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obn_a – A situated Archive of the Old Boys Network

The obn_a project is about the creation of an open and multi-lingual archive of the cyberfeminist alliance Old Boys Network. OBN was launched at documenta X as part of the Hybrid Workspace where it held the first Cyberfeminist International in September 1997. In the following years, the network organized regular international conferences, published readers and books and served as a platform for a plethora of cyberfeminist activities. Since the end of OBN in 2001, I have kept many materials created during the active 5 years in my personal archives and maintained the website obn.org. The material consists of generally available printed matter, which I simply collected, but also of material I created, as for example the first website of OBN, the layout files of the first two readers, hundreds of photos I took, but also original video tapes of the OBN film “Processing Cyberfeminism”¹ and the full video documentation of the third conference in Hamburg – all material for the OBN’s activity’s storage and preservation of which I took care.²

For many years there was neither an internal nor an external reason to deal with the material. This changed only a few years ago when a resurgence of the topic of gender and technology led to several invitations for which I was asked to report on OBN as a historical formation.³ It became clear to me that it was not enough to simply report from my perspective what it was like at the time. Changing social and technological conditions also required situating OBN in today's context and thinking about it from today's perspective. In addition, the personal need to reflect on the experiences made during the active networking – its high and low points – grew. What would be the ideal situation to do this work? And who would be interested in working on it with me? It was clear to me that it would require resources such as time, money, expertise as well as collaborators who would dive into the project with me.

In June 2020, Nora Sternfeld, documenta professor at Kunsthochschule Kassel, invited me to give a lecture on OBN, which she had organized together with Kasseler DokFest. On this occasion it was also brought up that OBN had its first public appearance at Hybrid Workspace in Kassel and that research by some of her students had shown that there was nothing in the documenta archives about the Old Boys Network. This prompted her – together with the documenta studies group⁴ – to

1 The video *Processing Cyberfeminism* by Old Boys Network (1999) has been republished online in the course of the archival work: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbK_13S6sLg&t=10s

2 At this point, it is important to address the question of ownership. Being the owner of the material goods in question, e.g. a collection of publications, does not mean that I am the copyright holder. I can donate this material to a public archive while the republication of it requires the consent of the respective copyright holders.

3 For example: Lunch Bytes Conference: <http://www.lunch-bytes.com/events/past/lunch-bytes-36/> and 1st “< Interrupted = “Cyfem and Queer > organized by CreamCake”: <https://www.creamcake.de/program/81-2/>

4 <https://documenta-studien.de/en/team>

take the initiative for an archiving project. The idea was to turn the material in my possession into a public archive that would be hosted at documenta archiv. To put the project on serious footing it was included in a larger application to the Ministry for Culture and Education of Hessen and conceived as a collaboration.⁵ From the very beginning, the idea was to prepare the material in a way so that we could hand it over to documenta archiv and such lay the ground for the archive of the Old Boys Network to become part of a public institution whose objective is the preservation, documentation and scientific research of text and image based resources on modern and contemporary art.⁶

The guiding principles for the archiving process we derived from a concept OBN itself proposed: “The mode is the message. The code is the collective.” The goal was to create an infrastructure that would enable research on cyberfeminism, its spirit, its objectives and its expressions in theory, art and visual culture. Moreover, the aim was to provide insights into hands-on-technology practice, as well as to understand, more broadly, the spirit of early internet culture. In a time where digital networked technologies have pervaded everyday lives in unexpected extends, the renewed interest in early feminist criticism of technology shows the relevance of this historical feminist practice as an essential source of inspiration for the development of contemporary forms of power-critical approaches to technology.

Archiving a Network

To start with, I will briefly introduce the Old Boys Network and also raise some of the questions about the *why* and *how* of archiving.

The Old Boys Network described itself as the “first international cyberfeminist alliance.” That OBN was neither an individual artist nor a fixed group is the first peculiarity that also has consequences for the archiving. *What* exactly and *who* was OBN? Who belonged to the network that kept reinventing itself, internally testing different forms of organization? As an open platform where everyone was invited to present their approach to cyberfeminism, OBN did not propagate one particular approach to cyberfeminism, but rather placed emphasis on the various manifestations of cyberfeminism and their coexistence in difference. Few names run through from the beginning of 1997 to the end of 2001, while at the same time there are several hundred names that can be associated with OBN.⁷ So which material belongs into the archive – and which does not?

