

SEX DRIVE

Curated by Stuart Horodner

Just One Kiss, Then Another

Essays

by [Farid Azfar](#)

In [Melanie Manchot](#)'s 2009 film, *Kiss*, a boy and a girl kiss on top of a double-decker bus as it moves through the streets of London. Manchot's camera must have been positioned a few seats back; from this position we view them in the gallery, as if we ourselves were on the bus. They are framed by the city, the enveloping night, and a haze of swarming lights. The kissing lasts for ten minutes. Or perhaps it lasts forever, the film looping as it does in gallery settings. The kisses are graceful, the kisses are awkward. There are brief moments of quietness and eternities within seconds of mutual contemplation: moments that are almost melancholic in their brevity. There are times when the lovers withhold their embraces, others when they seem to invade each other with something akin to aggression. Each kiss creates a demand that the next kiss needs to meet. As the kisses become more passionate, the demands become increasingly difficult. More so even than the lips, it is the hands that illustrate this undercurrent of despair: the lovers do not fall into each others' arms so much as they sway in and out of the others' control, always teetering on the edge of their seats, always at the precipice of embrace. The most significant plot twists are shifts in temporalities—moments where one lover changes the narrative by slowing things down or speeding them up. From the back, we catch glimpses of smiles—smiles that could be smiles of conquest, or smiles which recognize the ultimate impossibility of true conquest. There is a point when the girl runs out of breath and rests her head on the boy's shoulder, as if bewildered and overwhelmed, as if to say, "This is too much. I need time to stop for a moment. I need to think about what we are doing. I need to figure this out." Beyond the lovers is a constantly moving city, whose beeping sounds and blinking lights create a rhythmic buzz that seems to synchronize with the locking and unlocking of lips.

Who are these lovers? Why are they kissing so relentlessly? Are they about to part or have they just been reunited? Are they in control or have they lost it? Are they shameless or shameful in their oblivion to their surroundings? Is the picture they make one of contentment or one of desperation? And just how are we meant to react to them? Is the film itself jubilant or melancholic, utopian or dystopian, euphoric or wistful? What is it trying to say about them and what is it trying to say about *us*? What is it trying to *do* to us? I find that I cannot engage with these questions without using distinctions introduced in an extraordinary work of historical scholarship: [Giulla Sissa's *Sex and Sensuality in the Ancient World*](#). Sissa aims to bring to life "an anthropology of ancient sexuality." Critical to this anthropology is her distinction between sexuality and *sensuality*. For her sexuality "smacks of the chemist's shop, the natural history museum and forensic medicine" (6). "Sensuality," by contrast, "is the pleasure of the senses, kept alive by a persistent craving, the need to take, embrace, hold a yielding body, but, even more, to please a willing soul" (194). Sensuality, for Sissa, is a historical process: "Civilization is a process which starts with hardship and hardness, only to progress to softness. It begins with sex and progresses to sensuality...The process of softening...coincides with the process of civilization" (104-105).



Melanie Manchot
Kiss, 2009, Film, 10mins
Courtesy of Galerie m Bochum, Bochum, Germany

We might disagree with this assertion, but it is clear that the terms of Sissa's anthropology can help us understand this film and other works in *Sex Drive*. My point is not to show that nothing has changed since Ancient times (although that may be the case), nor to suggest that elements of the Ancients live within us (although that too may apply), but to place her categorical distinctions before a work like *Kiss* and see what emerges. The Ancients, she insists, saw many things that we don't necessarily see so clearly ourselves. "They realized that bodies are basic models not just because of their configuration, but also, and above all, because of their openness to the world and their incarnate intentionality." And they made a series of critical distinctions, at the crux of which was the question of the relationship between pleasure and desire. Let me proceed, then, by summarizing her narrative, which uses this distinction in order to show us how we get from

Homer to Plato and from Plato to the Christians. And then I will return to *Kiss*.

The three stages of Sissa's analysis can roughly be divided as follows:

Stage One: Homeric desire, a line that ends at the point of pleasure.

Stage Two: Platonic desire, a line that never ends.

Stage Three: Christian desire, a circle with a center of pleasure.



