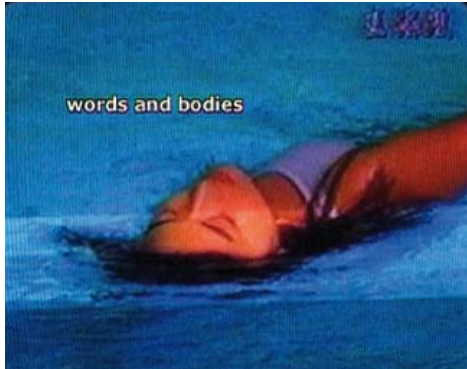
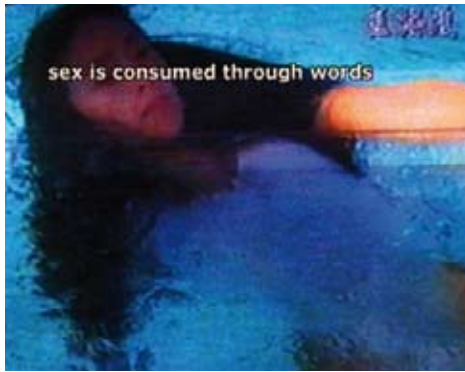


# TURNING BODIES INTO CODES: WRITING DESIRE





While all of my videos elaborate the relations of gender, technology and transnational capitalism, *Writing Desire* (2000) is perhaps the most rigorous at placing the contradictions produced by the union of new technologies and global capitalism implacably side by side.<sup>1</sup> Whereas *Performing the Border* examines the outsourced production site of the hi-tech industry at the US-Mexico border as a gendered space, *Writing Desire* looks at cyberspace as a marketplace, a place for consumption and a site where female bodies and desires are written anew. Through a complex web of discourses, the video traces the different subjectivities produced through virtual communication in both the industrial world and in post-socialist and southeast Asian countries. “Desire,” pluralized into “desires,” is tied to, and expressive of, the economic power, cultural profile and geographic location of the digital writer. The internet has quickly capitalized on these differences and created an eroticized relational space, which is determined in both sexual and economic terms.

*Writing Desire* was made in the early years of the world wide web, when email was still a relatively new communication medium. The research and assembly of the video was in itself a learning process, aimed at a better understanding of the dynamics that were to constitute virtual space. The video is a fairly wild assemblage of short scenes which draw their content from sociological studies and new media analyses. This includes a video interview with an NGO expert on trafficking in Manila, data and visual material found on the internet (particularly Russian dating and mating services), an interview conducted with philosopher Rosi Braidotti on women’s writing and the disembodiment of sexuality, electronic correspondence with a digital artist in Mexico City and knowledge gained through personal experiments with digital media and through the experiences of befriended cultural producers who were willing to share these intimate data.

Beyond the simple but dramatic fact that the electronic medium has an immediate impact on one’s positionality *vis à vis* a global community, these early experiences revealed that, in compressed virtual space, the notion of the self undergoes further transformations that affect questions of boundaries, gender, and sexuality. Electronic communication has become a tool with which to build romantic relations on a textual basis with a speed and immediacy unknown to us before now. The isolation of the private writing space inspires fantasies that travel the wires freely in their coded, textualized and disembodied manner. The fantasies are “free” because they do not have to be implemented, and they reach a heightened intensity because they are released from any embodied experience. This state of suspended realities simulates a permanent condition of being in love and

1 Yvonne Volkart, “Gender matters to capital,” *make: the magazine of women’s art*, February 2001, 5-6.

creates the sense of always approaching but never reaching. A seductive female voice speaks these exact words in *Writing Desire* as we are drawn into mesmerizing video images taken on night flights over Asian metropolitan areas, looking down on a spiderweb of light streams produced by the steady flow of street traffic. The images immerse the viewer in nocturnal impressions of thresholds and liminalities, locations of transit like airports and highways, images in which we are constantly moving forward.

