

## Revisiting Cyberfeminism

Text / Cornelia Sollfrank

*Not every artist's generation is in the lucky position of witnessing the birth of a new technology that has the potential to revolutionize the world, its communication, economy, politics – and art. Young artists who, in the early 1990s, understood what was about to happen, had no other choice than to get involved, leaving behind the surfaces of their screens and sliding down the rabbit holes of their modem connections. Operating on the level of code and protocols, these individuals found themselves in a strange new territory, in which the reality and beauty of their artworks were largely imaginary. The prevalent atmosphere of departure attracted like-minded pioneers, and within a few years, an entire ecosystem of Internet art populated what sci-fi writers of the previous decade had termed, “cyberspace.” It was the novelty of this habitat, its (apparent) ability to depart from the limitations of the physical world – including those of the body – that inspired female artists to develop new feminist utopias, and to test new strategies based on digital networking. This first wave of Cyberfeminists posited an intrinsic affinity between women and digital networked media, and set out to challenge the patriarchy in complicity with technology.*

### ETYMOLOGY

The first text I wrote about Cyberfeminism, in 1998, was titled “The Truth About Cyberfeminism,” and ended with the sentence: “Create your own Cyberfeminism, and you will find out the truth about it.” This use of the term was initially deployed in the context of the Old Boys Network, a Cyberfeminist alliance founded in 1997, where it was intended to avoid clearly defined political goals, and to motivate people to fill the “ism” with their own ideas of what it could and should be instead.

The combination of a by then familiar reference (“feminism”) with something then relatively obscure (“cyber”) was strategic: the term sought to cause irritation and arouse curiosity, thus opening up a new space for thinking and acting. This merging also liberated “feminism” from its strictly political agenda, allowing it to freely associated with such notions as cybernetics, and the related, mostly literary concepts of cyberspace or cyberpunk – none of which had a necessary or presumed connection to gender issues at that time (though cyberpunk did tend towards a gender-stereotypical ethos and aesthetic). In the most general sense, Cyberfeminism sought to evoke networking alongside transgression, progressive, yet

baggage-free politics, and most importantly, the appropriation of digital technologies by women—and the appropriateness of this affinity.

From a historical perspective, the term “Cyberfeminism” has been used by a number of different protagonists, with a variety of at times contradictory agendas. There was no single definition to accommodate all its uses, nor were these applied to a common political agenda with defined goals, or a representative aesthetic style. This was exactly its strength: as long as we could keep the terminology open and polyvalent, it would create new territories of experimentation at the frontiers of feminist politics, art, and technology. “Cyberfeminism” was suggestive not of something that existed, but of something that needed to be created. It enabled and fuelled our laboratory for rethinking feminism in the age of networks, though not without contention.

However, before our group—women loosely organized around the Old Boys Network—could start to make use of the term in this productive sense, we had to appropriate it from its two ostensible inventors: the Australian artist group VNS Matrix, and the English cultural theoretician Sadie Plant.<sup>1</sup> Without going into the details of their respective approaches, what VNS Matrix and Plant had in common was the largely techno-deterministic assumption that there was a special connection between the basic features of digital networked technologies and “the female.” While Plant elaborated an essentialist approach, in which the transition to a new society would virtually happen via the click of a mouse, VNS Matrix’ poetic outpourings about the female body and its connectedness to cyberspace were decidedly tongue-in-cheek. Both efforts nonetheless feminised digital society. VNS attempted to contaminate sterile technology with blood, slime, cunts, and madness—powerful symbolic interventions that used an anarchic power to contribute to the desecration of the myth of new technologies as “toys for boys.” Plant’s writings, by contrast, focused on the inscription of women into the history of technology. Of course, many women were inspired by both Plant’s and VNS Matrix’ ideas: they provided an alternative to traditional ideologies that attributed technology to man, and nature to woman. In this sense, early modulations of Cyberfeminism had an empowering effect; their essentialist tendencies, however, limited its artistic and political potential.

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<sup>1</sup> Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones – Digital Women and the New Technoculture*, 1997.

