Where is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism?

Faith Wilding

The First Cyberfeminist International took place in Kassel, Germany, September 20-28, l997, as part of the Hybrid Workspace at Documenta X. After eight days of intense daily life and work with over 30 participants at this event, Faith Wilding reflects on the significance of these discussions and their implications both for the attempts to define, and the arguments against defining, cyberfeminism. While these and subsequent on-line discussions, especially through the FACES list, provide a browser through which possible practices of a cyberfeminist movement become visible, what concerns her is how such politics might be translated into practice for an engaged (cyber)feminist politics on the Net.

Against Definition

The question of how to define cyberfeminism is at the heart of the often contradictory contemporary positions of women working with new technologies and feminist politics. Sadie Plant's position on cyberfeminism, for example, has been identified as an absolutely post-human insurrection - the revolt of an emergent system which includes women and computers, against the world view and material reality of a patriarchy which still seeks to subdue them.

This is an alliance of the goods against their masters, an alliance of women and machines.[1] This utopian vision of revolt and merger between woman and machine is also evident in VNS Matrix's Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century: **we are the virus of the new world disorder/ rupturing the symbolic from within/saboteurs of big daddy mainframe/the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix.**[2] Another position in this debate is offered by Rosi

Braidotti: **cyberfeminism needs to cultivate a culture of joy and affirmation....Nowadays, women have to undertake the dance through cyberspace, if only to make sure that the joy-sticks of cyberspace cowboys will not reproduce univocal phallicity under the mask of multiplicity**[3]

The press release issued at the cyberfeminist discussions in Kassel declared that: **The First CYBERFEMINIST INTERNATIONAL slips through the traps of definition with different attitudes towards art, culture, theory, politics, communication and technology--the terrain of the Internet.** What strangely emerged from these discussions was the attempt to define cyberfeminism by refusal, evident not only in the intensity of the arguments, but also in the l00 antitheses devised there - for example:

cyberfeminism is not a fashion statement/ sajbrfeminizm nije usamljen/cyberfeminism is not ideology, but browser/cyberfeminismus ist keine theorie/ cyber feminismo no es una frontera[4]

Yet the reasons given by those who refused to define cyberfeminism - even though they called themselves cyberfeminists - indicate a profound ambivalence in many wired women's relationship to what they perceive to be a monumental past feminist history, theory, and practice. Three main manifestations of this ambivalence and their relevance to contemporary conditions facing women immersed in technology bear closer examination.

Repudiation of "old style"(1970s) feminism

According to this argument,"**old style**"(1970s) feminism is characterized as monumental, often constricting (politically correct), guilt inducing,essentialist, anti-technology, anti-sex, and not relevant to women's circumstances in the new technologies (judging from the Kassel discussions,this conception is common in the US and Western Europe). Ironically, in actual practice cyberfeminism has already adopted many of the strategies of avantgarde feminist movements, including strategic separatism (women only lists, self-help groups, chat groups, networks, and woman to woman technological training), feminist cultural, social, and language theory and analysis, creation of new images of women on the Net to counter rampant sexist stereotyping (feminist avatars, cyborgs, genderfusion), feminist net critique, strategic essentialism, and the like. The repudiation of historical feminism is problematic because it throws out the baby with the bathwater and aligns itself uneasily with popular fears, stereotypes, and misconceptions about feminism.

Why is it that so many younger women (and men) in the US (and Europe) know so little about even very recent histories of women, not to speak of past feminist movements and philosophies? It is tempting to point the finger at educational systems and institutions that still treat the histories of women, and of racial ethnic, and marginalized populations, as ancillary to *"regular"* history, relegating them to specialized courses or departments.

But the problems lie deeper than this. The political work of building a movement is expertise that must be relearned by every generation, and needs the help of experienced practitioners. The struggle to keep practices and histories of resistance alive today is harder in the face of a commodity culture which thrives on novelty, speed, obsolescence, evanescence, virtuality, simulation, and utopian promises of technology. Commodity culture is forever young and makes even the recent past appear remote and mythic. While young women are just entering the technological economy, many older feminists are unsure how to connect to the issues of women working with new technology, and how to go about adapting feminist strategies to the conditions of the new information culture. The problem for cyberfeminism, then, is how to incorporate the lessons of history into an activist feminist politics which is adequate for addressing women's issues in technological culture.