*Writing Desire* is my first attempt at exploring the possibilities of designing a compressed and multilayered type of space of the www in video format. Highly fragmented, the piece breaks the conventional linearity of video by simulating the interactive character of online activities in many forms. Graphics and writing, as well as selection processes on the screen, suggest a viewing situation more associated with the computer monitor than with televisual or cinematic viewing. At a fast pace, the video provides individual clips which deprive the viewer of the causal explanations expected in a documentary or linear manner. Meaning has to be extracted and combined by each individual viewer; knowledge is produced in a way that has been learned from computers and the internet. "I thought of making a video so I could speak with you" says a silent text on the screen, addressing the relationship between the online computer and video which represent and constitute us differently.

The use of seductive writing is experienced by many in the western world as playful and fun. The aim of correspondence is to maintain the virtuality of the relationship, as announced clearly in the words on the video screen "I don't want to enter your reality because it will cost what we have now", emphasizing that the purpose of the activity lies in the self-reflexive process of writing itself which would only be jeopardized by a physical follow-up. In contrast, many women in weaker economies use the internet as an opportunity to address a western man as a symbol of redemption, of getting out of poverty. For these women, the correspondence is a means to an end, the end being migration to the west. In their writing, discourses of romantic desire intertwine with a desire for survival.

Unsurprisingly, the internet capitalizes on this vulnerable set of motivations. The booming bridal market is evidence of how emotional and sexual relations are being commercialized within a larger power scheme based on economic imbalances. There is a wealth of websites advertising women available for correspondence, friendship or marriage. Some of the domain names refer to an imaginary space: *freespace.virgin*, *love.garden*, *tropic.paradise*; others make reference to the women on offer: *china.doll*, *tiger.lillies*, *latina.heartbeat*, *geisha.song*, while others qualify the type of relationship they offer: *classic.love*, *good.wife*, *first.love.matrimonial*. The sites include comprehensive picture databanks with demographic and anatomical information about the

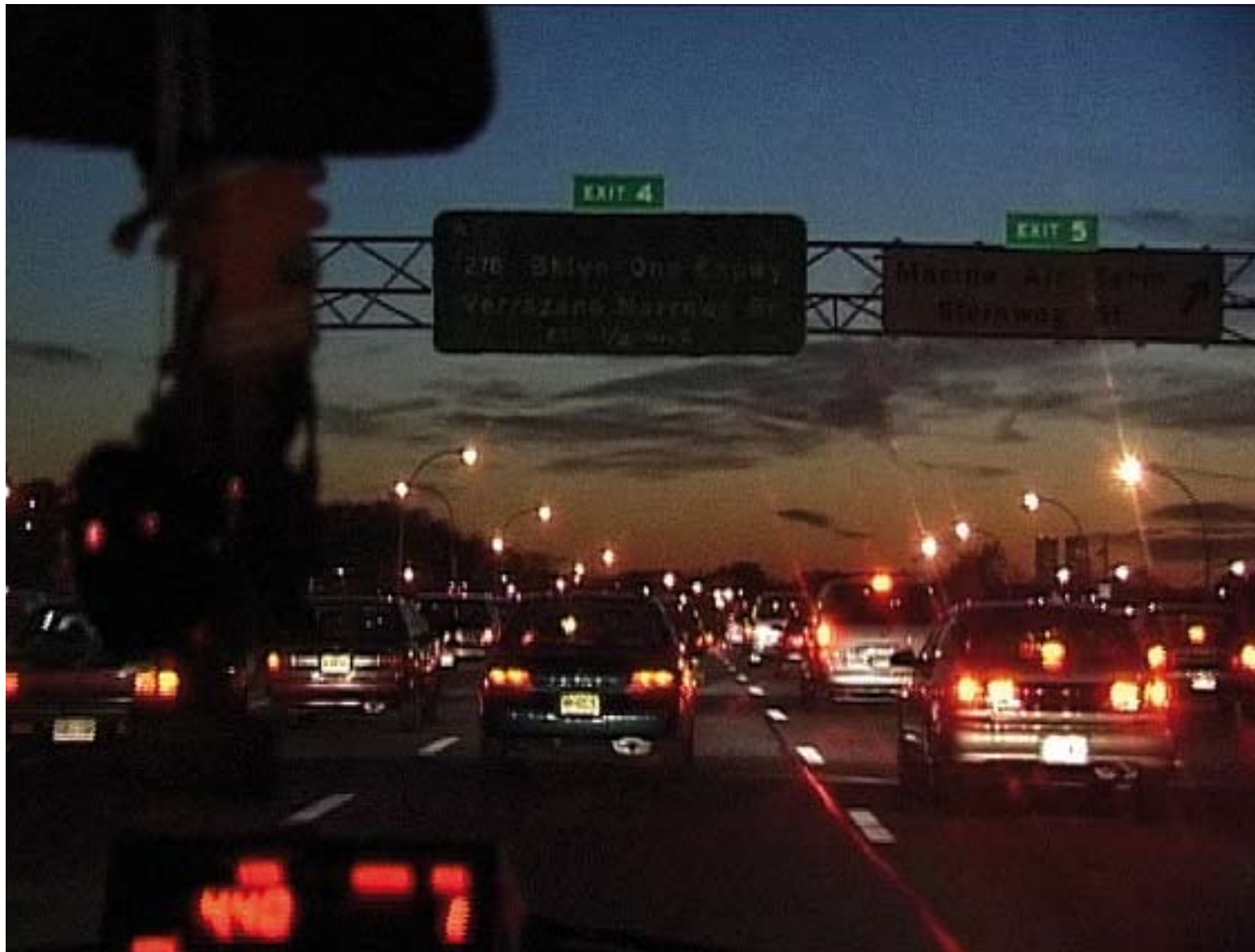
women. Some websites even feature short self-presentation videos in which women can voice their qualities and desires. Over the moving image of a blonde woman in an evening dress, *Writing Desire* summarizes the description of the Russian female, as advertised on one of these sites:

