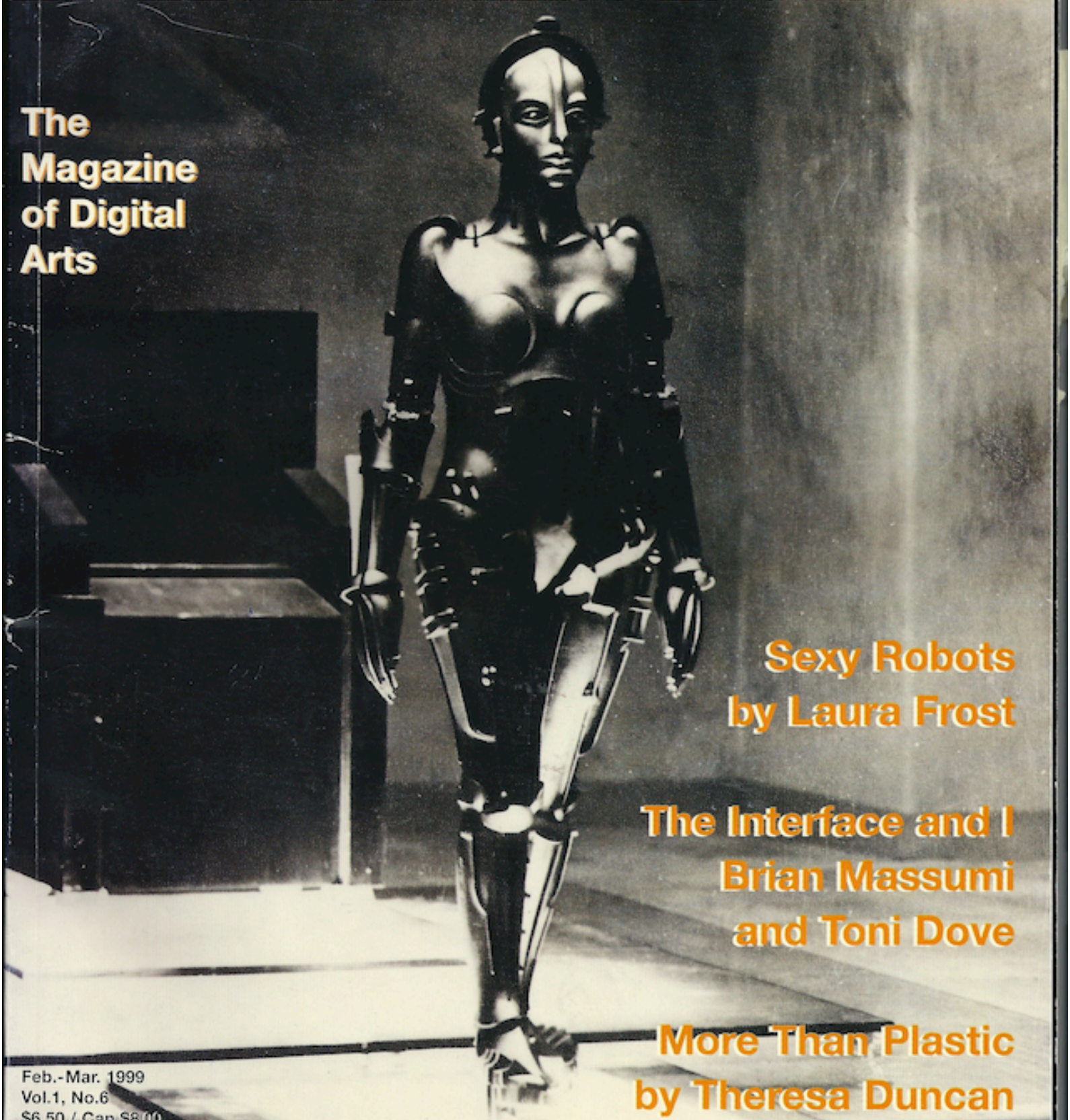

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