AN-ICON

AN-ICON Studies in Environmental Images

Issue №1 Year 2025

→ Virtual Sex: Pornography, Immersion, and Erotic Environments

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AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images
Issue 1
Year 2025
an-icon-journal@unimi.it
https://riviste.unimi.it/anicon

Creative direction & design FIRM.GS
Proofreading and layout battitoriliberi

ISSN: 2785-7433

AN-ICONOLOGY
History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO
DIPARTIMENTO DI FILOSOFIA "PIERO MARTINETTI"

AN-ICON has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. Grant agreement No. 834033 AN-ICON.
The project is hosted by the Department of Philosophy "Piero Martinetti" – Department of Excellence at the State University of Milan.

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Hallucinated Pornography: AI, Synthetic Erotics, and the Reverse-Engineered Image of Desire

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Abstract

This paper explores the emerging aesthetics of AI-generated erotic images, emphasizing how hallucination, estrangement, and synthetic opacity replace the immersive realism and emotional transparency of traditional pornography. Pornography is viewed here as a visual regime centered around legibility, immersion, and bodily availability, while erotics is proposed as a mode in which desire develops through opacity, latency, and estrangement. Through a comparative analysis of works by artists Arvida Byström and Jake Elwes, I argue that synthetic erotics do not aim for direct representation or immediate sensuality but operate through ambiguity, atmospheric affect, and resistance to being captured. Arvida Byström's *In the Clouds* mobilises AI-generated nude self-portraiture as a feminist strategy of opacity, pushing machinic codes of sexual legibility toward the point where they collapse into aesthetic estrangement. Jake Elwes's *Machine Learning Porn* exposes the spectral traces of a neural network trained to classify and censor explicit content, rendering desire as glitch, residue, and machinic symptom. Both practices utilize hallucination as a technique, reconfiguring the erotic as a space of tension and delay. To analyze these images, I use reverse engineering not only as a technical metaphor but also as a semiotic method, revealing how erotic hallucinations interfere with systems of recognition, legibility, and algorithmic control.

Keywords

Hallucination | Posthuman visuality | Reverse engineering | Synthetic erotics | Opacity

To quote this essay: Voto, Cristina. 2025. "Hallucinated Pornography: AI, Synthetic Erotics, and the Reverse-Engineered Image of Desire," *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 4, no. 1 (2025): 86–103, https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/29472

Introduction: Hallucinated Images in the Age of AI Erotics

In the picture, a female figure crouches in an impossible pose, a ballet of digitally rendered skin and synthetic muscle tone. Although the body may initially seem coherent and conventionally recognizable, a closer look reveals its composition falling apart – one can no longer distinguish its parts. It becomes a trompe-l'œil of artificial and assembled flesh, a visual illusion that mimics wholeness while losing anatomical clarity. It is not a photograph of a body but a synthesis of what a body might be if shaped by desire and filtered through aesthetic computation. Hyper-visible yet unreachable, the body becomes a hallucinated event. The female figure does not perform for us; she performs for the system, folding herself into the ambiguity of being seen yet unread while the viewer cycles around, caught in the gravity of a form too artificial to trust, too uncanny to possess. The image belongs to the series of AI-generated self-portraits that Arvida Byström[1] circulated through Sunroom, an OnlyFans-like platform, within the broader project In the Clouds (2024), where synthetic nudity, parasocial interaction, and platform economies become objects of artistic experimentation[2,3].

Another piece, now a video, depicts bodies melting and transforming in rhythmic abstraction while pulsing in darkness – flesh-like shapes blooming and dissolving without faces or centers. It is Jake Elwes[4]'s *Machine Learning Porn*[5] (2016), a video that offers not actual bodies, but traces: echoic smears of synthetic skin, flickering hints of

1 A Swedish artistit, model, and musician.

2 As she reported in an interview: "In November [2023] I saw a tweet that complained about ads for 'nudifying' platforms. Around that time I had been working with DALL-E's Out-Paint tool, which could be described as a tool for collaging with AI. You upload a photo or a painting and then edit it with AI. These 'nudifying' platforms reminded me of photography collage. The results are actually quite realistic, so I became interested in messing with the platform and creating more grotesque, glitchy results. Then Sunroom [an OnlyFans competitor] got in touch and offered me a sponsorship deal. It seemed like an interesting way to explore the new landscape of influencer sex work" (Roux 2024).

