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Speculative Pink

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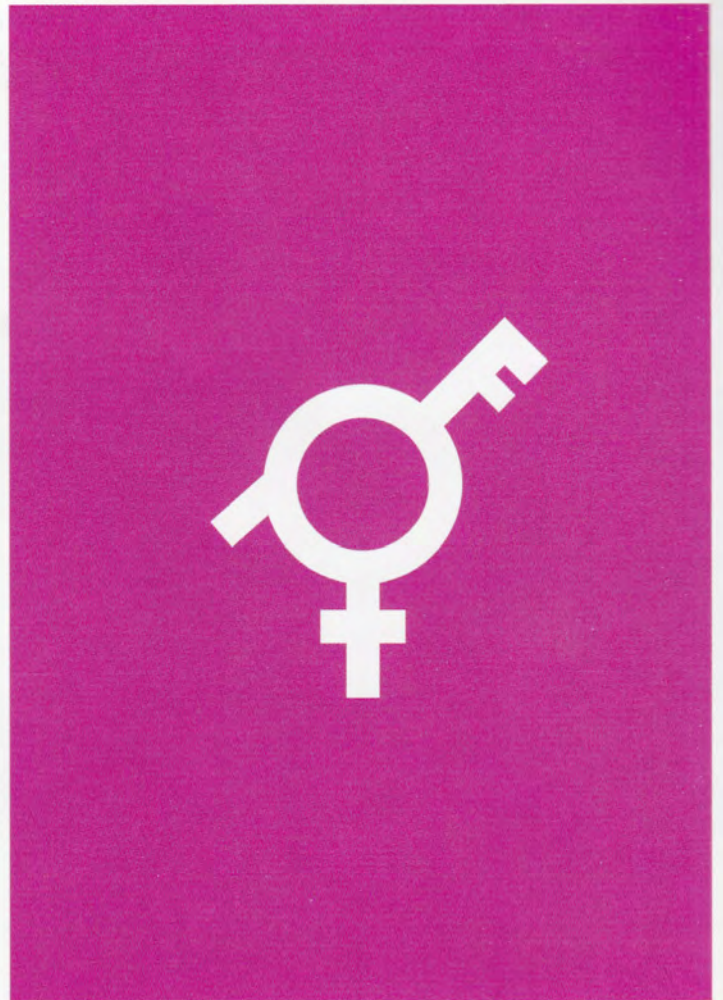
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Cornelia Sollfrank

What you called “cyberfeminism” over twenty years ago, you now sometimes call “technofeminism.” How would you sketch the trajectory among these two definitions over time, and do you think they are instrumental for the same evolving discourse?

I don't think that there are definitions of either term that would allow for a precise distinction. The term ‘technofeminism’ was introduced in a book by Judy Wajcman with the same title in 2004, and I find it quite useful as an umbrella term for all critical, speculative and queer positions that engage with technology in a way that—in theory and practice—undermine, challenge, address the coded relationship between gender and technology, and aim at changing this code by opening up the potential of technology to support emancipatory purposes.

‘Cyberfeminism’ could easily be subsumed under such a definition, at the same time, it is clearly associated with a specific attitude of the 1990s. In my understanding cyberfeminism marks a certain historical period and the spirit of the decade between 1991 to 2001. It started with ‘A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century’ by VNS Matrix and ended with the last Conference of the Old Boys Network: ‘The very Cyberfeminist International’ in Hamburg.



One of the Purple Noise Icons

The overall mood was one of positive excitement and departure into a new era in which the relationship between gender and technology would be reinvented. These innocent and naïve times are clearly over now – while we still desperately need to reinvent the relationship between gender and technology...

In terms of discourse, I would say there is a broad variety, from nostalgia trying to bring back the 1990s imagery and ideas, to a lot of liberal diversity policies in the tech industry, to a growing academic discourse, for example in feminist Science and Technology Studies, and radical queer activism, all of which refer to technofeminism in the broadest sense, however filling it with very divergent assumptions and agendas.

Your latest project is “Purple Noise, feminist noisification of social media”, which seems to act as a double intervention, as public interventions in the streets (including demonstrations), and as posts and “engagements” on social media to create a meaningful “noise”. Can you tell me more about it?

First of all, it is correct that I initiated the project, but it was realised by a group of five (Janine Sack, Isabel de Sena,



Johanna Thompson, Christina Grammatikopoulou, and myself). The inspiration for the project goes back to a text by Christina Grammatikopoulou with the title 'Viral Performances of Gender' that investigates a series of contemporary art and protest phenomena from which she extracts two fundamental concepts: 'noise' and 'virality.' Noise she defines as "a manipulative communication strategy [...] which, through the conscious disruption or muddling of communication platforms, aims to obfuscate or falsify information or a message for its receiver or to spread false information." The goal of the second strategy, virality, is to have content spread horizontally and as widely as possible by users themselves.