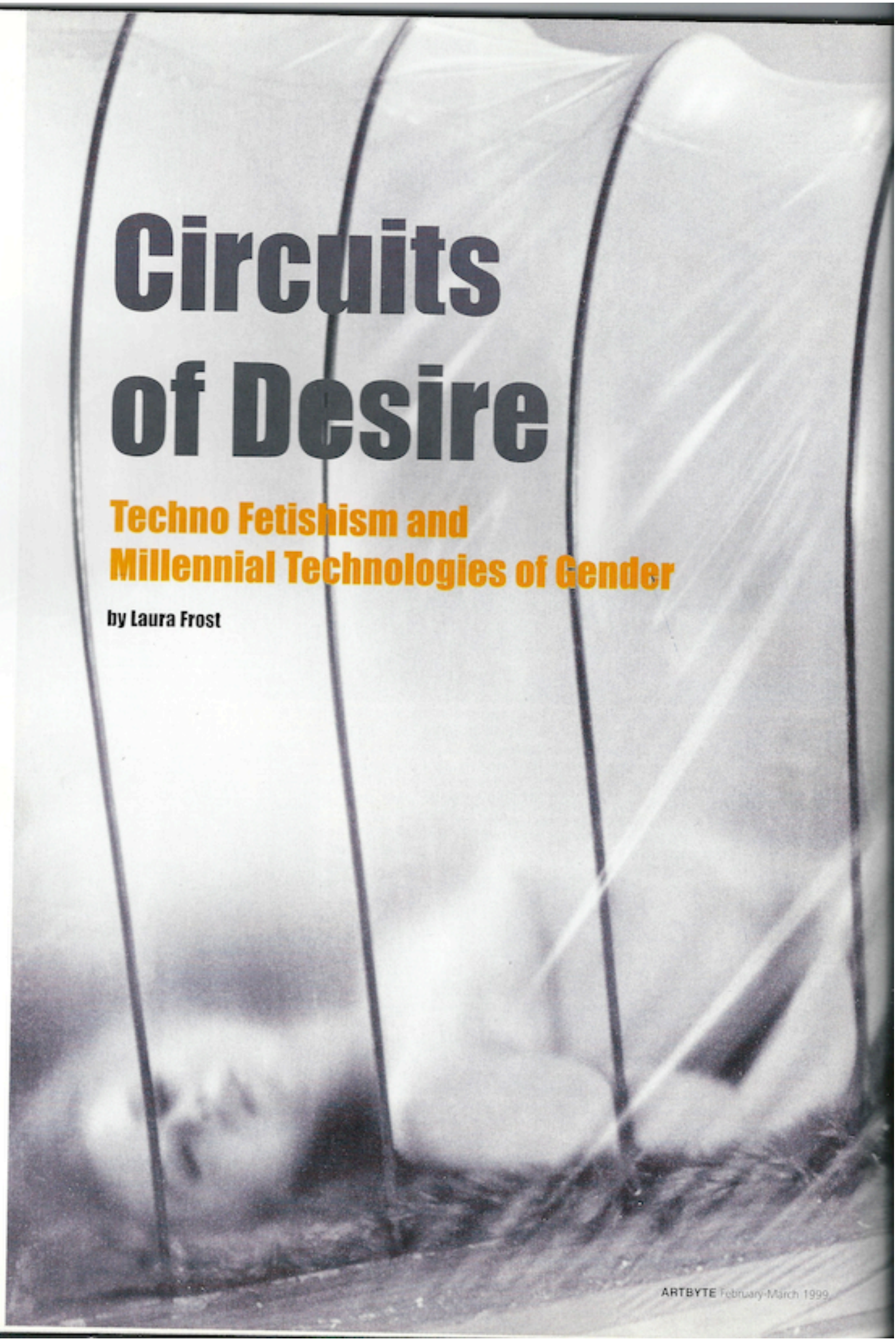
Feb.-Mar. 1999
Vol.1, No.6
$6.50 / Can $8.00