3 The image has also been published on the artist's Instagram profile (Bystrom 2024).

4 A British media artist, hacker and researcher.

5 The video is available on the artist's website (Elwes 2016).

sex that never fully appear. These hallucinations are generated by a neural network trained to censor pornographic content, yet pornography here endures as a symptom – a ghostly montage of what the system tries to erase. There is no narrative, climax, or point of view; no camera enters a scene – it is the scene itself, recursive and hypnotically detached. Generated by reversing a neural network trained to censor explicit content, *Machine Learning Porn* reveals the machinic hallucinations of a system trained to detect and suppress sex – producing amorphous, synthetic imagery that reflects the network's internalized patterns of taboo, fantasy, and control. Where Arvida Byström's avatars polish the self to excess, Elwes offers no self – only the rhythmic output of pattern recognition turned inward. Their hallucinations are ambient, erotic only as mist is wet: not intentional, but atmospheric. What seduces is not desire but the uncanny spectacle of a system trying – and failing – to remember what it was built to suppress.

Nevertheless, both artists destabilize the immersive promise of virtual erotics. Rather than simulating intimacy or facilitating identification, they conjure friction, delay, and non-resolution. They ask us to linger with the strange, suspended between recognition and refusal, beauty and blankness.

In this paper, I use the term pornography to refer to a cultural regime of representation focused on legibility, immersion, and the transparent availability of the body to vision. In contrast, I use erotics to describe a different aesthetic and semiotic state, where desire arises through opacity, latency, and estrangement rather than visual realism or identification. The concept of hallucinated erotics, therefore, signals a shift from pornography's immersive transparency toward a mode of visuality structured by opacity, delay, and resistance.

Considering these two artworks, the following develops a semiotics of synthetic erotics rooted in their shared tension. I distinguish between hallucination of the self (as in Byström's avatars) and hallucination of the system (as in Elwes's neural outputs), two modes that togeth-

er illuminate how AI reconfigures erotic imagery. Through this perspective, I propose to theorize AI-generated erotic imagery through the concept of hallucination: images that simulate without representing, seduce without revealing, and inhabit the erotic as a zone of glitch and ambiguity. These images are less about what they show than how they operate on bodies, gazes, and classification architectures. Moving from representation to operation, hallucination becomes a method; through it, we glimpse a post-representational erotics devoted to opacity and the flickering instability of synthetic desire.

Toward a Semiotics of Hallucinated Erotics

The hypothesis I am exploring is that AI may embody a historically and tropically situated[6] (Haraway 2016) aesthetic within erotic visual culture, one that shifts from immersive realism and emotional elements toward hallucination, moving away from the transparency of society in general (Han 2015), and of pornography in particular. Instead of simulating bodies to be entered, touched, and thus objectified, these images stage ambiguity, estrangement, and synthetic opacity[7] (Glissant 1990). They resist intimacy, rendering it frictional, speculative, unstable, and, in doing so, open a diverse semiotic terrain where the erotic is not on the frenzy of the visible (Williams 1989) but unfolds through atmospheric abstraction, automatization, and posthuman ambiguity.

By hallucination, I refer not simply to AI errors but to a productive visual regime that unfolds in two direc-

6 To say that an aesthetic is historically and tropically situated means acknowledging that it is embedded in material-historical structures of power and discursive-semiotic operations of meaning, and that critique must address both. This orientation resists the abstraction and universalization of computational aesthetics by insisting on context, position, and figuration.

7 Following Édouard Glissant, "opacity" is understood not as a lack of clarity, but as an ethical-political mode of refusing transparency, capture, and epistemic domination. In this sense, opacity asserts the right to remain illegible within systems – such as biometric algorithms – that equate recognition with intelligibility and control. More generally, and drawing on Glissant, opacity resists reduction to data, categorical identity, or legibility, proposing instead a relationality grounded in alterity, unknowability, and the refusal to be fully known. See Glissant (1990) and Haraway's critique of the "god-trick" in *Situated Knowledges* (1988) for complementary accounts of partiality and non-innocence in knowledge production.

tions: hallucination of the self, in which avatars of identity are exaggerated or dissolved (Byström); and hallucination of the system, in which machinic cognition exposes its own spectral residues (Elwes). In both cases, hallucination is not an accident but an operational aesthetic – images that perform estrangement by revealing their own artificiality.