For Purple Noise we decided to use an invitation to the City of Women Festival in Esslingen in September 2018 for the launch. We organised a street protest and worked on the representation of this protest on social media in order to investigate the dynamics between the two spheres that have grown together into an "expanded space," as Grammatikopoulou calls it. After having avoided social media for a long time, we found that it is no longer enough to simply try and ignore them. On the contrary, we have to face the fact that they have become an essential player in political opinion making and the organisation of action, and that we need to invent tactics and strategies to deal with them. To use social

media or not to use social media is not the question any more. They have become 'the site' where not just ordinary users but also the political establishment, law enforcement, secret services, marketers and hate groups can develop their greatest impact. At the same time, social media are private enterprises, driven by greed and hunger for data and power, being elusive, non-transparent, secretive and unpredictable. By providing an easy-to-use pseudo-functionality of public space, they have taken the public hostage, locking it up in an infantilizing maze without giving it a say. Within our project we express this critique by using the hashtag #algorithmicdespotism.

We knew all of that before, but experiencing it on a daily basis, physically and mentally, and understanding how time consuming and manipulative the structures themselves are, was extremely frustrating and even depressing. I would say this first lesson was a hard one to learn. Luckily, we also had a lot of fun in the course of our collaboration.

In the practice of this project the combination of 'fake' and 'real' seems to hint at how the current political strategies for consensus can be technically used for a liberating potential. Particularly, how do you strategically see this relationship between fake and real, now?

In the 1980s 'fake' was an important part of post-modern aesthetics. It stood for the deconstruction of notions of authenticity, authorship, the original etc. and was meant to subvert the traditional regime in art and culture. Strategies such as pranks, hacking and disrupting became widespread and eventually were appropriated and co-opted by players who are now using them to manipulate large audiences. 'Alternative facts' could be a really cool expression, if only it had remained a playful artistic and activist strategy instead of the Orwellian dystopia of state power controlling people's minds having become true.

For Purple Noise, spreading fake information is an essential part of our strategy as well. How could it not be? An interesting fake story gains much more attention and spreads way faster than pure facts. One of our main references, however, is the concept of 'nonsense' as practised in Dada. And instead of proclaiming simple truths and goals, we call for the recognition of insecurity and confusion as a fundamental condition and driving force of our contemporary condition. This is something we elaborate on in our manifesto.

Among the nodal elements of this project, there are "the feelers", and their metaphorical/emotional use as an element to deeply and consciously connect with the others, exchanging vital information. What do the feelers represent in the project? And was there any specific reason you chose an animal component?

By reverse engineering successful campaigns, we understood that we needed certain recognizable elements, amongst them hashtags, iconic imagery, a manifesto and memes. The feelers function as our meme. The idea stems from one of Donna Haraway's Camille stories in which Camille 3 chose to grow feelers when she could make decisions regarding her physical features during puberty. We liked this feature because feelers can be both organic and technical (antennae). They indicate an extended human sensorium which I think we need as times become more complex. Feelers can help us to stay alert and receptive in the contemporary landscape of infobesity, which has the effect of blunting sensitivity and leads people to lose their capacity (or will) to act/think. Furthermore, they are an invitation to go beyond our standard ways of thinking and perceiving, and allow fantasy to take over our everyday lives. We invited people to feelers-tinkering workshops and asked them what they want their feelers to be capable of; what kind of extension they need or would like to have. This is where fiction can help to start thinking along new lines; first in individual ways, and from there structural ideas can evolve...

In this project you propose a design method to self-define new symbols for representing different genders, potentially a very large number, and share them on social media. Beyond their universal abstraction, how do you think symbols work on social media? And what do you think is the potential impact of this method?

As our iconic imagery, we chose to mix existing gender symbols with symbols from electrical engineering to create an array of very charming icons. They indicate playfulness in terms of gender definitions and suggest agency when it comes to notions of gender. Like all symbols, they allow for a speedy transfer of content across language barriers, which is key for social media communication. Our symbols are easy to recognise due to their specific design (font and colours) and thus help to spread our movement.

Recently you have edited an anthology of texts: "Die schönen Kriegerinnen. Technofeministische Praxis im 21. Jahrhundert" (The Beautiful Warriors. Technofeminist Practice in the 21st Century). Here you define the strong connection between feminism and queerness: "Queer deconstruction continues the feminist deconstruction of power relations by exposing mechanisms of "othering" and extending them to new realms: gender, sex, disability, nature, non-human beings, machines, the socially and globally weak, or other subalterns". Is this then a perception and affirmation of an ample diversity of entities (including machines) which we are mainly missing now?

