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A Report on Cyberfeminism

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ELECTRONIC GENDER

A Report on Cyberfeminism

Alex Galloway on Jun 14 1998

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Sadie Plant relative to VNS Matrix

"Hardware, software, wetware- -before their beginnings and beyond their ends, women have been the simulators, assemblers, and programmers of the digital machines."

--Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones*

It would be hasty to dismiss Sadie Plant's recent book, *Zeros and Ones*, as being totally second-wave feminism. True, she seems quite interested in the deep, dark, technological feminine; she speaks of the male Ones and their binary opposites, the female Zeros; and she manages to weave together a genuine her-story of technology. Yet, she also reaches beyond these constraints into a complex relationship between women and machines. This relationship, tied up in problematics surrounding identity, technology and the body, is at the heart of the contemporary movement called cyberfeminism.

Emerging from Adelaide, Australia in the early nineties, a group of artists and activists, calling themselves VNS Matrix, published the first Cyberfeminist Manifesto. From this early rant, the cyberfeminist movement began to grow and shift. It began to coalesce around Europe. And on September 20, 1997 in Kassel, Germany, the First Cyberfeminist International met at Documenta X, an international exhibition of contemporary art.

Despite international recognition, cyberfeminism remains a highly problematic theoretical framework. No one is quite sure what it means. Its leaders, when they are not abandoning the movement all together, have often given less than inspired readings of political and technological issues. Because of this cyberfeminism remains a bit disappointing as avant-garde political movements go. There's no viable party line, strictly trade union consciousness.

That said, the emerging cyber culture has certainly produced a need for cyberfeminism. Let's describe that need through the following set of questions: How does technology gender us? Does the internet escape discrimination through gender anonymity? Can technology help us overcome patriarchy? Why are computer geeks disproportionately male? Who wrote the history of computers? Are digital machines fundamentally male or female?

My goal is to give a report on the status of cyberfeminism today, to approach the subject of feminism and technology, in both its historical and ideological dimensions. As Faith Wilding and Critical Art Ensemble have noted in their recent study of cyberfeminism, **"the territory of cyberfeminism is large. It includes the objective arenas [of] cyberspace, institutions of industrial design, and institutions of education--that is, those arenas in which technological process is gendered in a manner that excludes women from access to the empowering points of techno-culture."** Cyberfeminism in its very nature necessitates a decentered, multiple, participatory practice in which many lines of flight coexist.

Part of the same movement that produced "girl power" e-zines like **gURL** and the now

famous **Geekgirl**, the nineties cyberfeminist is a unique mixture of activist, cyberpunk, theorist and artist. Historically, cyberfeminism has developed in two directions: the radical politics of Sadie Plant and VNS Matrix on the one hand, and the more mainstream work of the **Old Boys Network** (OBN is a mostly European consortium of cyberfeminists) and the **FACES** email community on the other (FACES, surprising enough for cyberspace, is a "women only" email list). Supplementing this are the various online publications that address the question of feminism and technology, including the new media art resource **RHIZOME**, the **nettime** community and the **pop~TARTS** web page, a feature section of Telepolis (a German-based online theory zine), which specializes in material on woman and technology. Cyberfeminist theory has also flourished in the print community with such recent books as Sadie Plant's *Zeros and Ones* and Sandy Stone's *The War of Desire and Technology*.... Although cyberfeminism has also benefited from the half-dozen or so anthologies emerging in recent years on digital studies--not the least of which are Timothy Druckrey's *Electronic Culture*, the Krokors' *Digital Delirium* and Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Clicking In*--much of this material remains male dominated, neglecting the scope and depth of contemporary cyberfeminism. Cyberfeminism's theoretical roots tend to grow out of an interesting mixture of Donna Haraway and French third-wave feminism and poststructuralism.

The schism between the two halves of cyberfeminism has been exacerbated within the community on more than one occasion, including VNS Matrix member Francesca da Rimini's description of the current state of mainstream cyberfeminism as nothing more than some "**quaint essentialist quilted rant.**" To their credit, the Old Boys Network (OBN) has been instrumental in bringing cyberfeminism into the institutional PGA Tour of cyberspace: the ISEAs, DEAFs, and Ars Electronica festivals that run on and off throughout the year. Most spectacularly OBN was able to lead the so-called First Cyberfeminist International at last summer's **Hybrid Workspace** (a think tank for progressive politics and aesthetics at the recent Documenta X exhibition). That said, This paper is primarily addressed at what I believe to be the more interesting faction of cyberfeminism, that of Plant, Stone and VNS Matrix.