My initial work with Cyberfeminism was primarily interested in experimenting with the term's specific potential to activate people, through the ambiguous, even contradictory associations it unleashes. I was especially inspired by Donna Haraway's socialist-feminist "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1983), in which the biologist and science theoretician takes an anti-essentialist stance. Haraway suspends dichotomous categories such as the demarcation between man/woman, man/machine, and physical/metaphysical, and uses the figure of the cyborg as a conceptual tool for rethinking feminist-socialist politics in the age of techno science. The term "cyborg" is shorthand for "cybernetic organism," and suggests the artificiality of corporeality while exposing the collective nature of subjectivity—and the inherent politics of inter-connectivity. The cyborg is neither natural nor mechanical, neither individual nor collective, neither male nor female; she is more than the sum of her parts, and thus, as Karen Harrasser noted in 2011, enables new forms of social and political practice. The figure facilitated an early rethinking of subjectivity under networked conditions, and can be considered as a predecessor of concepts such as the distributed self, or what Gerald Raunig has recently discussed as the "Dividuum."

Instead of resorting to a technophobic utopian model embraced by a number of 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist activist groups, Haraway argued for the channelling of an inborn agency, to be put towards the reinvention of feminist and socialist politics within the paradigms of networking, informatization, miniaturization, and the entanglement of bio- and information politics. The cyborg has shepherded this critical exploration of this alternative potential for resistance in a revolutionary way: it refused to reject technology as purely a patriarchal, imperialistic, or capitalist force destined to destroy the earth, and to exploit and alienate people. Although the cyborg metaphor has gone on to yield a number of post-humanist stances, for OBN, it provided an important reference point in our experiments with new forms of organisation and agency beyond those of traditional feminist ideologies.

## OLD BOYS NETWORK

The Old Boys Network, the first international cyberfeminist alliance, was active from 1997-2001. It was a hybrid self-organised structure – something in between an artist group with an associated network, and a fictional collective. OBN organized online and offline opportunities for communication, and provided the infrastructure for many diverse approaches to and discourse about gender on the net. Our mission was to use the potential of the term Cyberfeminism to provoke women from different professional and social backgrounds, generations, and political, artistic, and technological affinities. In order to achieve this, OBN

created scenarios in which distinct concepts and practices could be confronted and discussed, forming a framing context. Three international conferences were held—two in Germany, and one in Holland—and the conference proceedings, including presentations from various OBN members, were published. Through these activities, the Old Boys Network came to involve over 180 women as active contributors, each with her own interpretation and suggestion of what Cyberfeminism should and could be.

The concept of the Old Boys Network was based on the cyberfeminist strategy of irritation and elusiveness. The network could have been viewed as a motor for political mobilization, a self-help group, a service by/for techno-enthusiasts, a feminist task force, or an art project, a philosophical speculation, or a fiction. The opacity of the nature of the consortium effectively turned out to be its strength. It triggered speculation and created a mythology that was attractive to potential participants, who could project their individual ambitions onto what OBN might have become. The resulting inclusivity endowed OBN with the sense that it become a site for real difference; unfortunately, it was difficult to maintain. Among the various hegemonic ambitions were those of wings that worked hard to reduce the project's deliberate complexity, and to force a unified conceptualization of cyberfeminism. After five years, the emergency plan for such a scenario—to shut down the system altogether, thus safeguarding its concept—was put into action.

As one of the co-founders of the project, I was motivated to create both “real” and imaginary spaces and situations, in which experimental anti-essentialist politics could be tested, and traditional and alternative institutions critiqued. As such, OBN as a laboratory for a politics of difference, an anti-organisation of experts committed to dealing with—even encouraging—contradiction. New technologies and the euphoria around them inspired the search for new feminisms, but also provided the opportunity and platform to build such a hybrid entity.

OBN's slogan, “the mode is the message – the code is the collective,” served to indicate our emphasis on process, and our awareness of power structures. Our institutional affiliations were temporary and parasitic; our method of production was collaborative and voluntarily, participation being based on an individual's own initiative, and open to anyone who called herself woman. My work on the concept, its organization, its realization constituted my artistic contribution to cyberfeminism. It was also reflective of my version of cyberfeminism: enabling and support of the formation of precisely such a structure, and its collaborative building and maintenance.