The book is an anthology that includes eight current technofeminist positions from art and activism. As indicated in the title, it looks at specific and exemplary practices more than developing theory. The "queering" of dichotomies is one important way of looking at the field, a field in which diversity of every kind has always been lacking. Technology has traditionally been a white male domain – and it still is. Now, as new feminisms emerge, the demands for diversification also become more complex.

Among the selected texts, Yvonne Volkart proposes in hers the term "techno-eco-feminism". Can you tell me what do you think about that?

I think the term has great potential. It makes a lot of sense to emphasize the material aspects of technology, as well as the aspects of biopower, and to link the ecological crisis together with various social issues. Earlier versions of feminism have never reached such a complex approach. We need to create such a transversal space for thinking and acting, a space that reflects the desire for vitality, presence, affect, and relationality, and from which transformational power can emerge in the face of catastrophic scenarios.

Do you think that Haraway's "situated knowledges" concept is still relevant in the current debate? And, if yes, why?

'Situated knowledges' is regarded as a feminist epistemology that recognizes its own contingent and localized foundations as well as the contingent and localized foundations of other forms of knowledge. The basic thesis is that all knowledge is situational, partial and conditional, which means that

only a partial perspective promises 'objectivity.' This fundamental insight has in no respect lost its relevance; on the contrary, with a growing diversification of actants there comes a diversification of partial knowledges. I think we are only at the beginning of a new era, in which science and technology are opening up to new ways of thinking. Hopefully, it is not too late.

In the book's introductory text you also mention that "technological structures" [are] "nodes of social and political interests" and that "we have to intervene in the production of knowledge, science and technology." Can you elaborate more on that?

This sentence expresses two basic assumptions. Firstly, technology is more than the objects it spawns. Rather it is a field thwarted by different forces. This leads directly to the second assumption, i.e. technology is not neutral.

Science and technology do not develop quasi-automatically, linearly and out of an inherent logic, but are determined in their emergence, application and dissemination by various forces such as economic ones, political ones, but also socio-cultural ones. At the same time, there is a reverse effect, as science and technology do affect society, politics and culture. Therefore, one could say that science and technology are both a source and a consequence of power relations – one of them being gender relations, of course. As Cynthia Cockburn stated early on, "technology is a medium of power."

Here we are entering the field of Science and Technology Studies in which important contemporary approaches investigate the relations of production and power; they analyze the interests these relations represent and ask to whom these relations, technological innovations and the social changes associated with them benefit most. This shifts the emphasis of scientific theoretical questions from previously abstract processes of knowledge to empirically answered questions about concrete practices and specific places of knowledge production. And this is precisely where the agency lies for the transformation of technologies.

In this respect, you've historically been close to hacking and hacker culture qualifying their "emancipatory aspects." Can you mention a few examples of these aspects?

In the light of what I have elaborated earlier, it becomes obvious that the old, romantic idea of hacking also needs to be subject to a revision. In this respect, I would like to point to another text in my recent book by Sophie Toupin. She develops the notion of 'feminist hacking' as a dual expansion, one might also call it a "double hack." On the one hand, it adds a material dimension to traditional technofeminism, in the sense that also the material conditions of technology are considered, including the working conditions in the technology sector. On the other hand, it expands the concept of hacking, which typically refers to technical categories such as software and hardware, to also include gender as an area of application.

3 Feelers



What is essential is that feminist hacking entails a combination of technical competence, feminist principles, and socio-political engagement. Here, unlike the case in traditional hacker environments, technical competence is not something pursued for its own sake – or for the sake of recognition within the meritocratic hierarchies of hacker culture – but is rather a necessary precondition for promoting emancipatory aspects when developing or dealing with technology. Prominent feminist principles of the new hacker culture include collectivity in the form of common action, informal and formal transfers of knowledge on the basis of feminist pedagogy, and the production of visibility – and not in the sense of individual or collective positions but rather in the sense of exposing hidden mechanisms of the technological realm, of the "off-spaces" that are never in the picture and yet are constitutive for what is seen. Such things include the physical, economic, and material structures in which technologies are embedded. The foundation of this emancipatory and oppositional culture is a redefinition of the relation between online and offline spaces, which is in turn based on the production of its own new spaces and structures.

Infiltrating traditional hacker environments with such thinking is a process similar to the infiltration of traditional tech environment with technofeminist thinking. It has just started, and there is still a long way to go.

(Thanks to Isabel de Sena and Christina Grammatikopoulou for the fruitful exchange.)

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PROJECT LINKS

Purple Noise: <http://artwarez.org/projects/purplenoise/>

Die schönen Kriegerinnen. Technofeministische Praxis im 21. Jahrhundert (free download in German):

<https://transversal.at/books/die-schoenen-kriegerinnen>

Preface in English: <http://artwarez.org/projects/dieschoenenkriegerinnen-BOOK/introduction.html>