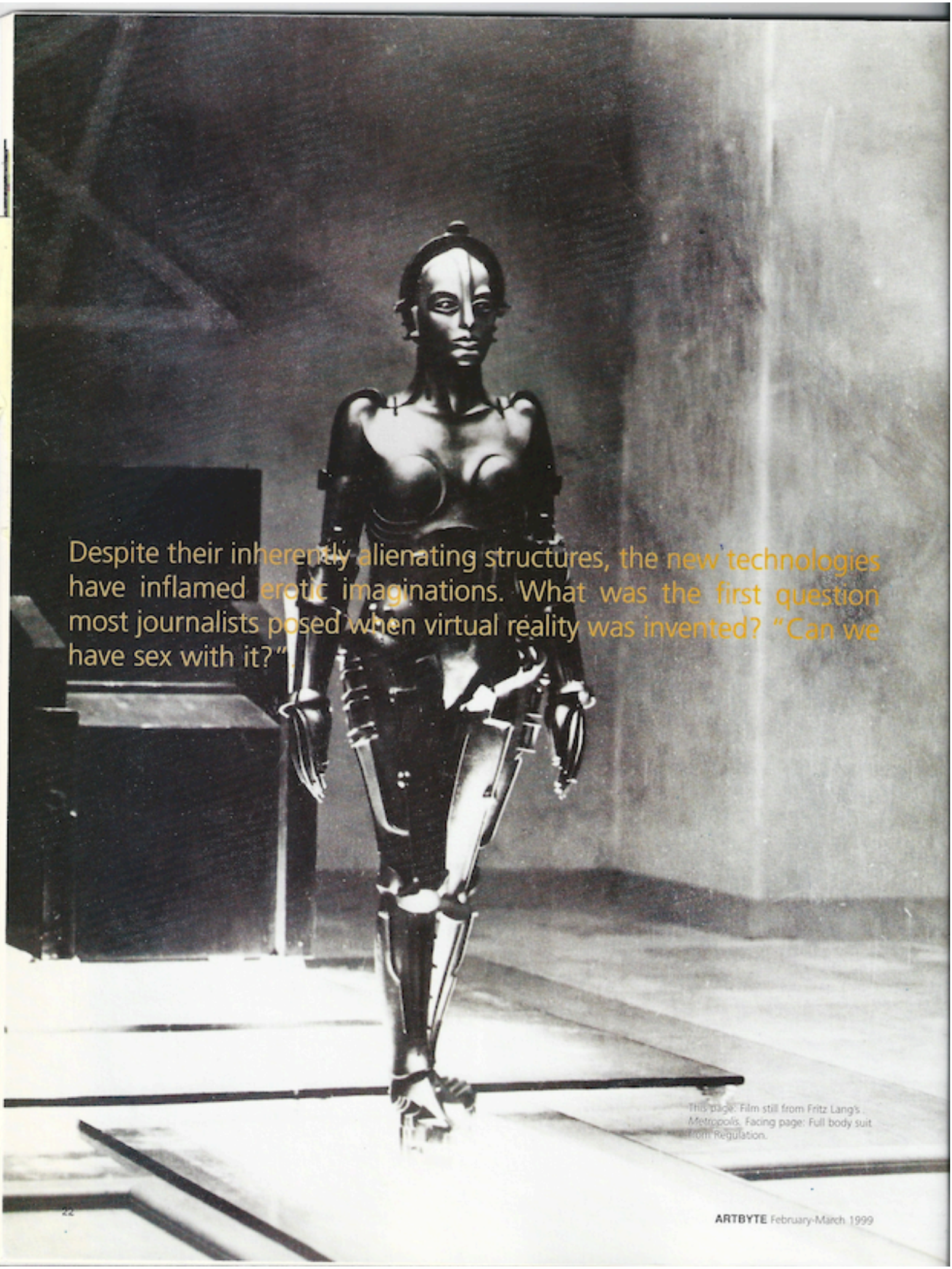
Circuits of Desire

Techno Fetishism and Millennial Technologies of Gender

by Laura Frost



Film still from Roger Vadim's *Barbarella*, starring Jane Fonda.



Despite their inherently alienating structures, the new technologies have inflamed erotic imaginations. What was the first question most journalists posed when virtual reality was invented? "Can we have sex with it?"

This page: Film still from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. Facing page: Full body suit from Regulation.