To be sure, the problem of losing historical knowledge and active connection to radical movements of the past is not limited to feminism--it is endemic to leftist movements in general. By arguing for the importance of knowing history I am not paying nostalgic homage to moments of past glory. If cyberfeminists wish to avoid making the mistakes of past feminists, they must understand the history of feminist struggle. And if they are to expand their influence on the Net and negotiate issues of difference across generational, economic, educational, racial, national, and experiential boundaries, they must seek out coalitions and alliances with diverse groups of women involved in the integrated circuit of global technologies. At the same time, close familiarity with postcolonial studies, and with the histories of imperialist and colonialist domination--and resistance to them--are equally important for an informed practice of cyberfeminist politics.

engender documenta xx today ...

... join the cyberfeminist week!

Vera Kuni *Advert/Logo for CI*

Web-Grrls, Amsterdam @ **http://www.webgrrls.nl**
Corrine Petrus/Mathilde Mupe

Cybergrrl-ism

Judging by a quick net browse, one of the most popular feminist rebellions currently practiced by women on the Net is **cybergrrl-ism** in all of its permutations: **webgrrls**, **riot grrls, guerrilla girls, bad grrls**,etc.

As Rosi Braidotti[5] and others have pointed out, the often ironic, parodic, humorous, passionate, angry, or aggressive work of many of these recent grrrl groups is an important manifestation of new subjective and cultural feminine representations in cyberspace. Currently there is quite a wide variety of articulations of feminist and protofeminist practices in these various groups which range from:- anyone female can join chatty mailing lists, to sci-fi, cyberpunk, and femporn zines; antidiscrimination projects; sexual exhibitionism; transgender experimentation; lesbian separatism; medical self-help; artistic self-promotion; job and dating services; and just plain mouthing off. Cybergrrl-ism generally seems to subscribe to a certain amount of net utopianism--an *"anything you wanna be and do in cyberspace is cool"* attitude. Despite the gripings against men in general, which pervade some of the discussions and sites, most cybergrrls don't seem interested in engaging in a political critique of women's position on the Net – instead they adopt the somewhat anti-theory attitude which seems to prevail currently; they'd rather forge ahead to express their ideas directly in their art and interactive practices.

While cybergrrls sometimes draw (whether consciously or unconsciously) on feminist analyses of mass media representations of women--and on the strategies and work of many feminist artists--they also often unthinkingly appropriate and recirculate sexist and stereotyped images of women from popular media--the buxom gun moll, the supersexed cyborg femme, and the 50's tupperware cartoon women are favorites--without any analysis or critical recontextualization. Creating more positive and complex images of women that break the gendered codes prevailing on the Net (and in the popular media) takes many smart heads, and there is richly suggestive feminist research available, ranging from Haraway's monstrous cyborgs, Judith Butler's fluid gender performativity, to Octavia Butler's recombinant genders. All manner of hybrid beings can unsettle the old masculine/feminine binaries. Cybergrrlish lines of flight are important as vectors of investigation, research, invention, and affirmation. But these can't replace the hard work that is needed to identify and change the gendered structures, content, and effects of the new technologies on women worldwide. If it is true, as Sadie Plant argues that '**women have not merely had a minor part to play in the emergence of the digital machines.....[that] women have been the simulators, assemblers, and programmers of the digital machines[6]** then why are there so few women in visible positions of leadership in the electronic world? Why are women a tiny percentage of computer programmers, software designers, systems analysts, and hackers, while they are the majority of

teletypers, chip-assemblers and installers, and lowskilled tele-operators that keep the global data and infobanks operating? Why is the popular perception still that women are technophobic? Sadly, the lesson of Ada Lovelace is that even though women have made major contributions to the invention of computers and computer programming, this hasn't changed the perception--or reality--of women's condition in the new technologies. Being bad grrls on the Internet is not by itself going to challenge the status quo, though it may provide refreshing moments of iconoclastic delirium. But if grrrl energy and invention were to be coupled with engaged political theory and practice.....Imagine!

