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## Queer STS Forum #4: Interfaces of queer technologies and sexualities

For this fourth issue of our Queer-Feminist Science and Technology Studies Forum, we were originally looking for contributions to extend perspectives on sex robots from a queer-feminist point of view. We were interested in this perspective because in media, sex robots are either portrayed as great threat to society or as new, fascinating technological sensation. Although most people seem to enjoy discussing about sex robots, the discussions rarely exceed the dimensions of pure sensationalism and the belief that sex robots would further sexual objectification and patriarchal power relations of inequality and violence (e.g., Richardson, 2016). While acknowledging those concerns—which are predominantly expressed by the campaign against sex robots and indirectly supported by some scientific work (Gutiu, 2012; Sparrow, 2017)—we were sure that loathing sex robots per se cannot be the whole story. Too close seemed the similarity between the current anti-sexbot discourse to the anti-pornography discourse in the 80ies, which was strongly criticized by sex-positive and queer feminists (Offermann, 2012). Thus, we sought bring diverse queer-feminist perspectives to the discussion on sex-robots.

Later on we furthermore recognized that our pursued „extension of a queer-feminist approach of sex robots“ would ultimately not only de-construct the term ‚sex robots‘ or as one of our authors, Karen Richmond, puts it „sexually functioning automata“ (see “The Uncanny Valley: Extimité and the Lacanian subject”, in this issue, p. 7), but moreover lead to broader queer-feminist discourses on the interfaces of technologies and sexualities.

One of the scholars, who extended our perceptions of ‚sex robots‘ already a couple of years ago, is Nicole Duller, who told us during an Queer STS meeting in Graz about her work on DIY cultures around ‘fucking machines’, which were built mainly around their functionalities to give pleasure instead of focusing on their appearance. Nicole Duller and Joan Ramon Rodriguez-Amat define sex machines in their book chapter „Sex Machines as Mediatized Sexualities: Ethical and Social Implications“ (2019) as “technological devices to intimately interact with” (ibid., p. 223) and refer to six types of such machines, with only one (“sex machines of similarity”, ibid. p. 228), which imitate humans and comprise humanoid sex robots.

Hence, sex robots, sex machines, or the “sex automaton” can be seen as a mediator of sex and also gender identity: “In queer terms, the encounter with the uncanny sexual automaton is not limited to the apprehension of another who is impossible to define in

terms of gender identity. Rather, the automaton, in its uncanniness, allows for a simulated resurfacing of the tensions and psychic conflict of the split human subject, provoked by the collapsing of the division between subject and object, interior and exterior.” (Richmond, p. 10). As Elena Knox within this issue states: “The frontiers of robosexuality present untold opportunities to diversify sex, gender, and sexuality. They are vitally important in shaping future subjectivities.” (p. 21)

Karen Richmond brings us back to the very beginning of the often quoted “uncanny” (mostly referring to “The uncanny valley” by Masahiro Mori 2012) and argues that the originally psycho-analytical concept can – with a queer perspective– experience a shift from a site of conflict or acceptance problems to reveal implications of ‘the queer uncanny’ (Richmond, p. 10). With a potentially provocative argument Richmond concludes that critiques of sex robots and often debated ethical conclusions are inherently wrong, because: “In short, this is not the objectification of a subject. This is the subjectification of an object.” p. 15).

Elena Knox builds her article on the development, construction and use of – as she calls them – robot sex workers and cyborgian sex workers that are “[F]ollowing the rules of the entrenched patriarchal and socio-industrial complex [...]” and argues that “[...] the initial robosex avant-garde will embody the fetishist representation of the gynoid (female-appearing humanoid) that is standard in both science-fiction and consumer capitalism: concomitant living computer, demure housemaid, repulsive corpse, and enigmatic erotic object.” (p. 21) Within her artwork, she created a Gynoid Survival Kit for cyborgian sex workers, which she uses in her contribution as starting point to argue about issues of safety, telepresence, reproduction and control, componentry and conformity, roboethics and technicity.

Hence, research on and discourses about sex robots need to include a broader understanding of sexualities and gender identities. For our final article we therefore, asked Sophie Gerber from the technical museum in Vienna and Eleanor Armstrong from University College London to tell us about their upcoming event, a workshop on STEM Museums, Gender and Sexuality (s. p. 48). In their workshop, which is planned for the beginning for March 2020, the participants will “critically attend to constructions of gendered and/or heteronormative technology and science“ (p. 50). The workshop will offer “innovative approaches and perspectives for engagement with gender, LGBTIQ+ and activist movements in museums beyond a science and technology context” (p. 50).

## References:

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