Nineteenth-century technology seems to have been designed to inspire eroticism: the steamy thrust of a locomotive, the vibrating pistons of an internal-combustion engine, not to mention the safety pin, the zipper, and that irrepressible signature of kink, barbed wire. It's no coincidence that the Victorian period was the golden age of sexual fetishism (classically defined as an excessive libidinal attachment to an inanimate object), with an iconography that remained virtually unchanged for a hundred years. Twentieth-century technology is pitched in an entirely different register. Its historical arc shows an increasing distance between people and objects via invisible force fields, electromagnetic waves, and encrypted signals: radar, lasers, satellites, atomic reactors, computers, microchips. Late-20th-century technology is to eroticism as the Quick Cam is to a Luddite.

Still, the libido finds a way. Despite their inherently alienating structures, the new technologies have inflamed erotic imaginations. What was the first question most journalists posed when virtual reality was invented? "Can we have sex with it?" The libidinal variations produced in recent years are stunning examples of how even the most erotically inhospitable forms of technology have been cathected and assimilated into a new erotic lexicon. The most elaborate example is "cyber" or "techno" fetishism, the erotic subculture that has materialized in the past five years or so, anticipated by William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. New York's Click and Drag is one of a number of clubs that boasts "new nightlife hybrid, an exploration of technology, fetish and the territory in between." The establishment's formal dress code suggests the mission of techno fetishism: "Sexy robot, fetish, anime, glamnerd vs. classic nerd, gender-hacking, cyberslut, trekkie, post-apocalyptic, Victorian, cyberpunk, or access denied!"

Traditional fetish fashion accentuates the body's shape: the latex catsuit and the corset, for example. Although it may create the impression of an impenetrable body, it nonetheless emphasizes the corporeality of the human form. Techno fetish is different. These costumes incorporate technological components—mechanistic design and computerized tropes—in order to morph the body into a hybrid entity. Equipped with screens, switchboards, and headsets inspired by virtual reality, these "bodies" sprout wires and complicated circuitry. A keyboard is planted onto an arm, a logic board serves as a breastplate, a motor of unidentifiable origin is wired into a headpiece. The resulting effect is a body fragmented into interlocking mechanical parts bound together by a rhizomatic network. Techno fetishism does not merely embellish the erotic potential of the machine but, rather, strives for a physical merging with the machine itself, a libidinalized grafting of technology onto the human body.

Japanese pop culture is rife with images of "sexy robots." The Japanese illustrator Sorayama is known for his techno versions of Vargas girls bursting out of robot costumes. Films such as *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* and animated series such as *Armitage* and *Battle Angel Alita* feature voluptuous female robots who seek to seduce and ultimately destroy men. Techno fetish culture draws from the anime scene and translates these fantasies into real-life costumes. The primary material of the techno body is metal, a substance whose relation to eroticism is indirect at best. Some techno fetish costumes retain standard modern fetish materials—PVC, leather, and rubber—but radically alter the form. Full-enclosure leather or rubber bodysuits distort and fuse limbs into grotesque shapes featuring strange growths and protuberances. These prosthetic appendages aren't human or identifiably functional; they are more like vestigial limbs, gesturing to an unspecified time in the past or sculpting an unknown future. Breathing tubes are quite common. In one instance, a sarcophagus-like body bag is hooked up to a portable vacuum. Another techno fetish costume (by Regulation) consists of an enormous futuristic inflatable sphere, with a zipper for entry; a gas-mask breathing apparatus threaded through the balloon suspends the wearer's body inside, with only his head, shoulders, and arms protruding from above. Many of these costumes serve a sensory-deprivational function, but the hoses, masks, and tubes are carefully incorporated into the sartorial element of fetishism and calculated to produce an otherworldly, nonhuman effect.

Techno fetishism, American and Japanese alike, can be traced back to a filmic prototype: the gleaming metallic goddess in Fritz Lang's 1926 *Metropolis*. This tall female robot with jointed limbs (which nonetheless have a seamless, smooth surface) and molded breast cups is the creation of a scientist, Rotwang, who intends to replace human labor in the futuristic city Metropolis with a force of mindless androids. In a climactic scene that makes great use of a "modern" laboratory set and graphic demonstrations of electric currents, the external features of Maria, the workers' heroine, are grafted onto the robot. In an Art Deco nightclub, the robot-Maria does a striptease for the leaders of Metropolis and then, rebelling against the orders of Rotwang, causes a libidinally fuelled riot among the workers.