Imagine cyberfeminists theorists teaming up with brash and cunning grrl net artists to visualize new female representations of bodies, languages, and subjectivities in cyberspace! Currently (in the US) there is little collaboration between academic feminist theorists, feminist artists, and popular women's culture on the Net. What would happen if these groups worked together to visualize and interpret new theory, and circulate it in accessible popular forms? Imagine using existing electronic networks to link diverse groups of women computer users (including teleworkers and keystrokers) in an exchange of information about their day-to-day working conditions and lives on the Net; imagine using this information network as an action base to address issues of women digital workers in the global restructuring of work. Such projects could weave together both the utopian and political aspirations of cyberfeminism.

Net utopianism

As noted in a previous essay on the political condition of cyberfeminism, there is much to be said for considering cyberfeminism a promising new wave of feminist practice that can contest technologically complex territories and chart new ground for women.[7] There is a tendency though among many cyberfeminists to indulge techno-utopian expectations that the new e-media will offer women a fresh start to create new languages, programs, platforms, images, fluid identities and multi-subject definitions in cyberspace; that in fact women can recode, redesign, and reprogram information technology to help change the feminine condition. This net utopianism declares cyberspace to be a free space where gender does not matter--you can be anything you want to be regardless of your "*real*" age, sex, race, or economic position--and refuses a fixed subject position. In other words,

cyberspace is regarded as an arena inherently free of the same old gender relations and struggles. However, it is of utmost importance to recognize that the new media exist within a social framework that is already established in its practices and embedded in economic, political, and cultural environments that are still deeply sexist and racist. Contrary to the dreams of many net utopians, the Net does not automatically obliterate hierarchies through free exchanges of information across boundaries. Also, the Net is not a utopia of nongender; it is already socially inscribed with regard to bodies, sex, age, economics, social class, and race. Despite the indisputable groundbreaking contributions by women to the invention and development of computing technology, today's Internet is a contested zone that historically originated as a system to serve war technologies, and is currently part of masculinist institutions. Any new possibilities imagined within the Net must first acknowledge and fully take into account the implications of its founding formations and present political conditions. To be sure, it is a radical act to insert the word feminism into cyberspace, and to attempt to interrupt the flow of masculine codes by boldly declaring the intention to mongrelize, hybridize, provoke, and disrupt the male order of things in the Net environment. Historically, feminism has always implied dangerous disruptions, covert and overt actions, and war on patriarchal beliefs, traditions, social structures--and it has offered utopian visions of a world without gender roles. A politically smart and affirmative cyberfeminism, using wisdom learned from past struggles, can model a brash disruptive politics aimed at deconstructing the patriarchal conditions that currently produce the codes, languages, images, and structures of the Net.

Definition as a political strategy

Linking the terms *cyber* and *feminism* creates a crucial new formation in the history of feminism(s) and of the e-media. Each part of the term necessarily modifies the meaning of the other. "***Feminism***" (or more properly, ***"feminisms"***) has been understood as a historical--and contemporary--transnational movement for justice and freedom for women, which depends on women's activist participation in networked local, national, and international groups.[8] It focuses on the material, political, emotional, sexual, and psychic conditions arising from women's differentialized social construction and gender roles. Link this with ***"cyber"***, which means to steer, govern, control, and we conjure up

the staggering possibility of feminism at the electronic helm. Cyberfeminism could imagine ways of linking the historical and philosophical practices of feminism to contemporary feminist projects and networks both on and off the Net, and to the material lives and experiences of women in the integrated circuit, taking full account of age, race, class, and economic differences.

If feminism is to be adequate to its cyberpotential then it must mutate to keep up with the shifting complexities of social realities and life conditions as they are changed by the profound impact communications technologies and technoscience have on all our lives.