Whereas for Homer desire is limited by nature, for Plato it is insatiable. Homeric desire is “a movement towards that which has provoked the longing...a movement towards its own cause... Pleasure marks the end of desire... Desire is the past of pleasure... Desire is suicidal” (37). Then, at some point between Homer and Plato, desire becomes *insatiable*. “The loved person becomes an unattainable objective...the recipient in whom one confides the very difficulty of attainment” (39). The Romans kept this Platonic tradition alive. Sensuousness, for Lucretius, was “elusive and ended inevitably in disappointment, jealousy, and bitterness, because desire is always excessively voracious and unrelenting.” If desire was always uncertain, jealousy was “awareness of the loved one's essential freedom” (9). The Ancient pursuit of what Sissa calls “the unfathomable pathology of desire” is perhaps most startling in its revisionist implications for the early Christians. Foucault saw the Christians as prioritizing desire over pleasure; Sissa sees them as locating pleasure *within* desire. Lust was itself a form of pleasure—to look at a woman in lust was to commit adultery. Sex was feared for its speed and transience: it was because the libido brought pleasure too quickly—and not, as the Platonists would have it, because the insatiability of desire made it unattainable—that the libido had to be distrusted. “Whereas desire made pleasure impossible for the ancients, for the Christians it made pleasure all too real” (206). Christianity, in other words, created a time warp when time was the thing that separated desire from pleasure. It was not a disgusted attitude towards sexual acts but “the coexistence of desire and pleasure, in a movement of consent” that was “the fundamental problem of Christian sexual morality” (187). Christianity was a radical altering of the Homeric and Platonic temporalities of desire. “The sexual event takes place in the heart, where desire is satisfied at the very moment in which it appears” (186).

We need not buy into Sissa's narrative in order to acknowledge the usefulness of her distinctions. If *Sex Drive* is any indication, the three traditions seem to be in a noisy, contentious dialogue, a dialogue rich in paradox. And the distinctions will render the dialogue and paradoxes visible.

Let us return to *Kiss*. The piece, on first glance, seems to prove a Homeric point: that there is no pleasure without desire. “The very absence of what you want plays a fundamental role in what the selection of that which, later, will delight you...It is therefore the same thing that causes both desire and pleasure...Appetites are not insatiable” (38). This is the principle that seems to motivate both these lovers as they lean back to be kissed. To keep the kiss going, each lover has to create a reason for desire. If we break the film into several moments of withholding and release, it seems to prove the Homeric point a hundred times over. The Homeric line of desire, a line that ends at pleasure, keeps being drawn and redrawn here.

But if we think of the film as a whole that is only meaningful in its entirety, then it suggests a shift from a Homeric to a Platonic vision of desire. “Kisses are never enough,” Sissa writes of the Platonic Lucretius, and this could well be the title of Manchot's piece. There are moments when it seems that each lover wants something the other cannot give—that each tries every possible kiss because no kiss is perfect. Because every kiss points to a better kiss, a different kind of kiss. Sensuousness ends inevitably in disappointment, says Plato, as summarized by Sissa, “because desire is always excessively voracious and unrelenting” (9). It is perhaps because the lovers are reacting to an inner desire which can never ultimately be sated—and not, as we might assume, to something that is in the other's power to give—that the kissing never really ends. What the one lover wants, the other cannot give, and so the piece loops on forever: this is the Platonic interpretation of this film, one that locates the source of pleasure in a chamber inside the soul, and then throws the key to this chamber down a well.

If Platonic desire is “not defined as a state but as a process, a shift from empty to full, in a movement which never ends because plenitude can never be achieved,” then the piece is not only Platonic but fully illustrates “the fundamental theoretical argument of Platonic ethics,” a problem that emerges when “sex...imposes a use of time that is subject to the inability of erotic desire to take possession of its object and retain its hold upon it” (45). Sex is useless because it never reaches its destination, like the bus making rounds through London. Sex in the Platonic sense is worrying “because it becomes sensuality and, therefore, wastes your time: compliance with desires means failing to take notice of anything else” (46). I cannot imagine a work of art that more vividly illustrates this critical source of Platonic anxiety about sex, “desire that maintains pleasure in an unremitting flow” (46). The piece, as such, is entirely defiant of our sense of erotic time: one that is made up of movie kisses that tend to either evolve into full blown sex or devolve into outright rejection. Cinema is about temporal economy and sex has to conform to its temporal-financial dictates. It is for this reason that Platonic pessimism about an inherent insatiability is kept at bay—in movies (most of the time) but not in this piece. The temporality of this

piece conforms to a different economy—the temporal economy of a London night bus, one that keeps running and running and running, in an existential loop that is either tragic or sublime, depending on how you see things. The kissing, like the driving, is not a prelude to anything. It is, like the bus, everlasting and, as such, either profoundly worrying or profoundly exhilarating.