An essential aspect of OBN were the three big conferences, the Cyberfeminist Internationals (1997, 1999, 2001), but also the many small events, workshops, interventions and presentations that took place under the label OBN. Among the few firm principles, which were also laid down in an FAQ, was that never only one particular position could be considered representative, but always only a plurality that made difference visible. The motto “the mode is the message – the code is the collective” gives an indication of this self-understanding. Can and must such an understanding of

⁵ The obn archive group consists of herself as advisor, Carina Herring as project manager and two archival assistants: Malin Kuht and Julia Stolba. Further information: <https://obn-archive.multiplace.org/doku.php/about>

⁶ <https://www.documenta-archiv.de/en>

⁷ The founding members of OBN in 1997 were Susanne Ackers, Valie Djourdevic, Ellen Nonnenmacher, Julianne Pierce and Cornelia Sollfrank. A list of people who contributed over the years can be found here: <https://obn.org/>

difference be reflected in an archive? Is it enough to bring together the different contents and place them next to each other, or would the form of the archive itself also have to have a polyphony? And *how* could this be done?

Before the questions of the *how* will be discussed, however, there is another one: Why an archive at all? Who cares? For whom is the work of OBN so important to put further work into its archiving? Who cared about preserving material and passing on knowledge about OBN? This question arises especially in collective and networked projects. While the participation of many theoretically brings with it a greater potential for sharing responsibility, it is precisely this shared responsibility that often leads to a situation in which no one really feels responsible, or in which individuals have to take responsibility for the preservation of collectively produced work – including all its implications. In fact, there are several factors that have led to the current project. The most immediate impulse came from the fact that there has been renewed interest in the topic of ‘gender & technology’ for some years now, and that a young generation that is dealing with it today often cites cyberfeminism and the Old Boys Network as references. I was particularly struck by the fact that in this context, very often the specific social and techno-political framework of the 1990s gets completely ignored. It is often pretended that cyberfeminism of the 1990s can be revived seamlessly 30 years later. It certainly can't!⁸ To make this shift recognizable, I have therefore been proposing for some time now the use of the term technofeminism, and to understand cyberfeminism as historically situated.⁹ In addition, there have been some classifications of and attributions to OBN that show a clear misunderstanding or lack of understanding. I found these particularly vexing, although they can partly be excused because they are based on working primarily with material that was readily available – e.g. texts on the still existing website <https://.obn.org> – and, in typical academic fashion, making a selection of texts and then develop a thesis from them. The longer I thought about it, the clearer it became that the material that could convey the networking spirit of OBN, give an indication of the context, the zeitgeist, the spirit of upheaval and the inkling of a new form of organizing, is simply not accessible – if it exists at all. Basically, all that is there is the old website including the readers of the three conferences. Therefore, a main motivation for thinking about an obn_archive has been the realization that what people can find out, at the moment, is very limited after all. Ideally, an archive could address this shortcoming by providing access to materials previously privately owned – by many different actors. This means that I consider the material in my possession just as a foundation that should be complemented. The future obn_archive, therefore, could either be a “distributed archive” in the sense of a network of different privately held archives, which would require a common protocol in order to grant access, or one central archive whose objective it is to include materials from different sources. As we have the opportunity to work with a public archive the latter model seems to suggest it self.

8 Examples of recent, rather uncritical reviews of cyberfeminism can be found in: Sonja Peteranderl, “Die Pionierinnen des Cyberfeminismus sagen den Tech-Cowboys den Kampf an,” WIRED Germany, June 2, 2015, <https://www.wired.de/collection/life/das-cyberfeminismus-kollektiv-vns-matrix-macht-eine-kampfansage>; Claire L. Evans, “We are the Future Cunt: Cyberfeminism in the 90s,” Motherboard, November 20, 2014, <http://motherboard.vice.com/read/we-are-the-futue-cunt-cyberfeminism-in-the-90s>. Others improperly reduce cyberfeminism in an attempt to deny its relevance altogether, such as in Armen Avanesian, *de a machine* (Berlin: merve, 2015).