she is beautiful and feminine  
she is loving and traditional  
she is humble and devoted  
she likes to listen to mellow music  
the smile is her rhetorical gesture  
she believes in a lasting marriage  
and a happy home  
she is the copy of the First World's past

These markets for virtual brides easily extend into physical transnational space by offering travel packages to the places of recruitment, with the male desire to consume, possess and colonize strangely intermingled on these web pages. One of the package deals offers regular round-trips from a US city to Siberian Novosibirsk for \$199 and extends to prospective grooms the privilege of being the judge in a beauty contest organized for their benefit. The mail-order-bride – a positively thriving market segment in the decade following globalization – draws on an historical narration of the racialized female body as an object of desire waiting to be conquered.

It is no coincidence that the female reservoirs of Thailand and the Philippine Islands are being tapped for women with the traditional qualities which are allegedly becoming more and more difficult to find in the industrialized world. We remember the thick marriage catalogs from the 1970s, channeling thousands of agreeable, smiling and soft-spoken women to a male community in the west. The routes for female migration along those lines into Europe, North America and Japan have never ceased; on the contrary, they have accelerated tremendously in recent years through use of the internet. Women no longer have to travel to the west in the hope of finding a husband within the three months of their tourist visa. Migration is made easier with the use of email, enabling them to build up a relationship that will hopefully lead to an engagement and consequent invitation to the west.

In the late 1990s, women from East Germany and the former Soviet Union made their appearance in cyberspace. *getmarriednow.com* – a very selective "business class" type of site which offers Russian models with university degrees – announced the forthcoming videos of 2000 women from Siberia, Russia, and Ukraine. In the subsequent digital representations of Russian and Filipino women, their bodies are reduced to a flat minimum of visual and textual information, with the web cast technologizing the bodies even further. The slave of the colonial era is transformed into a post-Fordist robot. But, then again, through the new possibilities of web casting, women are also able to voice their desires through video clips and, by doing so,





Hello  
I'm Natascha



Novosibirsk  
Russia  
Kyrgistan



resist their total co-option. As subjects *with* desires they can no longer be reduced to mere objects of desire. In the short presentation videos, the female applicants can voice their personal qualities and wishes; however, the wish part is often pushed to the end and may be cut off by the agency to fit the prescribed length of the clips. In their standardized self-presentations – reduced to a pixellated, low resolution web image – the women begin to resemble animated cartoon characters; their desires become utterly interchangeable.