To theorize this, it is necessary to position AI-generated erotics within a broader semiotics of the body, particularly one attentive to feminist critiques of visuality (Pollock 1988; Haraway 1992; Carson and Pajaczkowska 2000; Fraser 2000) and posthuman understandings of embodiment (Hayles 1999; Buongiorno 2019). These frameworks allow us to interpret hallucinated erotics not as degraded pornography, but as aesthetic interventions into the conditions of recognition, legibility, and embodiment under algorithmic vision. In the age of machine vision, the erotic image becomes less a record of presence than an output of computation (Viola and Voto 2023), in a visual regime where bodies emerge as functions of machinic modulation.

The shift from indexicality to operationality (Parikka 2023) marks a turning point for erotic aesthetics, enabling images to appear seductive while refusing full entry, to perform beauty while sabotaging identification. Arvida Byström and Jake Elwes articulate two divergent but complementary uses of hallucination as a critical method. Byström stages the self as a synthetic mirage: her avatars are hyper-feminine not to attract the gaze, but to clog it, to overload its expectations. Where biometric capture seeks legibility, Byström installs friction. The hallucinated self she performs in *In the Clouds* resists the instrumental logic of AI-generated identity: it is un-indexable, affectively suspended, estranged from both subjectivity and realism. Elwes, on the other hand, reverses the gaze. *Machine Learning Porn* does not construct an avatar – it reveals the machine's inability to do so. Their project hallucinates not the self but the system. Visualizing what a neural network trained to censor porn imagines when asked to produce it, the video reveals an algorithmic residue: pulsing shapes, ambiguous organs, ghostly pleasures assembled

from datasets and filters. Here, desire is leaked, abstracted into a glitch. Elwes's hallucinations expose the visual unconscious of classification systems: the looping, recursive, fragmented symptom of a machine trying to simulate what it has been programmed to fear.

Together, Byström and Elwes trace the outer contours of what we might call a hallucinated erotics, where intimacy emerges through modulation, abstraction, and strategic deformation rather than through fidelity to the body. This is where hallucination ceases to be a mere failure of representation and becomes a deliberate semiotic method, a way of making visible how erotic desire is encoded, resisted, and misfired in algorithmic infrastructures. Their practices displace sensory immediacy and cultivate a slow, ambient estrangement. In this aesthetic regime, desire emerges through misalignment and delay, and within this setting, the viewer is kept in suspension, with meaning accruing gradually, shaded by latency rather than driven by clarity. Through ambiguity, these images articulate a counter-narrative in which the erotic derives its power from opacity through hallucination, which acts as both method and intervention. It dismantles fantasies of seamless immersion, disrupts the architectures of digital intimacy, and deflects the normative pull of recognition. The body, no longer structured as a locus of entry or certainty, hovers as glitch, atmosphere, tension. Within this shift lies the potential for a posthuman erotics shaped by refusal, speculative aesthetics, and synthetic estrangement – a sensibility that reimagines desire beyond transparency, identity, or possession.

As bodies become computational surfaces and erotic affect is encoded, visual culture finds itself suspended between two poles: the synthetic subject and the automated system. Within this suspension, Arvida Byström and Jake Elwes present two distinct but mutually illuminating approaches to AI erotics. While Byström's work occupies the intimate edge of synthetic subjectivity, her avatars reject biometric realism while simultaneously performing femininity to the point of saturation. In this gesture, Byström weaponizes gender: her images perform over-recognition,

folding traits of digital femininity – softness, symmetry, pink – into a kind of aesthetic excess that becomes resistant through hyperbole and, in this shift, the viewer is seduced into estrangement, held at the surface of a body that performs compliance while staging refusal. In contrast, Jake Elwes collapses subjectivity altogether. *Machine Learning Porn* depicts the residue of machine cognition reversing the logic of classification, generating images from the latent traces left by a system trained to erase them. The result is an uncanny erotics of non-reference: glitchy, indeterminate forms that appear not as scenes of pleasure but as outputs of algorithmic neurosis. There are no characters, encounters, or climax – only a looped attempt at remembering what must remain unseen.