9 The term technofeminism was coined by Judy Wajcman (2004) in her book of the same name. The concept denotes speculative and queer positions that – both in theory and in practice – question the coded relation between gender and technology.

In the concrete possibility of working with documenta archiv, one of the most difficult questions of all is probably how a connection can be made between the material at hand (texts, ephemera, many hours of video documentaries, hundreds of photos, etc.)¹⁰ and what existed beyond the material – the underlying affects that, on the one hand, allowed this network to grow in all directions over a period of five years, but ultimately also led to its end. At the very Cyberfeminist International in Hamburg (2001), irreconcilable differences emerged that made it clear that the idea of being a platform whose concern is to make differences visible and livable could no longer stand. There were fierce disputes about whether such a structural self-understanding (different content within a common form) was political at all. The representatives of this pluralistic approach were accused of being "not political," i.e., of committing themselves too little to concrete political content. Since the basis of OBN had been to enable contentual polyphony within a jointly set framework, the questioning of this framework meant the end of OBN. This conference is fully documented on 29 video tapes. As part of the obn_archive it awaits future research and evaluations and could serve as a perfect example of digging deeper into the affective dimension of OBN through the study of the material at hand. What has been historically conditioned about OBN's process, and what has been systemically pre-programmed incompatibilities between an ambitious political acting and experimenting and the regulating structure of the art world, in which OBN was embedded to a large degree? There are no easy answers to all these questions, but they mark out a field in which one can think further. As an inspiration for further thinking, I am oriented towards a number of concepts and terms, which I would like to explain briefly in each case and then place in relation to the work on the archive.

Care

The term care has become widespread in the arts and academia in recent years, and is used in a variety of contexts to refer to moral attitudes or particular practices or forms of labor. Imported from political theory and philosophy, it has also long played an important role in feminism in particular in relation to unpaid, reproductive labor, but is also increasingly used in a broader understanding of care for the environment or health. As, Tronto and Fisher put it, care means "everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair 'our world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web."¹¹ This very general definition of care shall be the guiding for my reflections on the topic because it contains one of the most important aspects of the care discussions of recent years: the feminist idea of the 'Politics of Interdependence,'¹² which assumes not only a fundamental connectedness, but also a mutual dependence. Ethical and affective aspects pervade the various levels of care, ranging from a passive "caring about", to an active "taking care of" and "giving care", as an intervention or alleviation of a need.¹³ And the notion of "caring with" was later added by Tronto, expressing the idea of doing the caring work

10 This material will be specified in the methodology section to come in relation to its inventory process.

11 Joan Tronto and Bernice Fisher, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Care". In: Emily Abel and Margaret Nelson (Eds.), *Circles of Care: work and Identity in Women's Lives*, State University of New York Press, 1990, p.35.

12 The Care Collective, *The care manifesto: the politics of interdependence*, Verso Books, 2020.

13 This phased model has been suggested by Joan Tronto in *Moral boundaries: a political argument for an ethic of care*, Routledge, 1993.

together with others. Although the various degrees of involvement describe different processes, the individual phases are interwoven and “allow us to think across subjectivity, relationality, organization, and materiality,” as Manuela Zechner notes.¹⁴

In terms of the concrete work we are doing in the obn_archive group, our understanding of care refers first and foremost to the things we want to archive, but also to how, where and with whom. If one understands an archive in the concrete sense as an institution or organization whose task it is to store, preserve and make usable archive material for an indefinite period of time, then this includes both material aspects, such as the provision of space and other infrastructures, as well as personnel dedication, which ensures proper storage and systematization so that the archive materials are preserved and can be found and used by anyone who is interested. This may sound obvious and simple at first, but in practice it is an extremely laborious work that requires considerable resources. This is also the reason why we decided to house the OBN materials at documenta archiv, a public memory institution: the resources for this are provided by the public sector. There is the building in Kassel, administration and storage space, an archive system, staff whose paid job is “to take care.” That sounds promising: our material will be well preserved and usable there. At the same time, it is also a public institution, which means that not only are certain resources available, but that they are also tied to corresponding conditions. Compared to the pirate archives and the conceptualization of ‘pirate care’¹⁵ as a self-organized activity that sees itself as resistant and decides for itself what to take care of and how, this may seem to be a compromise. It means the acceptance of gatekeepers and also of the conditions they impose – including questions of ‘quality’ or ‘relevance’ that regulate entry into a public archive. What material is worthy of being managed at great expense in a public memory institution? But also vice versa: by which institution would OBN like to be represented?