Kiss delivers us from Homer to Plato, and then from Plato to St. Paul and other early Christians. The piece is Christian in what it shows us about the containment of pleasure within desire. For the piece also implicates us, the viewers, in its bewildering cycle of desire and pleasure. Who among us does not at some point identify with one of the lovers? Even if we are not aroused by the lovers, or by the act of continuous kissing, we are forced to position ourselves in relation to the scene. In fact, we are behind it: as if we ourselves were passengers on the bus of never-ending desire. But unlike the other passengers on the bus, who emerge occasionally and choose to sit in front of the lovers—as if ashamed by what they are about to see—we remain positioned behind the lovers. Unlike the other passengers, we stare, throughout, with impunity. Every second we spend before the film seems to suggest that pleasure comes from looking, and not necessarily from doing. The relentlessness of the lovers' kissing is matched by the relentlessness of the camera as it stays fixed, resolutely behind them, refusing to move, refusing to allow them a moment of privacy. It is rebelling, it seems, against a Christian antipathy towards looking—an antipathy that Sissa claims only started with the Christians. The two lovers, meanwhile, are impervious to us, as we sit behind them, and to London, as it unfolds before them. They are impervious to our penetrating gaze and, their imperviousness, they liberate us from the fear of being caught as we look directly at them. By liberating us, they implicate us in the shameful of looking.

In all these ways, Kiss asks us to witness a scene of sensual extravagance and then forces us to consider what this witnessing means. It tells us that it's OK to look. It tests the limits of our ability to look. It tries to get us to see how much we really want to look. It prods us to measure our unquenchable thirst for scenes of extravagant sensual abandonment—for kisses that remain kisses without turning suggestive, crude, or explicit. In either case, we are supposed to get some kind of pleasure—even if it is a perverse form of pleasure, even if it is a cerebral pleasure—from looking at this seemingly eternal kiss. We're trying to derive pleasure from the lovers' desire for each other. And, as such, the piece is quintessentially Christian, or post-Christian: unthinkable outside of a Christian—or post-Christian—context. Every second we spend before the film is a second of viewing pleasure. Even if that pleasure is mixed with the shame which comes from self-discovery—a discovery of the fact that we sat behind the film at all. But the extent of our pleasure can never be divorced from the extent of the shame, which, in turn, is proportional to the extent of our deprivation—the extent to which we are denied that pleasure in everyday life.

The piece, as such, is Homeric, Platonic, and Christian: all at once. Inasmuch as it reaffirms the immediate and evanescent—the momentary burst of pleasure extended across minutes, or across eons—it combines a Homeric optimism about pleasure with a Platonic pessimism about insatiability. If Homeric desire is “a conscious tendency towards an action, a condition or an object” (37), then the piece might be quintessentially Homeric. If Platonic desire “does not have an external cause, but rather an object or an objective towards which it suddenly veers”—an object that is “generated by human passion itself” and hence “unable ever to prove satisfactory”—then the piece could also be quintessentially Platonic. What we consider it to be depends on how optimistic or pessimistic we are feeling at any given moment. And also how Homeric or Platonic we are feeling. If, as Sissa writes, “the question of inexhaustible appetite became secondary to the question of impatient assent to a future pleasure” (12) at some undetermined point in the first three centuries of Christianity, the film seems like a late Christian warning tale: the lovers' assent to future pleasure is decidedly impatient. And so is our willful fixation on them.

Why was Kiss made? Why does its creator want to freeze things at the point of desire and why do we go along with it? The lovers, it is clear, are caught in the moment, and we, too, are caught in the moment that catches them. Why catch them and why be caught? What lies beneath and beyond this moment? It is my suggestion, here, that mortality lies beyond it: its outline is discernible not far beyond its horizons. Some might protest against such a claim. But the older you get, the harder it becomes to look at a piece like this without a feeling of wistfulness. Our reactions to Kiss divide us, in this regard. They date us. Still, even the most utopic of us knows that the lovers are not going to kiss forever. We know that the bus is eventually going to stop; we know that the passengers will have to get off: just like we, eventually, will have to stop watching the film. And we know that their embrace is not eternal. In the relentlessness of its fixation on this embrace, the camera also comments on the temporal contingency of the act. The lovers are caught in a moment, but they are also indebted to the moment that has caught them. They are indebted to it for its magical properties. If the piece can be seen as celebrating desire and pleasure, it can also be seen as eulogizing it. This is true whether we see it as Homeric (a hundred moments strung together, a hundred moments of death and rebirth) or Platonic (one long gasp of desire, in search of pleasure that defies death or makes it bearable). At its most euphoric, it is its most elegiac.