While refusing definition seems like an attractive, non-hierarchical, anti-identity tactic, it in fact plays into the hands of those who would prefer a net quietism: "*Give a few lucky women computers to play with and they'll shut up and stop complaining.*" This attitude is one toward which cyberfeminists should be extremely wary and critical. Access to the Internet is still a privilege, and by no means to be regarded as a universal right (nor is it necessarily useful or desirable for everyone). While brilliant consumer marketing has suceeded in making ownership of a PC seem as imperative as having a telephone, computers are in fact powerful tools that can provide the possessor with a political advantage (the personal computer is the political computer). If the Internet is increasingly the channel through which many people (in the overdeveloped nations) get the bulk of their information, then it matters greatly how women participate in the programming, policy setting, and content formations of the Net, for information coming across the Net needs to be contextualized both by the receiver and by the sender. On the Internet, feminism has a new transnational audience which needs to be educated in its history and its contemporary conditions as they prevail in different countries. For many,cyberfeminism could be their entry point into feminist discourse and activism. While there is a great deal of information about feminism available on the Net--and new sites are opening up all the time–it must be remembered that the more this information can be contextualized politically, and linked to practices, activism, and conditions of every day life, the more it is likely to be effective in helping to connect and mobilize people. [9] A potent example is in the Zamir Network (Zamir *"for peace"*) of BBS and e-mail that was created after the eruption of civil war in Yugoslavia in l99l to link peace activists in Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Bosnia across borders via host computers in Germany. The

100 Anti-Theses @
Old Boy's Network
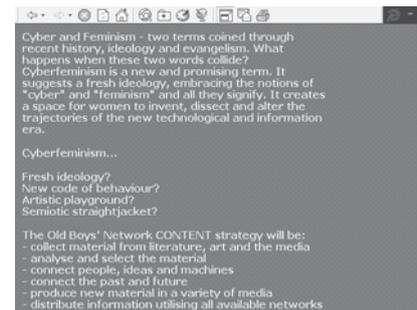
Cyberfeminism @
Old Boy's Network

point is that computers are more than playful tools, consumer toys, or personal pleasure machines–they are the master's tools, and they have very different meanings and uses for different populations. It will take crafty pilots to navigate these channels.

While cyberfeminists want to avoid the damaging mistakes of exclusion, lesbophobia, political correctness, and racism, which sometimes were part of past feminist thinking, the knowledge, experience, and feminist analysis and strategies accumulated thus far are crucial for carrying their work forward now. If the goal is to create a feminist politics on the Net and to empower women, then cyberfeminists must reinterpret and transpose feminist analysis, critique, strategies, and experience to encounter and contest new conditions, new technologies, and new formations. (Self)definition can be an emergent property that arises out of practice and changes with the movements of desire and action. Definition can be fluid and affirmative–a declaration of strategies, actions, and goals. It can create crucial solidarity in the house of difference–solidarity, rather than unity or consensus–solidarity that is a basis for effective political action.

Cyberfeminists have too much at stake to be frightened away from tough political strategizing and action by the fear of squabbles, deologizing and political differences.

If I'd rather be a cyberfeminist than a goddess, I'd damned well better know why, and be willing to say so.

A Cyberfeminist cell

How might cyberfeminists organize to work for a feminist political and cultural environment on the Net? What are various areas of feminist research and net activity that are already beginning to emerge as cyberfeminist practice? The First Cyberfeminist International (CI) in Kassel serves as an example of feminist Net organiz(m)ation.

Responsibility for organizing the CI workdays was taken on by *Old Boys Network*(OBN)–an ad hoc group of about six women–in on-line consultation with all participants. Because of the on-line communications between the OBN leadership and participants, collaborative working relationships and the content of the meetings were already established by the time the participants met together face to face in Kassel. A shifting and diverse group of more than thirty women (self-selected by open invitation to members of the FACES listserv, [with a core of about ten]) participated in the CI.

