

# ANTI-UTOPIAS

a contemporary art platform

## Swapping Identities. A Conversation with Claudia Hart

Sabin Bors  
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**Claudia Hart** graduated from New York University with a BA cum laude in art history in 1978, and then studied architecture at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture. She then practiced as an art and architecture critic. In 1985-86, she was Associate Editor of *ID* (then *Industrial Design Magazine*) where, along with Senior Editor Steven Skov Holt, she redeveloped it into its present form, *ID: the Magazine of International Design*. Hart has published her critical writings widely, and then went to *Artforum* magazine where she served as Reviews Editor until 1988. She continues to write critically but in the academic context, presenting papers at the past three College Art Association conferences with a new paper, *Baby doll: Boys and Their Virtual Toys*, scheduled for the National Women's Studies conference in Denver this November.

In 1988, Hart showed multi media work with the Pat Hearn Gallery in New York, moving from critical to artistic practice. At that time, she exhibited paintings and installations inspired by the visionary architecture from the French Enlightenment.

**Sabin Bors:** Your work was first inspired by the utopian architecture of the 18th century, and then in the 1990s you began working on iconographies of the virtual female and the female body. How did these two topics influence your work and medium of expression? How do they relate?

**Claudia Hart:** My interest in Utopian architecture began after I graduated from architecture school in the early eighties. In school, I studied the visionary architecture of the French enlightenment by LeDoux and Boullée. I attended a very conceptually oriented architecture school, Columbia University in NY, and most of my professors were paper architects themselves, meaning they built very little, but mainly worked with propositional forms. So it was a natural way for me.

When I finished school, I started writing criticism and was asked, along with another young writer, to reformulate the magazine *ID*, the old industrial design journal from the fifties. We both became editors of that historic journal when we were quite young, in our late twenties. Our idea was to make a magazine that hybrid art, design and technology, something like an American *Domus*.

I therefore began researching cognitive science and models of the mind and computer science, which lead me directly back to the 18th century Enlightenment paradigms of "reason" and of "unreason," and the historic polemic between Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In my first art works that I started making around the same time, exhibited with the Pat Hearn Gallery in the East Village in the mid eighties, I actually transformed myself into Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

In the course of this research I also discovered the work of Jean Jacques Lequeu. He was another 18th century paper architect whose works were erotic: a kind of architectural equivalent to the *Marquee De Sade*. A monograph had recently been published on Lequeu, written by Philippe Duboy, a radical French art historian who proposed Lequeu as a "folie" that he "proved" was actually a forgery produced by Marcel Duchamp when he worked at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris as a young man. Lequeu designed architectural décor featuring him in drag enacting various forms of a self stylized drag porn. I was completely captivated and started drawing obsessional self-portraits in his style, using hard drafting pencils and making very refined pictures in extreme detail.

In 1991, I did an exhibit in Paris of related works, and amazingly, Phillipe Duboy actually came to the show, recognized my practice as related to Lequeu, and invited me to lunch in his apartment in the 13th arrondissement. It was the beginning of a friendship that completed my formation. When I started working with 3D animation, it was because I felt it was the perfect embodiment of the many of the issues driving my work up until then. I was totally seduced by the mathematical computer model underlying it, and the possibility of using them to create images that have an uncanny and very artificial sense of reality. 3D seemed to visually merge the qualities of reason and of unreason. So I used it create erotica in the form of impossible, uncanny, female bodies that seem to work like clockwork.

After receiving an NEA Fellowship in 1989, she shifted her practice to Europe where she spent ten years and received numerous fellowships, including the Kunstfond Bonn, Stiftung Kulturfonds, the Stiftung Luftbrueckendank Grant, the Arts International Foundation Grant, the Kunstlerhaus Bethanien grant and two fellowships from the American Center in Paris. In Europe she exhibited widely with galleries and museums. Her work from this time has been collected by the Museum of Modern Art, NY; The Metropolitan Museum, NY; The MIT List Center, Cambridge; The Vera List Center for Art and Politics, New School, New York; The San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Berlin; and the Sammlung Goetz Museum, Munich.

Hart is currently an Associate Professor in the department of Film, Video, New Media and Animation at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is represented by bitforms gallery, NY. Her new works are part of The Sandor Family Collection, Chicago, the Teutloff Photo + Video Collection, Cologne, and the Borosan Collection, Istanbul, among others.