It is useful, perhaps, to compare Kiss to one of the other pieces: one that is far more explicitly about death—[Patricia Cronin's](#) marble mortuary sculpture memorial to her marriage. This is a Greek statue of a post-coital embrace amongst

lesbian lovers, in which the lovers are Cronin and her partner, and the sculpture is set in a graveyard. Cronin has said she is using a national form—19th century mortuary sculpture—to address a federal failure, one that makes it impossible for her to marry her partner. Art uses death in its rebellion against sexual control. But art is also rebelling against time—against the limited temporalities of desire and pleasure. “[What I can't have in life, I will have forever, in death,](#)” says Cronin, and in this piece she takes us to a point where Homeric pleasure no longer ends the life of desire and where Platonic desire is no longer insatiable. Desire is frozen at the point of satiation. It is in a post-Platonic context that we might read Cronin's claim of posthumous, post-coital bliss—her point that she can forever have in death what she cannot have in life. It is not just a death-defying sex act but a sex-defying death act, one that endeavors to protect desire from its own insatiability.

Cronin's piece is just one example of how Manchot's Kiss is part of a more extended struggle: one that this exhibition represents so vividly. Manchot is moving where Cronin is still, Manchot is flesh where Cronin is marble, Manchot is urban where Cronin is suburban. Manchot, on the surface, is creating a monument to life whereas Cronin, on the surface, is creating a monument to death. Beneath the surface the roles reverse, but remain complimentary. Manchot narrates the necessary death of a fleeting moment, whereas Cronin narrates a happy eternity of posthumous post-coital bliss. But both travel back and forth across the same shifting interstice that we have already seen in Kiss—one that lies between these Ancient conceptions of sensuality.

Does anything lie beyond Sissa's framework? Do the Ancients really tell us everything we need to know about Kiss? I think there is at least one very critical aspect of the piece that remains unclarified. The Ancients didn't so clearly contemplate the possibility of modernity and, in particular, the disorienting urban modernity of the piece. Plato suggested that desire was eternal, painful, and insatiable because it came from within. It wasn't that your lover didn't want to give it to you—your lover just couldn't. But what if these lovers are responding to something outside of themselves and outside of each other? What if they are getting carried away, in a metaphorical sense, because they are also being carried away, in a literal sense, by an ever-moving bus? What if the inscrutable keys to desire reside not in an inaccessible chamber lost in a maze which lies somewhere in the darkest depths of the soul, but in the ineluctable chaos of a wider sensual world? Kiss helps us see how sensuality is not just about sex, and not even just about bodies. London is part of the *ménage-à-trois*—or the *ménage-à-quatre* if we include ourselves—that is the subject of this narrative. If we're going to engage with the sensuality of the piece, we cannot stop at the lovers, but have to take in the whole scene. We have to take in the bus itself, and the city beyond the bus: a throbbing metropolis that is, like these bodies, thoroughly alive. This is a metropolis whose sonic and visual textures profoundly shape our experience of the kiss: we cannot separate the sound of the kisses from the sound of the city because we literally cannot listen to one without listening to the other. The metropolis also creates the framework of desire—both literally and metaphorically. It is the public nature of the act that renders it so extraordinarily sensual. The very intensity of the lovers' passion is almost necessarily measured against its boldness. Its sexiness derives in part from its riskiness. And its riskiness is utterly modern: to kiss like this in a world like ours—a world divided into public and private spheres, the crossing of which is a matter of such incredible shame—is not the same as to kiss like this in Ancient Athens. But then, again, it would be impossible to kiss like this in Ancient Athens. There were no buses in Ancient Athens; nor was there much anonymity. If you were kissing on the street, you could count on being recognized. The lovers in “Kiss” are protected by the disorienting modernity of modern London: by the constancy of its movements and its social fragmentation. By the polite alienation it engenders between strangers. The bus is like a moving cocoon which allows their kiss to gestate. It creates an environment of complete anonymity which is also terrifically liberating. Fellow passengers don't have to look at the lovers if they don't really want to. And if they do, it doesn't really matter. The lovers aren't going to see these people again.

