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The Art of Getting Organized. A Different Approach to Old Boys Network.

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If the past insists, it is because of life's unavoidable demand to activate in the present the seeds of its buried futures.

Walter Benjamin, *Psychography*

More than one decade after the Old Boys Network (OBN) has ceased its work, I was invited to look back and reflect about the cyberfeminist network that was active from 1997 to 2001. This was in 2013 and I used it as an opportunity to think about our internal organizational structure.¹ As expressed in the motto "the mode is the message," we understood our way of working (together) as an important contribution to cyberfeminist practice, and my lecture was an attempt to trace the dynamics of this collaboration.

Building on my thoughts from 2013, I would like to go beyond the internal structure and take a closer look at the underlying dynamics. Therefore, it is less the macropolitical manifestations of OBN that interest me in this text, but rather the spirit of the time, the vibes and the affects that brought us together in the first place and kept the process going for more than five years. This other side of politics allows a new and different perspective on OBN, one which was not been paid much attention to before – not by us at the time, but also not by our successors who had no chance to learn about it.

Related to this aspect of micropolitical currents is the entanglement of art and politics. Where and how did politics meet aesthetics in this formation? Getting organized, networking and building relations was central to our understanding of cyberfeminism, however, OBN was not just a platform whose objective was to organize an existing context but rather played an important role

¹ "Cyberfeminist Ways of Getting Organized," University of the Arts Berlin, lecture series "Art and Gender," organized by Judith Siegmund, April 2013.

in the emergence of a whole new field. This quality of a structure of bringing to life what did not exist before while, at the same time, being itself in a constant process of transformation and becoming – as was the case with OBN – does not help to win political battles in the traditional sense, it nevertheless creates ever new imaginaries, and with that, agencies and agents. Olga Goriunova² describes such process of mutual shaping as “organizational aesthetics,” a concept that links questions of organization, which are political in nature, to aesthetics as the interface between the world and an emerging subjectivity.

OBN’s trajectory

The Old Boys Network described itself as “the first international cyberfeminist alliance.”³ Founded in 1997, the connecting element of the network was the term “cyberfeminism.” The formulated concern of the organization was “to create spaces in which cyberfeminists can research, experiment, communicate and act. Such spaces include virtual ones such as the cyberfeminist server and the <oldboys> mailing list as well as temporary meetings such as workshops and international conferences. All the activities have the purpose of providing a contextualized presence for different artistic, theoretical and political formulations related to cyberfeminism. At times mysterious, at times transparent, OBN is setting an agenda for communication, intervention and production.”⁴

The use of the term cyberfeminism was a tactical appropriation by OBN. Introduced in 1991, Sadie Plant had promoted it in the context of cultural theory, while the Australian artist collective VNS Matrix had used it as an inspiration for their poetic and visually stunning artworks. What both approaches had in common, however, was a kind of techno-deterministic assumption that there was a special connection between the characteristics of digitally networked technology and the “feminine.” While Plant pursued an essentialist approach, in which the transformation into a new social order was to take place virtually at the click of a mouse, VNS Matrix's poetic effusions from and about the female body and its connection to cyberspace always came with a wink. Their feminization of the digital society, took place through the contamination of sterile technology with blood, sperm, pussies and madness which would be enough to desecrate the toys for boys forever with its anarchic power...

Clearly, this new discourse on digital technology with a special emphasis on gender aspects ushered a new era. The time was ripe to throw overboard old prejudices with regard to gender-specific handling of technology. However, questioning the alleged bond between women and nature and between men and technology should provide more options than simply replacing one essentialism by another one. This is where OBN came into play – with the idea of diversifying early cyberfeminism and use its underlying affects for building a fluid context. Gender would not just be

² Goriunova, Olga, *Organizational Aesthetics: Art Platforms and Cultural Production on the Internet*, Routledge, 2012.

³ See the archived website of OBN at: www.obn.org

⁴ Quote from the FAQ on the website of OBN.

associated with male and female but understood as a technology in itself; technological development would equally be understood as plastic in the sense of possibly having contradictory effects depending on social relations and the context of their use. And all these new opportunities were pervaded by desires that yet had to be explored, one of them being to understand digital technology as environment for thinking and working together, and as an occasion for creating something new – together with others.