Metropolis established several key tropes for 20th-century figurings of technology and culture: the machine that promises to improve life but goes awry, the imagining of the machine in sexualized terms, and the association of robots with predatory and feminine qualities. Lang was building on themes already present in the late 19th and early 20th century. E. T. A. Hoffmann's early-19th-century story "The Sandman" features an alluring female automaton, Olympia (who inspired Freud's essay on "The Uncanny," with its assertion that women, whether mothers, machines, or prostitutes, produce in men an ambiguous feeling of dread and sexual longing). F. T. Marinetti's 1912 "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature" includes a sadomasochistic love song to a "little machine gun" likened to "a fascinating woman ... sinister ... divine."

In *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen proposes that Lang's treatment of technology in *Metropolis* is related to castration anxiety aroused by female sexuality and a central fear of women usurping "phallic" power. By the interwar period, Huyssen argues, "women, nature, machine had

Far left: Helmut Newton, from American *Vogue* "Machine Age" layout, November, 1995. Silver robot suit and shoes, black patent-leather catsuit by Thierry Mugler. © Helmut Newton, *Pages from the Glossies*, Scalo, Zurich-Berlin-New York, 1998. *Pages from the Glossies* is edited by June Newton and Walter Keller.

Left: Falon, *Series Delta* suit, contemporary techno fetishism.

become a mesh of significations which all had one thing in common: otherness; by their very existence they raised fears and threatened male authority and control." Huyssen sees the creation of the "machine-vamp" in *Metropolis* as a displacement of "the much deeper libidinal desire to create that other, woman, thus depriving it of its otherness." Indeed, the self-generating "bachelor machines" that recur throughout modern art and literature demonstrate the desire to bypass women in reproduction. The man-made "machine-vamp" holds at bay generative dependence upon women and usurps threatening female sexual power.

Seventy years later, the themes have changed very little. Images of women in anime and cyber culture have for the most part continued in the soft-core direction of early sci-fi pulp novels and *Barbarella* space-porn. Perhaps they have a harder, laser-toting edge, emulating Lara Croft, but they distinctively emphasize gender. The male techno body, meanwhile, tends toward a harder, more mechanistic and androg-


high & mighty

ynous aesthetic. The cyber designer Garo Sparo, for example, shows women's outfits called "Betty 2060" and "Nebulatrix" that are not substantially different from standard fetish outfits, while the men's ensembles, such as "Galactic Servant," are decidedly asexual and even eunuch-like, as if shoring up the wearer against a dark hostile universe: the coldness of space, the last frontier.

The most evident contemporary inspiration of techno fetishism is *Star Trek* and its endless spin-offs—especially *The Next Generation*, which has introduced a number of nonhuman species overtly imitated by techno fetishism. The most notable of these is the Borg, a particularly aggressive species of cyborg that operates in a collective form (thus the singular). The Borg multiplies its numbers through "assimilation": a pernicious assumption of other species by injecting tubules under the skin, which release "nanoprobes" that infest and replace the victim's bloodstream. Techno fetish culture takes the Borg concept of "assimilation" quite seriously: it is the operating principle of the bricolage fusing of technological components onto the human body.

Borg culture is something like a beehive: a horde of interchangeable drones serve a Borg Queen. In the film *First Contact*, the Borg Queen is a sadistic, strangely beautiful, and grotesque creature. She makes her first appearance as a glistening, bald head (with delicate, classical features and external arteries) floating across a room on a short piece of spine that waves like a tentacle. She plugs herself into her body—a shapely gunmetal-gray mechanical suit—and sets about her task: intergalactic domination. The drone Borg are far less individuated. Their bodies, although retaining human form, are shaped out of undistinguished mechanical parts. Unlike the Queen, Borg drones have no facial expression other than one of vague menace. Interestingly, men's techno fetish costumes tend to emulate the drone Borg rather than the individuated Queen. The trademark drone mechanical eyepiece over one eye and the layered, mechanistic frigidity of the drone body constantly appear in men's techno fetish costuming.