There is a point at which Sissa speaks directly to the title of this exhibition. Sensuality is “desire, but desire beyond the crude and instantaneous event of what we might describe as drive, stimulation, reflex, response...sensuality is to transform the urges of the body into language—be it poetry, letters, rituals, garments, presents or gestures.” Then what to make of an exhibition called Sex Drive? Is it not adequately sensual? Is it an ironic sensual commentary on the sexual? Is the exhibition itself a paradox, or is Sissa too schematic? And if it is a paradox, are we living in it? Like the figure in the Kate Bush song who steps “out of the page and into the sensual world”—the song from which the title of this essay is derived—do these pieces leap out of the walls and into our own sensual worlds? It is my suggestion here that the pieces support Sissa's point about the irreducibility of sensuality to sexuality but also raise new questions about the relationship between art and desire. “[Almost all great songs,](#)” as one critic has said of Joni Mitchell's Amelia, “all songs that get you to play them compulsively over and over again, do so because they've got you seeking something you never find, some haunting enigma that won't quite disclose itself.” It is the same with art. The best art itself creates an insatiable desire, not necessarily for the object but for the inscrutable, ineffable thing that it represents. We love the artworks that make us look at them again and again. And we want to look at them again and again because they tantalize us with the possibility of more, when the ‘more’ is something perhaps unreachable, perhaps even necessarily so, an existential limit. The insatiability of sexual desire is, in this way, analogous to the insatiability of aesthetic comprehension.

To come back to a song or a painting you love is not just to get more of the same, but to hold the promise of being taken in a direction you never anticipated, never imagined, but which was nevertheless consistent with the unexpressed desires of your various desiring parts. Desire is insatiable inasmuch as it is also unfathomable. Art is like sex inasmuch as it combines immediate satisfaction with a longer, more anguished, and correspondingly enjoyable struggle for engagement, for communion with another's desires. Sex Drive, curator [Stuart Horodner](#) writes, "[is here understood as the compulsion to sex and the compulsion to come to terms with one's own identity, orientations, and affiliations through sex.](#)" The same compulsion for self-understanding creates the momentum for art, which, like sensuality, has the potential to represent desire at its most insatiable. In all its ambiguity, Kiss is telling us something about how to be viewers. For insatiability is about longing, a longing not just for sexual pleasure but also for understanding, for engagement with a thing that might not be reachable.

In all these ways, these pieces also raise some questions about the history of sexuality itself: about the distinctions that go into its making and, beyond, our reasons for writing it. The history of sexuality is revealed as being less like one of those medieval murals which extend across several canvasses, collectively forming a vast and epic narrative across which one might travel like one would through a landscape, and more like a collection of short interlinked stories, like a night sky: many of them pointing in directions that extend outward, but also filled with small transitions which parallel each other in telling ways. Even so, why write it? The Platonic moment is revealed to be just as evanescent as the moment it takes to get from one of these pieces to the other—indeed, to get from one second of looking at a piece to the next second of looking at it. And in getting us to move back and forth between these Homeric, Platonic, and Christian moments, a piece like Kiss helps explain why we write the history of sexuality. We write it for the same reason that we listen to songs again and again and share them with each other. And for the same reason we make these works of art, or stand before them for extended periods of time, and come back to them again and again, or frame them and put them up on our walls. We are trying to derive a strange kind of pleasure—a perverse kind of pleasure—from the inherent insatiability and unfathomability of desire. As Sissa writes, "The vitality of sexual organs and the involuntary nature of their movements provided ancient thought with its most interesting challenge. What kind of act is the sex act? Who is responsible for it?" (5) The pieces in this exhibition do not answer these questions. But they give us some clues about why we're still trying to answer them, and will continue to answer them, for as far as the eye can see.

Tags: [Amelia](#), [Farid Azfar](#), [Giulia Sissa](#), [homepost](#), [Joni Mitchell](#), [Melanie Manchot](#), [Patricia Cronin](#), [Plato](#), [sensual](#), [sensuality](#), [Stuart Horodner](#)

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