Where Byström uses AI to fracture the self, Elwes shows what happens when the self is never even assumed, yet both artists resist the immersive logic of affective realism. They create not identification but deferral, immersion, and suspension. Their works do not invite entry into a fantasy – they delay it, fracture it, and aestheticize its impossibility. Together, they stage desire as a glitch in recognition (Russell 2020): a site where image and affect no longer align, and where the erotic emerges as ambient instability. Desire here is not arousal – latency, friction, or refusal to resolve.

Through this comparative frame, we encounter two experiments with visuality: one that stretches the limits of what the self can become under synthetic light and one that exposes the classifier's unconscious aesthetic. In both, hallucination becomes a critical gesture, a method for revealing how digital systems construct, contain, and fail to comprehend the erotic body.

Immersion Revisited

As a dominant paradigm in contemporary digital aesthetics, immersion promises seamless integration between viewer and image, body and interface, staging desire through immediacy, responsiveness, and sensory

inclusion (Hutson 2024). This fantasy unfolds most vividly in virtual pornography, where presence becomes technologically mediated through haptic simulation, visual realism, and algorithmically tailored affect. Intimacy is shaped as technological proximity, a state in which the space between subject and object dissolves under visual and tactile synchronization pressure. Immersion signals the technological ambition to absorb the viewer entirely, to anchor affect in sensory saturation, and to resolve the image into an enveloping field (Malaspina 2024).

In the works of Arvida Byström and Jake Elwes, immersion does not guarantee presence or access. These images stage delay, sustain suspension, and generate estrangement as primary modes of visual engagement. Entry gives way to orbit; absorption yields to hesitation. The viewer remains proximate yet displaced – seduced by surface, animated by friction. Desire emerges not through fusion but through misalignment. Clarity recedes as the images organize experience around latency, uncertainty, and affective ambiguity.

Hallucination first obstructs immersion in its classical sense, where identification and presence rely on coherence and realism. However, this obstruction does not eliminate immersive engagement. Instead, it reconfigures immersion into a suspended form, structured not by immediacy but by delay, not by absorption but by atmospheric tension. This is the key claim: immersion is not denied but transformed.

This displacement of immediacy transforms the erotic image into a speculative proposition. Visibility remains, though emptied of its referential force. Meaning unfolds across intervals, gliding through patterns without anchoring to form. Immersion no longer serves as a passage toward identification; instead, it persists as an unstable perceptual terrain.

Byström's hyper-feminized avatars stage a self-calibration to recognition, yet are devoid of psychic transparency. Every gesture is legible within the codes of digital femininity, yet remains aloof, emotionally opaque,

and affectively suspended. Her images establish a grammar of estrangement: the body as atmosphere, the erotic as delay. Elwes intensifies this principle. In *Machine Learning Porn*, the visual field disintegrates into algorithmic residue. Desire circulates through smears, pulses, and glitches that suggest the memory of sex filtered through machinic abstraction. These images contain no actors, no narrative, no identifiable bodies. What remains is the hallucination produced by a classifier trained to suppress what it imperfectly remembers. Here, immersion takes the form of saturation without resolution: the viewer is enveloped not by coherent scenes but by recursive feedback, intensity without climax. Immersion persists in the mode of saturation, density, and recursive failure. The visual does not open into space – it condenses into a signal. The result is not narrative progression but rhythmic intensity, an aesthetic trance grounded in system feedback.

Across both practices, immersion becomes a condition structured by delay rather than contact and dissonance rather than absorption. These images expose the scaffolding behind the fantasy of immediacy. They unravel the aesthetic labor required to produce coherence, and through that unraveling, foreground the visual protocols that sustain immersion as a cultural form. Abstraction becomes operational, not as evasion, but as activation. Sensory overload, stylization, and affective blankness replace the tropes of realism and transparency.[8] This reconfiguration marks a critical intervention in the politics of digital visibility. Byström and Elwes construct aesthetic experiences that sustain distance, privilege unreadability, and insist on the ambiguity of bodies rendered synthetic. Their erotics resides in the pause, the hesitation, the stutter of systems attempting to resolve what resists completion. Once equated with proximity and presence, immersion reemerges here as atmosphere: diffuse, recursive, and unresolved. Through this grammar of estrangement, the erotic image loses none of

8 Kate Crawford's analysis of AI as an extractive and infrastructural medium (2021), together with Anne Anlin Cheng's reflections on surface and opacity (2011), further illuminate how immersion is displaced into atmospheric suspension rather than presence.

its intensity – it acquires new force through opacity, through friction, and through the refusal of legibility.