OBN set out to create confusion regarding a definition of cyberfeminism. In fact, we wanted cyberfeminism to mean different things to different people with our main objective being to create a platform on which they all could live *with* each other and *next* to each other. It was an invitation to take things in one's own hands, a moment of activation instead of following someone's footsteps, gaining ownership of one's own feelings and needs. But it was about opportunities to find out what responses the time required instead of repeating established patterns of engagement; about active involvement in the uncertainty of the new. With the diversity came the threat of an infinite multiplication of meaning, which was not frightening for those who had agreed to the expressed rule of different contents and the unspoken rule of common forms. What cyberfeminism was at the time, was mainly a projection field to trigger all kind of fantasies, new imaginaries, to produce desires about genders and technologies. For this purpose, it was a necessary evil to have a term that suggested a political will and orientation. It seduced people into an organization for the exploration of what was not there yet.

One or more temporary collectives

The impulse to found OBN originated from an invitation to participate in the Hybrid Workspace⁵ in Kassel in 1997. My previous work with the artist groups women-and-technology and -Innen had brought me in touch with the international scene of media activists who got the opportunity to use the temporary media lab during the 100 days of documenta X. Ten groups were invited to work, discuss, present and publish as part of the world's largest exhibition for contemporary art. This opportunity asked for the launch of a new initiative that would be able to complement tactical media activism with gender-related issues, to counter the male dominated digital underground and hacker culture and come up with an experimental approach of combining (genders)political issues with aesthetic strategies.

OBN was founded in Berlin⁶ in early summer 1997, and the idea was born to use the invitation to Kassel for holding the *first Cyberfeminist International*.⁷ From the very beginning, we placed great emphasis on our organizational form, which should remain flexible while at the same time enabling us to adhere to certain principles. The slogan "The Mode is the Message – the Code is the

⁵ Archive: <http://medialounge.waag.org/lounge/workspace/index.html> and https://monoskop.org/Hybrid_Workspace

⁶ The founding members were Susanne Ackers, Vali Djordjevic, Ellen Nonnenmacher, Julianne Pierce and Cornelia Sollfrank.

⁷ <https://www.obn.org/kassel/>

Collective!" was representative of our attitude to consider an awareness of the conditions of production (and presentation) as an important part of the quality of a work, which made it essential to develop our own structures and forms of organization. Codifying the rules as part of the FAQ on our website made this transparent and functioned as an invitation to join in, discuss and co-design the structure, while in retrospect it is obvious that it was impossible to codify all the rules – and maybe even not desired, as many just evolved implicitly. Something always remained open, a state of not knowing exactly what OBN was and how it works – which was an essential aspect of the organization's appeal.

As for the first conference in Kassel, OBN decided to publish an open call and possibly invite everyone to participate who had expressed an interest in suggesting their personal approach to cyberfeminism. Thirty-six positions were presented under the motto "Targeting Content: Cyberfeminism." We succeeded in producing a small opening into the curatorial machine of the world's most prestigious contemporary art exhibition, allowing many cyberfeminists to participate without a judgmental selection process.⁸ To capture the spirit of the moment, we co-authored and published the *100 Anti-Theses* that describe what cyberfeminism is *not*. The manifesto expresses the agreement within OBN not to provide a general definition of cyberfeminism while, at the same time, committing ourselves to the shared form of this manifesto. This could be understood as the general agreement of OBN: a common form that not only allows, but demands diversity in content.

The conference had been organized by the five founding members of OBN but right after the conference, personnel changes began with old members leaving and new ones joining in – a process that would continue to the end. The various forms of participation and collaboration made it necessary to think about models of affiliation. A so-called core group of eight was formed.⁹ It declared itself responsible for organizational and administrative tasks and saw itself as the nucleus of the international network of associated members. After the second international conference held in Rotterdam in 1999, the organizational structure shifted again and replaced the 'core group and network' model to an association of different working groups. In the five years OBN was active, three international conferences were organized in different constellations,¹⁰ the conference proceedings were published in three printed readers, there were numerous appearances in form of lectures and presentations at international festivals and conferences, and OBN contributed to exhibitions and publications.¹¹ A total of about 180 people were actively involved in OBN at different times and with different intensity. Although they all identified themselves as cyber-

⁸ For the program see the web archive at: <https://www.obn.org/kassel/>. In 1998 a reader was published, which documented the *first Cyberfeminist International* (also available online).