From the first day this collaborative process–a recombinant form of feminist group processes, anarchic self-organization, and rotating leadership–continued to develop among women from more than eight countries and from different economic, ethnic, professional, and political backgrounds. Each day began with participants meeting in the Hybrid Workspace to work on various taskforces (text, press, technical, final party, etc.) and to organize the public program for the day. This was followed by three hours of public lectures and presentations for *Documenta* audiences. Afterward the closed group met again for dinner and to discuss issues such as the definition of cyberfeminism, group goals, and future actions and plans. Work was divided according to inclination and expertise;there was no duty list and no expectation that everyone would work the same amount of hours. Flexible schedules permitted conviviality, impulsive actions, brainstorming, and private time. Constant connection of participants to the FACES listserv was maintained electronically.

Practically all group activities were video and audiotaped and photographed. Participants' personal computer equipment was set up in the open work/meeting space and most of the lectures were accompanied by projected images from the lecturers' web-sites. One participant taught the group

how to set up CU_SeeMe_ connections and continued to participate virtually after she had to leave, and two young Russians trying to join the CI in Kassel, faxed a diary of their illegal journey as they jumped from country to country to evade visa problems. Thus there was an interesting interplay between virtuality and flesh presence. The face to face interactions were experienced as much more intense and energizing than the virtual communications, and forged different degrees of affinity between various individuals and subgroups, while at the same time they made all kinds of differences more palpable. Brainstorming and spontaneous actions seemed to spring more readily from face-to-face meetings. The opportunity for immediate question and answer sessions and extended discussion after the lectures also enabled more intimate and searching interchanges than are usually possible through on-line communications. Most important, all presentations, hands-on training, and discussions took place in a context of intense debate about feminism, which produced a constant awareness of the lived relationship of women and technology.

The wide variety of content presented in the lectures, web projects, and workshops touched on many of the hottest topics of concern to cyberfeminism: Theories of the visibility of sexual difference on the Net; digital self-representations of online women as avatars and databodies; analyses of gender representations, sex-sites, cybersex, and femporn; strategies of genderfusion and hybridity to combat stereotyping, essentialism, and sexist representations of women; *"feminism as a browser"*; the dangers of the fetishistic desire for information and the paranoia created by the new technologies; dissemination of knowledge about women in history; studies of differences between women and men programmers and hackers; an examination of feminist electronic art strategies; feminist models of technological education; health issues of wired women and discussion of how to organize and support feminist networking projects in different countries.[10]

The chief gains from the CI discussions were trust, friendship, a deeper understanding and tolerance of differences; the ability to sustain discussions about controversial and divisive issues without group rupture; and mutual education about issues of women immersed in technology, as well as a clearer understanding of the terrain for cyberfeminist intervention.

While the CI did not result in a formal list of goals, actions, and concrete plans, we reached general agreement

on areas in need of further work and research. An ongoing concern is how to make cyberfeminism more visible and effective in reaching diverse populations of women using technology. Options discussed included creating a cyberfeminist search engine that could link strategic feminist websites; country-by-country reports of net activity and cyberorganization for women; forming coalitions with female technologists, programmers, scientists and hackers, to link feminist Net theory, content and practice with technological research and invention; education projects (for both men and women) in technology, programming, and software and hardware design, that would address traditional gender

constructions and biases built into technology; and more research on how the ongoing global restructuring of women's work results from the pervasive changes introduced by information technology.

(Cyber) Feminism is a browser through which to see life. [11]

If cyberfeminists have the desire to research, theorize, work practically, and make visible how women (and others) worldwide are affected by new communications technologies, technoscience, and the capitalist dominations of the global communications networks, they must begin by clearly formulating cyberfeminisms' political goals and positions. Cyberfeminists have the chance to create new formulations of feminist theory and practice that address the complex new social, cultural, and economic conditions created by global technologies. Strategic and politically savvy uses of these technologies can facilitate the work of a transnational movement that aims to infiltrate and assault the networks of power and communication through activist-feminist projects of solidarity, education, freedom, vision, and resistance. To be effective in creating a politicized feminist environment on the Net that challenges its present gender, race, age, and class structures, cyberfeminists need to draw on the researches and strategies of avant garde feminist history and its critique of institutionalized patriarchy. While affirming new possibilities for women in cyberspace, cyberfeminists must critique utopic and mythic constructions of the Net, and strive to work with other resistant netgroups in activist coalitions. Cyberfeminists need to declare solidarity with transnational feminist and postcolonial initiatives, and work to use their access to communications technologies and electronic networks to support such initiatives.