**Sabin Bors:** Some critics have insisted on the “utopian” character of the landscapes you create. What is the role of this utopian referent in your art?

**Claudia Hart:** I don’t think of them as utopian. I think of the space of my work as a site of the uncanny, a world which is both dead and alive at the same time, that is both yes and no. I imagine my environments as mind models, but ones that are filled with paradoxes and contradictions and are somewhat perverse. I also want them to be mesmerizing and to lull the viewer into a contemplative, hypnotic state, so to be a space of reverie.



**Sabin Bors:** In your work, the natural is always seen through a mechanic lens. Why do you give it this mechanized function?

**Claudia Hart:** We are living in a time where the human and the natural are melting down and swapping identities, so this is part of it. The other part is the context in which I developed this work. I was teaching in a “Pixar” approved school where all of the students wanted to make either cartoons or men in armor, or soldiers, or monsters, for first-person shooter games designed for adolescent boys. This is a very conventional culture that is resistant to self criticism or self reflection. So I wanted to introduce an element of the “sublime,” meaning that idea from the Romantic period, about nature, into this kind of corporate technocratic culture. I used to make my pieces as in-class demos. It was a kind of sociological experiment. It was very unsettling for them.

**Sabin Bors:** Technology is a mediating environment, one that you traced back to its Christian origins and the exercise of a religious, political, and economical power. It is deeply rooted in the scientific advance of society. How do you interpret the science-religion binome in today’s society?

**Claudia Hart:** I think there’s a difference between science and bureaucratic technocracy. When I traced technology to monastic culture, I was doing this as part of a feminist critique of male, homo-social engineering culture. I identified it with feelings of anxiety and hostility, not just towards women, but also towards those things that are culturally identified with the female, including the sensual. I also thought of this kind of engineering culture as embracing a certain kind of rigid binary thinking.

But you see it in the extremely right-wing, fundamentalist Christian culture that has gripped the USA for the past 20 years. It is characterized by a kind of polarized simple-minded, black-and-white thinking. And in fact this is a culture that also rejects the science, higher education, nuanced thinking of any kind, and for specific examples, climate change and global warming, and even the concept of evolution.



**Sabin Bors:** How does the virtual female inform the cultural fields and their relation to consumer products? And how does the female body break away from homo-social cultures?

**Claudia Hart:** It's not the female body per se that I am positing, but the whole world that I am creating with all of the elements in it that I've already described. Also, please note, I happen to be a female, and in addition to being a stand-in for me, my virtual women are a far cry from the usual folks one finds in game worlds and other VR environments. In my world, there is nothing much is going on, no tasks to accomplish and no problems to solve. All there is to do is watch the grass grow. It's a world outside of the idea of efficiency, rationalistic systems, industry pipelines, and is pretty much purposeless. It has no use-value.

**Sabin Bors:** What is pornographic and what does sensual mean?

**Claudia Hart:** Well, first of all, porn is an industry. It has to do with consuming sex with humans in a depersonalized way and selling or buying it for money, as a product. It has to do with objectification and dehumanization. The sensual can include the erotic but more important, sensual knowledge comes through the senses and through the body rather than through analytic systemic thinking. I posit the sensual in resistance to and in relief from the bureaucratic, the corporate and the logo-centric.

**Sabin Bors:** I remember that for *Can We Fall in Love with a Machine*, you mentioned that virtual beings pose "on the brink of an evolutionary divide, hovering between animal, machine and conscious Subject". Where does the machine meet the animal? And how could virtuality contribute to the awakening of consciousness?

**Claudia Hart:** Ummm, did I really say that?

Well, it definitely already is creating a different kind of culture. The virtual highway, meaning the virtual space we find on the Internet and in shared virtual worlds, allows a special kind of meeting of minds between people whose bodies may be scattered all over the world – and separated by a number of years, such as the one that you and I are currently having, for example. The virtual commons is cultivating a new society and are transforming cultural constructions of the body and about the self.

**Sabin Bors:** How should one understand the idea of an "affective digital body"? I understand "affective" in its relation to the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, and separate it from the idea of "emotion"...

**Claudia Hart:** For me the affective digital body is one that is capable of conveying humanness, and can therefore elicit empathy on the part of the viewer. As an artist, this is THE most important thing as I'm interested in communicating with my audience in a direct way.