⁹ The members were Susanne Ackers, Verena Kuni, Helene von Oldenburg, Julianne Pierce, Helene von Oldenburg, Claudia Reiche, Cornelia Sollfrank, Yvonne Volkart and Faith Wilding.

¹⁰ *first Cyberfeminist International*, documenta10, Hybrid Workspace, 1997.

next Cyberfeminist International, Rotterdam, in coordination with n5m Amsterdam, Festival for Tactical Media, 1999.

very Cyberfeminist International, Hamburg, as part of the EU-funded collaboration between the Edith-Russ-Site for Media Art in Oldenburg and the Frauen.Kultur.Labor Thealit in Bremen, which also included the exhibition *Cyberfem Spirit* (Helene von Oldenburg and Rosanne Altstadt) and the symposium *Technics of Cyberfeminism* in Bremen (Claudia Reiche, Andrea Sick).

¹¹ For details pls. visit the website where all events and participants are documented.

feminists – following their own definitions – it remained unclear to many how to characterize their affiliation to OBN. There was no formal membership status, but everyone who had a sense of belonging was part of it. And it was part of the unspoken politics of OBN to operate on two levels, a visible and understandable organizational structure that, however, shifted regularly, and a co-existing and undefined state of belonging that kept things in limbo.

Starting in the Middle

In the context of the newly aroused interest in cyberfeminism, a critic accused OBN in 2017 to have generated “a cyberfeminism without a sense of direction and without a collective purpose – a position in which little appears possible in terms of working cooperatively to effectuate change or to extend capacities for meaningful action,” and continued that “this created barriers in terms of thinking beyond the individual in order to make collective demands, and thereby worked to shape and constrain cyberfeminism’s horizons of possibility.”¹² Such judgement assumes an understanding of politics that subsumes people under common goals and reduces meaningful action to marching in the same direction. The following quote by Deleuze/Guattari may help to identify the source of the mis-/non-understanding: “Those who evaluated things in macropolitical terms understood nothing of the event, because something unaccountable was escaping.”¹³ It is true that OBN has never formulated a political agenda and never claimed to be a movement in the classical sense, and the reason is that our understanding of politics did not focus on adaption but rather on activation. OBN produced its unity and relevance on a level that was not perceivable from the distance, as a banner, it rather required involvement and a sense of connection to the field in order to perceive the driving forces underneath the surface.

Using the term cyberfeminism with its all too obvious connotations and, at the same time, refusing to define it, indicated this line of flight from the sphere of formalized politics to a different territory that was filled with the desire to disagree but to trust, to allow difference and to understand, and to concatenate heterogenous elements as a way of becoming, not alone but together, and in the chosen context of digital technology – where the joy of empowerment lives so closely together with the unease caused by the uncontrollability of technology.

Sharing both the joy and the unease was what OBN was enabling without prescribing the direction to go. And it was built on these affects that never remain private but permeate society where they manifest as driving forces, usually under a wrong name. “The private is the political,”¹⁴ as Friedrich Balke paraphrases this cross-over of political territory as described by Deleuze/Guattari. All the more surprising that they were not able to credit feminism with this shift in political thinking who

¹² Hester, Helen, “After the Future: *n* Hypotheses of Post-Cyber Feminism,” 2017. Available at: <https://beingres.org/2017/06/30/afterthefuture-helenhester/>

¹³ Deleuze, Gilles / Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, p. 238.

¹⁴ Balke, Friedrich, *Gilles Deleuze*, Reihe Campus, 1998.

famously has created this slogan about a decade earlier. In direct neighborhood, their concept of micropolitics means neither politics in miniature nor the actions of individuals as opposed to the big picture. The term aims at the multitude of interacting movements that permeate the social field, or at collective structures and associations that are real without being representative.

This is the challenge when looking back to an organization that was not one but remained variable and responded to the needs of its everchanging members but also to the issues at stake. This shapeshifting – between a network, a group, a temporary collective, a structure, an infrastructure or a dust cloud – and the elusiveness that comes with it contributed to OBN's aura, which again attracted new people who kept the organization in transition through their own engagement. What appears as the past returns today as a possible way into the future.