List of participants

Susanne Ackers, Berlin
Babeth, Amsterdam
Ulrike Bergermann, Hamburg
Josephine Bosma, Amsterdam
Shu Lea Cheang, New York
Vali Djordjevic, Berlin
Marina Grzinic, Japan
Sabine Helmers, Berlin
Kathy Rae Huffman, Wien
Margarethe Jahrmann, Wien
Vesna Jankovic, Zagreb
Verena Kuni, Frankfurt
Vesna Manojlovic, Belgrade
Nikolina Manojlovic, Zagreb
Diana McCarty, Budapest
Alla Mitrofanova, St. Petersburg
Ingrid Molnar, Hamburg/Wien
Mathilde Mupe, Amsterdam
Ellen Nonnenmacher, Berlin
Helene von Oldenburg, Rastede
Daniela Alina Plewe, Berlin
Corrine Petrus, Rotterdam
Julianne Pierce, Sydney
Claudia Reiche, Hamburg
Tamara Rouw, Amsterdam
Rasa Smite, Riga
Cornelia Sollfrank, Berlin/Hamburg
Debra Solomon, Amsterdam
Josephine Starrs, Sydney
Barbara Strebel, Basel
Rena Tangens, Bielefeld
Gudrun Teich, Dsseldorf
Kerstin Weiberg, Berlin
Faith Wilding, Pittsburgh
Eva Wohlgemuth, Wien
Ina Wudtke, Berlin
Olga Egerova, St. Petersburg
Natalja Pershina, St. Petersburg

Faith Wilding, a founding participant of the feminist art movement, is a multi-media artist, writer, and feminist-activist currently living in Pittsburgh, USA.

Notes

l. Caroline Bassett, 'With a Little Help from Our (New) Friends?' *mute*, August l997, 46-49.

2. VNS Matrix webpage: [sysx.apana.org.au/artists/vns]

3. Rosi Braidotti, 'Cyberfeminism with a difference.' [www.let.ruu.nl/womens_studies/rosi/cyberfem.htm]

4. The complete l00 Antitheses can be found at Old Boys Network [http://www.obn/org]

5. Braidotti. Ibid.

6. Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + the New Technocultures*. New York: Doubleday, l997. p. 37

7. Faith Wilding and Critical Art Ensemble,'Notes on the Political Condition of Cyberfeminism.' [http://mailer.fsu.edu/~sbarnes]

8. Using the term "*feminism*" is very different from using the term 'women'--although perhaps one should consider using the term **"cyberwomanism**," which acknowledges the critique of racist white feminism so justly made by Audrey Lorde, Alice Walker, bell hooks, and others.

9. See, for example, the listings of l,000 feminist or women-related sites in Shana Penn **The Women's Guide to The Wired World.** New York: Feminist Press, l997.

10. For more information on the First Cyberfeminist International and papers see [http://www.obn.org]

11. Alla Mitrofanova, presentation at the First Cyberfeminist International in Kassel, September l997.

Artists Pages

(overleaf)

Helen Sear
2XST

(left) silver print, 1998

2XVY

(right) silver print, 1998

Helen Sear's two pages for *n.paradoxa* are part of an ongoing series of "double" portraits in the series *Twice....Once*, recently exhibited at Anderson O'Day Fine Art, London. Helen Sear works primarily with photography and time-based media. She studied Fine Art at Reading University and the Slade School of Art, and is based in London. Her recent solo exhibitions include:-a video installation (Rack Gallery, London, 1997) and *Moments Apart* (Zelda Cheattle Gallery, London,1997). She has exhibited widely in the UK and abroad.

She is currently collaborating with the novelist Emily Parker on a book project. For *Photo'98,* she has undertaken a large scale commission, drawing on her explorations of the relations between the body, nature and technology, which is to be sited at the Earth Centre near Doncaster. The new Earth Centre is the largest environmental project to be built in Britain for the Millennium and was opened in the Spring of 1998.