Feminist and posthuman aesthetics converge in this operation, where the hallucination of the body detaches it from the imperative of recognition. Opacity functions as a strategy of refusal, a displacement of biometric realism through ambient erotics – a distribution of desire that circulates without centering, drifts without resolution. Desire does not anchor; it hovers. Proximity unfolds without reaching the point of possession. Estrangement does not signal the failure of immersion; it signals its reconfiguration as critical suspension.

Within this reframing, immersion loses its association with identification and becomes a modality of suspension. The bodies rendered by Byström and Elwes are not configured for consumption. Instead, they generate visual events that return the gaze to the viewer, who becomes implicated in the process and unsettled by it.

These works foreground the system's excess rather than its absence. Endless production – images, norms, codified desires – builds toward a threshold where the apparatus hallucinates, and that hallucination becomes the texture of its aesthetic surface. Immersion transforms: sensorial coherence gives way to intensity formed through estrangement and recursive density. Realism passes into resonance, expanding the interval between subject and object, stretching perception until it remains open as a sustained tension zone.

Opacity intensifies this critique (Glissant 1990). In a visual culture defined by its obsession with legibility and exposure – particularly about sexualized, racialized, and gendered bodies (Blas 2016; Marling 2021; Voto 2021) – opacity refuses the coercive clarity of visibility. It saturates vision and simultaneously frustrates its resolution, and allucinated erotics emerge. This reconfiguration proposes not a retreat from image culture but a transformation of its aesthetic logic.

Byström and Elwes elaborate this politics through divergent but entangled strategies. Byström con-

structs a visibility emptied of emotional reciprocity. Her surfaces are hyper-polished and meticulously stylized, performing seduction to the point of abstraction. Her figures oversaturate the codes of femininity until those codes short-circuit. Elwes, by contrast, reveals the opacity within the algorithm itself. His images arise from machinic hallucination – unfixed forms, visual murmurs without human origin, spectral arrangements that expose the neural network's unresolved relation to sexuality. The classifier's recursive labor becomes visible through a register of ghostly incoherence.

Across both practices, the image refuses epistemic capture. These bodies are not misrepresentations or aesthetic failures; they open the possibility for a visual presence that resists incorporation into the systems of legibility and control. Under conditions dominated by biometric indexing, automated content moderation, and algorithmic sorting, this mode of resistance is not reactive; it becomes a generative force providing the conditions for a speculative erotics – an aesthetic mode composed of drift, opacity, and visual misalignment. Immersion no longer indicates fidelity or entry; it becomes ambient tension. Identity does not consolidate; it disperses into aesthetic atmospheres. Seduction unfolds not through recognition but through an unresolved presence that refuses to be settled. This is not disappearance. It is deliberate misrecognition, a refusal to stabilize. Moreover, in this refusal, a politics of erotic opacity begins to take form.

Reverse Engineering and the Semiotics of Erotic Hallucination

If estrangement and opacity define the aesthetic condition of synthetic erotics, then reverse engineering becomes its critical method. The synthetic erotic image – dislocated from referential flesh, suspended in ambiguous desire – does not merely represent bodies or fantasies. It performs operations. It is the aesthetic residue of technical systems learning, forgetting, and hallucinating sex. To

understand such images, we cannot rely on hermeneutics alone. We must reverse engineer them – not to decode meaning, but to uncover function.

In its classical sense, reverse engineering refers to the technical act of deconstructing a system to understand how it works. However, when transplanted into a semiotic and aesthetic field, it becomes a way to engage with visual regimes *not for what they show, but for what they do.* This methodological shift mirrors the earlier displacement of immersion: just as hallucination reconfigures absorption into suspension, reverse engineering reconfigures interpretation into analysis of operation. It asks: what kinds of bodies are produced by this image? What assumptions about gender, desire, and legibility are embedded in its construction? What does the system see when it tries to imagine the erotic?