As far as the documenta archive is concerned, it is the history of the Old Boys Network with documenta that has opened the doors of the archive for this formation. We were participants in documenta X, which suggests that we are also represented in the documenta archiv. However, there are institutional decision-making processes before the inclusion of our material in the archive can officially take place. Thanks to the current director, Birgitta Coers, we were able to establish a fruitful collaboration between the documenta archiv and our working group. And I don't think it's wrong to say that both sides see it as an experiment whose outcome remains exciting. Although the archive of the Old Boys Network may not be an ideal network of care in Dekker's sense¹⁶ it certainly is a significant experiment through its networking of professional archive workers, academic actors and an artistic experimental formation from the times of digital pioneering. documenta archiv even considers to complement the obn archive with a special stock dedicated to Cyberfeminism in general. This gives us confidence that our material will not only be well preserved there, but that it will also be kept alive in the context of future research projects and activations.

14 To Care as we would like to: Socio-ecological crisis and our impasse of care, Manuela Zechner, 2021. Available at: <https://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/en/gropiusbau/programm/journal/2021/manuela-zechner-to-care-as-we-would-like-to.html>

15 The notion of ‘pirate care’ has been suggested by the transnational research project with the same name, conceived by Valeria Graziano, Marcell Mars and Tomislav Medak: <https://pirate.care/>

16 Dekker, Annet, “Networks of Care. Types, Challenges, and Potentialities.” In: Anna Schäffler, Friederike Schäfer, Nanne Buurman (Eds.), *Networks of Care*, AG Networks of Care, nGbK, Berlin, 2022, pp.27-30.

Situated Archiving

It was in a conversation with Laurence Rassel¹⁷ in December 2020 that she introduced the idea of a 'situated archive' to address the tension between a collective project that needed the engagement of a single person to ensure its historical survival. The term 'situatedness' connects a feminist concept that has long been familiar and important to me, and my work on the archive. In fact, it helped me not only to free myself from any claim to 'objectivity,' which can only be a fiction anyway, but also to better understand what I can actually do: to determine the place from which I am acting without claiming objectivity or universal validity. The archive that I would develop together with the obn_archive group will contain exactly what I was able to contribute and would thus be an expression of my 'partial perspective.' This in no way excludes the possibility that others can also contribute, on the contrary; it is an essential part of the concept of the situatedness of knowledge that – what Donna Haraway describes as – “feminist objectivity” can only be achieved through the interconnection of different perspectives. The extension of my personal OBN archive by other perspectives should ideally be done on the level of documenta archiv, *after* I have handed over my collection to them. Such extensions can consist of material handed over by other “old boys”, but could also include the interviews conducted by obn_archive group member Malin Kuht with a number of former members of OBN – those who agreed to add their perspective. The additions of other “old boys” will multiply the points of view and perspectives, but need to be organized by someone other than me. However, the fact that blind spots creep in can hardly be avoided, and it would be wonderful to include a space for discussion into the obn_archive for those who are able and willing to provide criticism and support.

Methodology

From the very beginning, the work on the obn archive was driven by the idea of securing materials on OBN and make them as freely accessible as possible. This would ensure that OBN's work would remain in the public consciousness and thus make an important contribution to the historiography of cyberfeminism. Creating an archive seemed obvious. But what exactly would that entail?