The human market on the net is thriving; resources are almost inexhaustible. Yet, behind some of the legitimate pen pal clubs are syndicated operations which market women in great numbers to a global community. By means of an international network of agents, passers and club owners, they recruit trusting young women from southeast Asia, advance the costs of their travel tickets and then force them to provide sexual services abroad until the debt is repaid. But, even in less coercive rapports, there is an economic imbalance that determines power relations between male and female correspondents, particularly when these are so firmly embedded in a long history of eroticized discourse. They replay the loops that tie together fantasies about the “other,” the conveniences and seductions of travel, the economics of global trade, and the brutal mobility fantasies that dominate gender politics in many parts of Asia and the world at large.

No matter how harsh the economic relations into which one inscribes oneself, there is always some degree of agency inherent in writing. *Writing Desire* is, first and foremost, an attempt to unite various positions of authorship without suggesting a binary contrast between those female subjects in advanced western societies – who practice a self-reflective, psychoanalytical, postmodern discourse of desire and sexuality motivated by fun – and those female subjects who struggle for survival and offer their emotional and sexual services to get out of the slums. Instead, the video investigates a wider range of writing positions, including the analytical voice of Braidotti who associates the disembodiment of sexuality due to virtual relations to the trend towards more ephemeral, adolescent body ideals in society, and the voice of the activist, Soki, from the International Migration Organisation in Metro Manila who specializes in monitoring regional trafficking operations in southeast Asia.

There is yet another position that is of crucial importance in this schema and that is the one represented in the video by virtual artist Maris Bustamante, based in Mexico City. Bustamante – who describes herself as a fifty year old feminist, mother, widow, university professor and radical of her own will – tells the story of how she sets out to find an American husband via the internet. The reason for searching the net is her thorough frustration with the meager partner options in the macho Mexican context. Her desire is to enter into a more emancipated relationship, and she

ends up meeting a lieutenant of the US Marine Corps on the net. In escaping the local machismo, Bustamante opts for a representative of the most macho enterprise on this planet... and marries him. One suspects that, had she met him at a cocktail party, he probably would not have stood a chance of speaking with her. What makes this incredible match possible is the fact that, in cyberspace, individuals are ripped out of their context, whereby the material signs of particular political, ideological and class-related values are suppressed. To achieve total mobility, the body has to be severed from local and social ties.

The increasing deterritorialization induced by electronic media and migration opens ample room for flexible self-designed identity. In *Writing Desire*, the subject and object of writing are not permanent, fixed positions – occasionally they swap. In an intimate late night scene, a woman dressed in lingerie sits at her laptop as a typographic dialog appears on the screen: “Say, have I turned into a permanent little icon on your screen? ... When you gave me a body image I was debating for a moment whether I should acknowledge it openly or download it into the subliminal text. – And? – Well, I decided to address it because it seems a way of finding a language for questions of desire and sublimation.” This time, the self-reflexive message is formulated by the author herself addressing the video viewer not as a consumer, but as her object of desire.

The intention of this video is to provide a better understanding of how virtual space constructs different subjectivities and how they relate to one another. If we compare the motivations, selection criteria and forms of enunciation in a low-income Filipino girl, a Mexican artist and a Swiss intellectual, it turns out that different desires author different scripts. But, seen in the larger scope of global capitalism, there may be a case that, for all their diversity, desires end up authoring pretty much the same script and, as argued by Angela Dimitrakaki in this book, that script is about the will to migrate to the true object of desire, which is not, of course, the man, or even the relationship, but the fetishized western economy.