In the context of AI-generated erotics, reverse engineering becomes necessary because the image is no longer authored in the conventional sense. It emerges from a process: neural networks trained on biased data, classifiers conditioned to detect and suppress "NSFW" (i.e., not safe for work) content, and generative adversarial systems hallucinating bodies they were programmed not to recognize. The image is an operation, not a message. To approach it critically, we must reconstruct the technical and cultural processes it indexes.

Jake Elwes's *Machine Learning Porn* literalizes this method. His project reroutes a censoring neural network – originally designed to identify and suppress explicit content – into producing its own vision of pornography. The result is not a reversal of censorship, but its *aesthetic excretion*: ghostly pulsations of synthetic flesh, algorithmically imagined but never fully rendered. These images are not erotic scenes – they are epistemic symptoms. They show us what the system believes sex looks like when asked to hallucinate it. The failure of realism here is not disengagement but a different kind of immersion – one structured by recursive feedback, glitch, and atmospheric saturation. This is reverse engineering as critical exposure. Elwes does not

intervene at the level of content, but at the level of *machinic fantasy*. They lay bare the classifier's unconscious, revealing how systems meant to control desire end up reproducing it in disfigured, residual form. It is not the erotic that seduces here, but the uncanny logic of a system misfiring – a machine trying to recall the thing it was trained to forget.

Arvida Byström's *In the Clouds*, by contrast, performs a form of reverse engineering from within the aesthetic codes of algorithmic femininity. Her AI-generated avatars embody the tropes of online desirability – smooth skin, pastel tones, curated softness – but do so with a degree of precision and excess that destabilizes their apparent cuteness. These figures do not appear monstrous immediately; their unease unfolds slowly, revealed not through disruption but overperformance. The perfection becomes too seamless, the pose too stylized, the surface too polished. What initially reads as legible beauty begins to dissolve into something uncanny. Byström does not glitch the system through this hyperbolic precision – she exposes its logic. Her avatars reverse engineer immersion by weaponizing recognition itself, overloading visibility codes until intimacy collapses into estrangement. Her avatars operate at the threshold where desirability collapses into abstraction, unfolding the visual protocols that define synthetic recognition and revealing the strangeness hidden beneath algorithmic compliance. Where Elwes reverses the neural network, Byström reverses subjectivity-as-style. She turns herself into a hallucination – a speculative portrait that floats at the edge of biometric realism. These avatars are not hidden; they are hyper-visible. However, their visibility does not grant access. Like Haraway's cyborg, they refuse to have transparency of identity. They exist in what we might call *operational opacity* – a space of appearance that resists capture.

In both practices, reverse engineering becomes a semiotic gesture: a way of making visible the structures that condition visual desire under machine vision. It aligns with the call to read media through their technical operations rather than their symbolic contents, and with the insistence on aesthetics as a mode of systemic intervention. It

is also deeply feminist, echoing N. Katherine Hayles's work on reflexivity in cybernetic systems and Donna Haraway's politics of irony, partiality, and resistant embodiment. Reverse engineering, therefore, is not a digression from the analysis of immersion but its methodological counterpart. If immersion is reconfigured by hallucination into suspension, reverse engineering allows us to map this process at the operational level – revealing how classification, legibility, and desire produce their own opacity.

Byström and Elwes ultimately share a commitment to refusing immersive realism – not by rejecting images but by repurposing them. They show us what happens when we stop asking erotic images what they mean and start asking how they function: what labor they perform, what fantasies they encode, and what forms of control they rehearse. In doing so, they propose reverse engineering not merely as analysis but as aesthetic counter-design.

In this sense, reverse engineering is not just an auxiliary tool – it is central to the politics of synthetic erotics. It enables us to articulate a visual culture where meaning is no longer tied to representation, but to operation. It provides a method for engaging images that no longer mirror reality but simulate its desires. Crucially, it offers a strategy for intervening in classification systems, seduction, and surveillance by turning their outputs inside out.