Before the concrete work began, the archive group made some considerations about the tools we wanted to use as well as the methods to be deployed. Essential to the process of developing the archive was the fact that we are working in a group, i.e. discussing and deciding on issues collectively. Due to Corona, most of the meetings took place online. There were only three meetings where archive group members Julia Stolba and Malin Kuht came to my studio to work concretely on and with the material. The collaboration with the documenta archiv staff, namely Saskia Mattern and Martin Groh, extended this internal group and stimulated valuable learning processes regarding the stocktaking. Last but not least, being part of the nGbK working group 'Networks of Care' not only provided further opportunities for exchange, first and foremost with Anna Schäffler, but also gave me the opportunity to organize a public event at an early stage of our

¹⁷ Rassel, Laurence, “One never has enough back-reflections on a lost archive.” In: Anna Schäffler, Friederike Schäfer, Nanne Buurman (Eds.), *Networks of Care*, AG Networks of Care, nGbK, Berlin, 2022, pp.36-39.

archival work in which selected experts were invited to share their experiences.¹⁸ There was advice on all levels: technical, legal, political and aesthetic. At the suggestion of Dušan Barok, a DokuWiki was created, which we have filled in the course of the archive work with documentary materials of the process.¹⁹ For internal communication we set up a Google-group, not quite correct from a techno-political point of view, but all the more practical because not only is all communication automatically saved, but it can also be exported and ‘archived’ as a whole when the project is completed. The archived communication could additionally be joined by the saved ZOOM conferences.²⁰

But how to start? I knew I had all kinds of material in boxes, drawers, shelves, on the computer. But *how much* material do I have? And would it be even enough to constitute an archive? For me, OBN was a diffuse cloud of memories from which individual moments stood out, probably not representative of the whole, but rather of my selective memory... The work began by putting all the material together on a large table, and the first impulse was to group equal formats: books to books, photos to photos, video tapes to video tapes and so on. However, this gives, at most, an impression of the scale, but hardly allows for an approximation of content. And it raised the most fundamental question of how to organize this archive: What are meaningful categories to subdivide the material? And doesn't every categorization immediately mean a flattening, the loss of valuable references? How can one organize and at the same time maintain openings for an associative approach? These issues have still not been comprehensively resolved, nevertheless, a suitable categorization has eventually emerged during discussions within the archive group...

Categorizing

That the question of categorization is central also became clear when we began to systematically record the holdings in a spreadsheet. Discussions with various archive experts convinced us that a tabular record would be an important basis for any further work. My initial skepticism about this way of presenting information gradually gave way to the realization that one file containing all data and metadata of all the material we have would be the central tool. It would make it much easier to keep track of all the subsequent steps and to implement them. The templates provided by our external collaborator Michael Hiltbrunner from Zürich, and the one of documenta archiv offered us valuable assistance. Initially, we were disturbed by the level of detail of the requested information; for each individual object, over 20 different properties are available for its description including descriptions of the physical state, of provenance, but also related names, locations, dates etc.

18 “How can we maintain what we care about? Collaborative archiving strategies for the Old Boys Network,” inputs and subsequent discussion with Dušan Barok, Mela Dávila-Freire, Michael Hiltbrunner and Laurence Rassel introduced and moderated by Cornelia Sollfrank.

Documentation available at: https://obn-archive.multiplace.org/doku.php/public_events

19 obn_a – A situated archive of the Old Boys Network: <https://obn-archive.multiplace.org/doku.php>

20 This kind of exchange during the working process is exactly what will be missing from the OBN archive of OBN activities, because the corresponding digital tools were not part of everyday life at the time (and analog recordings are unfortunately not available).

However, while collecting the data, we noticed that we even had properties to add, as for example what material is digital-born, what requires scanning or reproduction and what is available online.

Working on the inventory began rather straight forward: simply listing everything that is there and see what emerges. In addition, the considerations of what kind of material was still missing and how to supplement (for example, the first version of the website, whose data was lost and therefore had to be painstakingly reconstructed with the help of archive.org). Then questions about possible key words and, again and again, about a meaningful categorization arose. The development of our categorization took a relatively long time and could really only emerge in the process: arranging the material along *events*. Since OBN was essentially realized through meetings in physical space, this was an obvious solution to which the documenta archiv had no objections. The subsequent creation of a timeline laid the foundation for then assigning individual archive holdings and grouping various formats around an event in a meaningful way. A separate text comments the creation of the timeline and explains the criteria used. At the time of writing this text (February 2022), the timeline contains 38 entries²¹ while the main inventory lists over 300 entries. These include about 20 publications, 300 photos, over 30 video tapes, 30 CDs and DVDs, several office folders with ephemera and original correspondence and invoices as well as a hard drive containing all digital files such websites, mailing list, designs etc.