Star Trek both influences and responds to techno fetish culture. In season four (1997-98) of the television program *Star Trek Voyager*, a Borg named Seven of Nine (played by Jeri Ryan) joined the Voyager crew. It was a revealing appeal to sexual undercurrents of techno culture. Seven is a statuesque blonde in a skintight blue jumpsuit. Her "nanotechnology" is mainly internalized, leaving her with a pinup exterior blemished only by a partial Borg eyepiece. Like the robot-Maria in *Metropolis*, Seven is a paradoxical creation: a machine whose hardware is hidden under comely human female skin. But Borg she is. In an episode called "Revulsion," a member of the Voyager crew is attracted to Seven's human exterior but is reminded of her true nature by her response to his advances: she informs him that the Borg has no need for seduction because it forcibly assimilates anything it desires. The Borg theory of sex encapsulates the terrifying allure of Seven: she is a perfectly engineered goddess who takes no prisoners. Between her lack of affect—her icy Amazonian demeanor—and the calculated casting and costuming, Seven is clearly reminiscent of a fetishistic type: the dominatrix. Which raises some important questions: Is techno fetishism just a technologically updated version of stereotypical SM fetishism? And why is it that the female robot or cyborg seems to be the most visible linkage of technology and sex?

Fetishism is precisely about the power of inanimate objects to excite sexual desire, stoking the libidinal fires by way of obstacles and substitutions. However, in its most extreme forms (the full-body suits of rubber or metal), techno fetishism seems to work excessively against eroticism. Its scaffolding and its deflective material severely curtail erotic and autoerotic possibilities: just as no one can touch the techno body beneath the machinery, the techno body can't touch itself. (In the case of Seven or the robot-Maria, where the technological components have been internalized, the machine's programming is distinctively anti-erotic or asexual.)

In this respect, the dynamics of millennial techno culture are one more example of how AIDS has changed the culture of sex, how it has induced an eroticized libidinal frustration. Hence, techno fetish is not simply a rarefied, bizarre subculture but, rather, is a more explicit articulation of trends in urban culture at large. One way to make the relation evident is to view techno fetishism in terms of its progenitor, SM. While SM culture and fashion was once limited to the domain of sex clubs and private dungeons, in the early 1990s high-profile couture fashion designers sent pale imitations—carefully studded leather dresses and color-coordinated dog collars—down the runways. It's unlikely that any designer (except perhaps Thierry Mugler or Alexander McQueen) will start mass-producing robot suits or inflatable sphere suits the way Versace coopted SM fashion for his 1992 "bondage lite" collection. But the aesthetics of techno fetishism are already making their way into the mainstream.

Photographer Helmut Newton, whose photographs appear in several mainstream fashion magazines every month, is arguably the most well-known and high-profile promoter of fetish fashion, and his recent work experiments with techno fetishism. After a phase in the 70s of photographing women with saddles on their backs, Newton settled into a steady pattern (in the late 80s) of creating tableaus of nearly naked women in impossibly high stilettos. Newton is fond of shooting these Amazons staring down bland-looking puny men in dark suits, often with obscured faces. Although Newton's images overtly depict women as classic dominatrix types, he has often been accused of objectifying and demeaning women. There is some credence to these critiques, but Newton's take on gender and female empowerment is by no means straightforward. He seems to be responding to his critics in his work of the 90s, which strikingly involves an exploration of women's relationship to technology.