Synthetic erotics, when reverse-engineered, cease to be about immersion or pleasure. It becomes a map of epistemic violence, an archive of machinic bias, a choreography of algorithmic hallucination. To observe these images is not to enter a fantasy – it is to study its circuitry. Moreover, from within that circuitry, perhaps, we can imagine different desires.

Conclusion: Toward a Synthetic Erotics

The rise of AI-generated erotics marks a fundamental shift in how desire is visualized and shared in today's digital culture. Freed from the need for material reference, the erotic image now exists in a liminal space – sta-

tistically likely, visually balanced, yet ontologically uncertain. Instead of mimicking presence, it evokes possibility; its logic is rooted not in physical immediacy or true-to-life realism, but in aesthetic play involving estrangement, ambiguity, and synthetic opacity.

Within this new landscape, the works of Arvida Byström and Jake Elwes follow different yet interconnected paths. Byström creates avatars with hyper-stylized femininity and monstrous latent details that produce a kind of emotional stillness. These figures, set against pastel voids, do not seek emotional connection through absence but through performative visibility – oversaturating their presence to make intimacy seem inaccessible. Her images serve as speculative rehearsals of embodiment, where clarity is neither entirely given nor completely withheld, but continually postponed. Femininity here is not mimed as authenticity but staged as a shifting aesthetic artifact, encoded for algorithmic consumption rather than human intimacy.

Elwes, on the other hand, works at the level of the system itself. Their *Machine Learning Porn* reveals not the failure of representation but the productive inner workings of neural classification. The images they generate come from applying content moderation algorithms in reverse, exposing the machine's visual unconscious – a recursive hum of disjointed desire shaped by training data and suppression protocols. These images resist traditional storytelling and depiction; they communicate through pulse, blur, and spectral forms. Erotic tension arises not through direct connection but from the uneasy recognition that what we see is the system's echo of what it was designed to erase.

Both artists contribute to synthetic erotics, a new visual regime where desire no longer depends on identification. Traditional immersion, tied to presence and physical sensation, dissolves into delays, ambiguity, and unreadability. In this new regime, affect is not heightened through accessibility but suspended through atmospheric tension. What might seem like aesthetic incoherence is a deliberate act of resistance: a refusal to follow the epistemic rules of

biometric realism, data collection, and visual mastery.

A key method here is reverse engineering – not just as a technical dismantling but as a semiotic strategy that makes the codes behind the image understandable and adaptable. Unraveling the erotic image involves breaking its visual promises, exposing the algorithmic framework beneath its aesthetic coherence, and shifting its emotional direction. Byström does this through an excess that fractures conformity, while Elwes manifests it through the system's recursive output. Both turn hallucination from accidental glitch into an aesthetic technique, transforming malfunction into mode.

I suggest that these works gesture toward a synthetic erotics, a speculative aesthetics of desire grounded in latency, friction, and opacity. This notion does not seek to encompass the whole field of AI erotics; it traces a trajectory opened by the practices of Byström and Elwes. Their dual approach opens the horizon of speculative intimacy: a relationship with the image shaped by sustained dissonance, unresolved proximity, and a politics of refusal. Synthetic images withdraw the body from sensual fullness and instead distribute embodiment across opaque surfaces, saturated with signals yet resistant to interpretation. The erotic persists in the interval where signification slips away and seduction stretches into abstraction.

To theorize synthetic erotics is to explore the political and aesthetic possibilities that unfold within artifice itself. Hallucination emerges as a gesture that reveals the contingencies of desire under algorithmic regimes, while opacity articulates an ethic of visual presence that resists imposed terms of recognition.

These synthetic images redirect desire radically. They craft erotics through latency, friction, and atmospheric drift, and they challenge us to dwell within the interval, where resolution never arrives and tension sustains perception. Between the seen and the unseen, the legible and the opaque, the real and the synthetic, these works suggest that the future of visuality takes shape in estranged images rather than perfected ones.

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ISSN: 2785-7433

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UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO
DIPARTIMENTO DI FILOSOFIA
"PIERO MARTINETTI"

AN-ICON has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. Grant agreement No. 834033 AN-ICON.
The project is hosted by the Department of Philosophy "Piero Martinetti" – Department of Excellence at the State University of Milan.