Legal Concerns

What also became clear in the course of the work is that we are mainly working on the transfer of the concrete materials (digital and analog) to the documenta archiv, at the moment, and that there is not yet a solution how this material will be available online later – although that was exactly the original motivation of our work. Also, our visit to the documenta archiv in November 2021 was mainly about the facilities, about technical aspects of storage, about digitization methods and work flows. The online presentation of the obn_archive not only requires a technical infrastructure, but also, just as importantly, the clearance of the relevant copyrights. Unlike shadow libraries and pirate collections such as ubu.com or monoskop.org, public archives are obliged to adhere to existing law.²² To their credit, public memory institutions have more rights with regard to digitization under the new Urheberrechts-Wissensgesellschafts-Gesetz (UrhWissG) (Copyright and Knowledge Society Act). For example, they may digitize all materials in their custody for the purpose of preservation. However, this does not apply to *publishing* anything online. Our desire to build an open online archive can only be realized if we can convince the rights holders to make their work available either specifically for the archive's website or under a free license. The details of this have not yet been worked out. Probably many of the copyright holders are easy to reach and cooperative and documenta archiv can help with their resources²³ – or, we may have to decide

21 The timeline and an explanatory text are available here: <https://obn-archive.multiplace.org/doku.php/material>

22 In the course of my research on digital commons, I have published several texts on the issue of shadow libraries, e.g. "The Surplus of Copying. How Shadow Libraries and Pirate Archives Contribute to the Creation of Cultural Memory and the Commons," essay #11 in: originalcopy, Michael Kargl and Franz Thalmeier (eds.), Vienna, 2020. Available at: <https://www.ocopy.net/essays/cornelia-sollfrank/>

23 The guide book „Bewegungsgeschichte digitalisieren“ (German only) published by the Digitales Deutsches Frauenarchiv gives legal but well understandable information. Available at: <https://obn-archive.multiplace.org/doku.php/material>]

to make a pirate archive after all... Spreadsheets are patient! In terms of technical infrastructure, the documenta archiv finds itself in a process of transformation, respectively of (re-)invention and we have been promised that obn_archive will have a prominent position on the new platform being developed at the moment. In any case, my involvement in archival work will not be over with handing over my material and I am happy to get involved in future research and development related to the Old Boys Network and cyberfeminism in general.

Interconnections

Another unexpected but very pleasing aspect has occurred during the indexing of the material and the development of the timeline: the emergence of additional cross-links. For example, I was able to suggest that the cyberfeminist conference *Cyberfeminism in East and West*, which took place in St. Petersburg in 1998, be included in the monoskop archive, from where it is linked to the Russian Art Archive,²⁴ which also makes images of it available online. Furthermore, I was also able to provide images for monoskop.org of *Meta-Forum II* in Budapest, which has played an essential role in my own networking with the scene of 1990s net culture. In addition, I was able to contribute up-to-date information on the Old Boys Network to the *Cyberfeminism Index* commissioned by Rhizome and compiled by Mindy Seu, an ever-growing collection that gathers historical and contemporary projects on gender and technology.²⁵ Through this interconnectedness with other archives large and small, thematic and art-specific, public and pirate, the emerging obn_archive forms a new node in the web of knowledge transmission. And when Laurence Rassel writes “You cannot think of building an archive without thinking the ecosystem it will be included in,” I realize that I like to think of the obn_archive as part of very different ecosystems. It should be well protected in a public archive and secured for the long term, but also buzzing around the web and nesting in all kinds of other collections and thus always stimulate new possibilities for its activation.

The basis of all archival work is the general ‘caring for’ something. It is the appreciation of things both material and immaterial that leads to the next step, ‘the taking care of’ to ensure that they will not be forgotten and preserved as well as possible. This connection between attitude and activity applies to all areas of life. What belongs to “our world” of which Tronto and Fisher speak? The small and concrete case of the obn_archive reflects a general understanding of the project’s interweaving with diverse networks of care, without which living and working, always based on community and interdependence, would not be possible. It can be understood as a work on consciousness and as learning an active engagement that starts in the personal approach to one’s own work, but it certainly does not end there.

24 https://monoskop.org/Cyberfeminism_in_the_East_and_in_the_West

25 <https://cyberfeminismindex.com/>