## “POST-INTERNET”

It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully assess the achievements of cyberfeminism, the validity of the OBN’s aspirations, the historical significance and continued role of networking in experimental feminist politics, or the strategies available to emerging generations of female artists, from the vantage point of 2015. It is possible, however, to outline hypotheses that might contribute to continued debate.

Digital networked technology undoubtedly unleashed a revolution. Nothing is the same as it was in the early 1990s: politics, economics, communication, and cultural production have changed very fundamentally. Yet the scenarios we are facing today are not what most of the pioneers of Internet culture had envisioned. The Internet has turned out to be *the* primary agent of neoliberal governance, and by enabling all-encompassing surveillance, it has given unimaginable power to corporate control and state espionage. Given the supremacy of technology and the forces behind it, attempts at criticism—to say nothing of the development of alternatives—have an air of futility. The motto of the 2013 International Symposium of Electronic Art (ISEA), in Sydney reflected this *Zeitgeist* provocatively, appropriating language from *Star Trek*’s Borg population: “Resistance is futile.” The political narrative fed into our brains on a daily basis is that there are no alternatives. What does that mean for critical art and cultural production?

A new generation of artists that has been subsumed under the “post-internet” label has ostensibly made itself at home in dystopia, responding to it with postmodern strategies such as irony and over-affirmation. Unlike the pioneers of Internet art—who were driven by curiosity, technological ingenuity, and to some degree, an institutional critique of utopian political thinking—“post-internet” artists take disillusionment as a starting point. Technology-based formal innovations are of no interest for them; likewise, critical and political thinking seem to have gone out of fashion. Instead, cultural phenomena spawned by the omnipresence of the Internet serve as content and material for what are otherwise formally rather traditional artworks, sculpture, installation, video, or performance. The art world, which has always been troubled by digital cultural techniques and their incompatibility with the requirements of the market, appears to appreciate this direction, and has responded enthusiastically.

Beyond the use and abuse of the Internet as an instrument for the centralized accumulation of economic and political power, the ubiquity of networked technologies has also fostered a large-scale implementation of cultural techniques that are actually at odds with the growing economization and political infantilization the Internet has facilitated. Projects such as Wikipedia and phenomena such as Free Software embody the emancipatory potential of digital networked technology. They highlight collaboration and sharing as renewed cultural

practices that hold the keys to social and political innovation. The idea of the “commons” as collectively produced and managed resources has become increasingly popular, giving rise to new utopias of self-determined and sustainable life—both online and offline. Contemporary feminist politics and artistic production can be repositioned with regards to this shift.

The crucial importance of technical skill in revolutionary endeavors has also been demonstrated by the landmark activities of Wikileaks, and the revelations of Edward Snowden. These efforts have demonstrated technology’s inherent vulnerability to manipulation, and highlighted the capacity for a resistance propelled by precisely the same technologies behind surveillance and neoliberal political agenda. Even a cursory reality check reveals that feminist and emancipatory efforts in the field of communication technology have in no way become redundant. The gender problems that have always plagued technological development remain largely unsolved. The numbers show that female presence in IT and software development have actually declined since the 1980s. In the cultures of free software, hackers, and open source content—including Wikipedia—the percentage of women among those active is estimated to fall between 2% and 8%. These statistics reveal that the appropriation of technology by women encouraged by the first generation of cyberfeminists never took place. Recent controversy surrounding the sexism and misogyny that is rampant in gaming culture, which culminated in severe attacks on the feminist media scholar Anita Sarkeesian provides further evidence of this sad reality. Early cyberfeminist ambitions may appear outdated in a “post-internet” context, but they are more relevant than ever; as a term and as a collectivity, Cyberfeminism did leave a trace legacy: for the first time, it provided role models for women with a political and critical agenda to include technical competence as part of the strategy, thus contributing to real empowerment. Pursuing individual careers is not enough: as a term and as a collectivity, cyberfeminism can still bring women together, and inspire creative and critical work.

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