Newton's recent photo shoots for American *Vogue* address the apparent paradox of his early work, in which he showed "empowered women" who "suffer" for fashion. In a notorious layout ("high & mighty") for the February 1995 issue of

Vogue, Newton photographed Valkyrie-like model Nadja Auermann wearing a series of couture stilettos (Blahnik, Chanel, etc.) that visibly hamper her ability to move. In one photo, Auermann reclines, spidery legs crossed, in a red-velvet-lined wheelchair. An anonymous black-suited man pushes her. Newton shoots the image from below, so that the wheelchair takes on an exalted stature; its shiny spokes and armrests are magnetic and almost voluptuous. In another shot, Auermann, perched on stilettos, hobbles with a cane on a jointed, polished silver leg brace very similar to the one Rosanna Arquette wears in *Crash* (the one that conceals the gaping wound with which the James Spader character copulates). In another photograph, Auermann leans against a car on one leg, an attractive matching prosthetic leg slightly offkilter beside her. Newton remarks in an accompanying pull quote that "A woman who wears these kinds of shoes has a tough time walking by herself." These images suggest that the sexualized body of the 90s simply cannot appear without restrictions, restraints, or prosthetics. And yet these obstacles are surmounted and ultimately eroticized.

The common ground between Newton's work and the techno fetishist aesthetic is even more clear in the photographs illustrating an article in Vogue called "The Machine Age." One photograph imitates the composition of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, except that the model is wearing a Thierry Mugler couture silver robot suit. In another, the female model is stretched supine on a "Panasonic Virtual Reality Massage Lounger" (a black leather chaise with a set of virtual-reality glasses over her eyes) while wearing a Chanel corset dress. The scene is a remarkable example of how the impulses of techno fetishism are translated into a more palatable mainstream register, how the fetishized body is traded in for the commodity fetish. Another photo in the series dramatically illustrates the confluence of classical fetishism and new techno fetishism. Three women appear in a chalky white room. In the center of the photo, a woman dressed in a Norma Kamali gym suit is working out in a state-of-the-art "ROM chrome and black steel" exercise machine. To her right, a woman wearing modern fetish staples, a black patent-leather catsuit (by Mugler) and stilettos, perches on the gym apparatus and shouts through a megaphone. To her left, the silver robot woman stands unsteadily against the machine. Two ages of fetishism flank Newton's favorite Amazonian type. Which way will she go?

And what does techno fetishism mean for feminism? Sexual fetishism itself has been thought to be, until very recently, the exclusive domain of men. As a compensation for castration anxieties and encouraged by a natural inclination for objectification ("the male gaze"), sexual fetishism just wouldn't make sense for women, or so psychoanalytic theorists thought. Women participate in techno culture, but their relationship to it appears different from men's: techno fetishism offers women a chance to "become" the "machine-vamp," but the mold is still Rotwang's. Donna J. Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" declares, "Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we [feminists] have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves.... It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories." The feminist potential of techno fetish, then, would be a deconstructive one: the taking apart of stereotypical circuits of desire and creating new ones that are more conducive to female power. So far the stereotypes—"cyberslut" and Seven of Nine dominatrix—are still in place. Perhaps the contemporary eroticization of the machine is the prerogative of those who do not feel estranged by technology, those who have been initiated into the world of programming. As of today, the highest echelons of computer culture are predominantly masculine.

In a recent interview published in the online journal *Salon* (Joel Stratte-McClure's "At Home with Helmut Newton"), Helmut Newton announces that he's finished with photographing nude women: "Today I have a strong desire to photograph women clothed from head-to-foot with hardly an inch of flesh. It will be a challenge to work under such restraints." This sexualized aesthetic of restraint, shared by techno fetishism, is a way of soothing anxieties about technological alienation by making it a part of one's libidinal repertoire. Although the fantasies that infuse techno fetishism at present are primarily male, that may well change as the institutions of technology change. In fact, given another ten years, techno fetishism, in a slightly different guise, may be inevitable. In the words of the Borg Seven of Nine: "You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile."

Techno fetishism, in a slightly different guise, may be inevitable. In the words of the Borg Seven of Nine: "You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile."

Laura Frost is an assistant professor of English at Yale University, where she teaches courses in 20th-century literature and culture.

Page 26: Helmut Newton from American *Vogue*, "high & mighty" layout, February, 1995. © Helmut Newton, *Pages from the Glossies*, Scalo, Zurich-Berlin-New York, 1998.

Page 27: Seven of Nine (Jeri Ryan) of *Star Trek Voyager*.

Opposite page: Yukito Kishiro, from the graphic novel *Battle Angel Alita: Angel of Redemption*, 1996.