As to Deleuze and Guattari: I actually never try to illustrate theory. Perhaps you can explain the relationship to me, I think that's YOUR job, isn't it?



**Sabin Bors:** How could the alternative constructions of the virtual Subject inform and create an authentic, direct emotional exchange with people?

**Claudia Hart:** I think this is more an issue of representation than of virtuality. Figurative artists of all kinds have to define a way to communicate. And this would be through representations of the face, and gestures of the body. It is equally challenging for figurative painters and for live performers as for those like me who create virtual Subjects.

Interestingly, at The School of the Art Institute, my graduate advisees are divided equally among performance artists, film makers, video artists and artists dealing with virtual bodies. We all deal with the same issues of expression, affect and representation.

**Sabin Bors:** Our emotions are increasingly dependent on the evolution of emerging technologies. How do you see the future of this emotional engineering? Are we fated to fulfill the withering destiny of the technical Self?

**Claudia Hart:** The more masterful I become maneuvering high-end technologies, the more intuitive and natural it becomes to me and the more fluidly I can represent my dreams and allow images to flow out of me. I notice this to be the case with the really young artists, those who are true digital natives. Technology becomes prosthetic and an extension of the body, so if we so desire it. I think the technocratic is a function of the corporate bureaucratic mindset, not the technologies themselves.

**Sabin Bors:** The desacralization of the body in ancient Western traditions lead to the body's self-exhibition in Western mass-media. The body itself is but an image. A manipulation. A seducer. How do you interpret the split between visual régimes based on the semiotics of signification and those based on the semiotics of communication?

**Claudia Hart:** Mass media empties out everything in the sense that it is used to manipulate and coerce people to consume products that they don't need or want. It is also used to brain-wash them to accept patent falsehoods and things that are against their better interests, in order to turn them into passive subjects – meaning to truly subjugate them. That's why the American working class has so easily discarded their democratic rights, supports the Republican fundamentalist right, and has allowed the USA to decay into a corporate plutocracy. What could be worse than this?



**Sabin Bors:** Technology is deeply connected to social ideologies. It is the most influential and seducing device of political propaganda, and the body seems to be the perfect agent for this. How could we redefine the body in terms of digital media, and thus redefine the dominant culture?

**Claudia Hart:** I don't think we can make hard and fast rigid rules, otherwise we fall into the same kind of ideological traps as the dominant culture does.

We can only think critically and feel our way along, one case at a time.

**Sabin Bors:** You insist on the iconographic study of the contemporary gaming industry and its relation to military knowledge and intelligence, but also to education and the entertainment industry. Could you please detail this?

**Claudia Hart:** I got all of my info about this from the writings of Tim Lenoir, Chair of the Program in History and Philosophy of Science at Stanford. He was the first to identify the military entertainment complex (<http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/configurations/v008/8.3lenoir.html>).

Lenoir describes the strategy of economic cross fertilization promoted by the US military in order to develop simulation technologies for military training enactments in *All but War Is Simulation: The Military-Entertainment Complex* in which military scientists entered the commercial computer game industry to further develop technologies used for flight simulations and war games in the form of popular interactive shooter games with their vastly superior commercial production budgets. The intention was to be re-deployed by the military, after being advanced in the commercial realm.



**Sabin Bors:** 9/11 certainly had a critical effect on culture, and I know you've discussed this in its relation to shooter games as part of an "at-war American military culture". How does this relate to the Gulf War and the age of television?

**Claudia Hart:** The media has directly affected war in the USA since the Vietnam era, when I was in college. All of that brutality was piped directly into everyone's living rooms. I think it mobilized my generation to resist the Vietnam war, which ultimately ended it.

The opposite happened with the Iraq war. After 9/11, a plethora of shooter games were introduced in the US, as products and freeware. They were created both by the DOD and also by commercial game companies (who by the way, also according to Lenoir, employed many former military simulationists, who had the right skills but also shared militarist values). These computer games cultivated a military culture of young men ready to enlist: ready and willing to a play real "live" war games.

**Sabin Bors:** How can art expose and contribute to the rejection of "entertainment industry aesthetics"? How could art bear away from the trajectory of its own history?

**Claudia Hart:** By somehow managing to express the pain of human being.