Sadie Plant and Sandy Stone are perhaps the two best entry points into contemporary cyberfeminist theory. It is Plant's view that technology is fundamentally female--not male as the legions of geeks, computer science teachers, and Wired magazine editors would have us believe. Stone, on the other hand, focuses on how virtual communities produce things like bodies, identities and spaces.

Plant, like French feminist Luce Irigaray before her, belongs to the recuperationist school of feminism. She argues that power structures, which have unequally favored men and male forms in society, should be made more equal through a process of revealing and valorizing overlooked female elements. The book turns on the story of Ada Lovelace, the world's first computer programmer. Ada's history is enthralling. As assistant to Charles Babbage, Lovelace helped build early calculation machines such as the Babbage's Difference Engine. Clearly not enough is known about this figure and her interesting place in the development of computer society. Plant's goal is to recuperate this lost female origin from within the history of technology. However, as her manifesto-like "**Feminisations: Reflections on Women and Virtual Reality**" shows, Plant wishes not to valorize some negative space created by patriarchy, but to unveil the always already feminine space of technology. This is ultimately a more powerful move. Plant prophesizes that "**Masculine identity has everything to lose from this new technics. The sperm count falls as the replicants stir and the meat learns how to learn for itself. Cybernetics is feminisation.**" Technology can give feminism something that it never had at its disposal, the obliteration of the masculine from beginning to end. With inspiration from the VNS Matrix and their cyberfeminist manifesto, Plant starts to move toward defining the pure feminine.

Zeros and Ones persuasively shows how women have always been inextricably involved with technology. Using the telephone operator as an example, she argues that women have traditionally comprised the laboring core of networks of all kinds, particularly the telephone system. From the power loom to typewriting, even to the discovery of computer "bugs," Plant categorizes technology as a fundamentally female object. She argues that women are intelligent machines, that the robotic is feminine, that the zero--the nothingness of binary code--has always been the 0-ther, the female.

On the writing of *Zeros and Ones*, Plant remembers: "**when I started the book it was really to try and correct, what I thought was the great miss-conception at the moment about the relationship between women and computers in particular and technology in general. It seemed to me, that a lot of 'orthodox' feminist theory was still very technophobic.**"

Throughout her work the matrix is a primary metaphor. This materializes itself historically in the weaving processes of industrial power looms, in the predominantly female telephone operators, in the trope of the woman as computer programmer (Ada Lovelace, Grace Murray Hopper) and in the web-like structure of cyberspace. Because of this history, Plant writes that technology is fundamentally a process of emasculation.

"The matrix weaves itself in a future which has no place for historical man," says Plant. If technology is essentially feminine, then the woman is the computer. Or rather, like the Turing machine (a machine that can be any machine), women can imitate the computer. Women are the ultimate mimetic force. Plant writes, "**Women cannot be anything, but she can imitate anything valued by man: intelligence, autonomy, beauty...perhaps the very possibility of mimesis.**" The imitating force is strengthened by the emergence of the digital as a powerful semiotic network. The digital provides a space of valences that exists outside of and potentially preempts patriarchal structures. As Plant describes it, "**the introduction of binary code introduces a plane of equivalence which undermines the very foundations of a world in which male and female have played the roles of superstructure and material base.**" In this model binary code replaces what have traditionally been the producers of value, these being the phallus, the law, the father, etc. In Plant, technology is less a question of good or and more the possibility for an objective weakening of patriarchy. "**Cyberfeminism to me implies [that] an alliance is being developed between women, machinery and the new technology that women are using.**"

Held aloft, yet notably aloof from the cyberfeminist movement is **Allucquère Rosanne (Sandy) Stone**, transgendered theorist of the history of cyberspace, desire and the virtual body. Stone's early essay "**Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?**" helped set the stakes for contemporary debates on the status of the body in virtual communities. The place of the body is central to cyberfeminism. Stone argues persuasively that binarisms such as nature/culture actually function logically as "**a strategy for maintaining boundaries for political and economic ends, and thus a way of making meaning.**" The insertion of the body into virtual space actually produces meaning through the articulation of differences between bodies and non-bodies, between spaces and non-spaces. Like Foucault's rejection of the "repressive hypothesis," Stone claims that new technologies are not transparent agents that remove issues of gender from view, but rather they proliferate the production and organization of gendered bodies in space. She shows that the dominant spatial metaphor (what Doreen Massey might call an "imaginary geography") for interactions in virtual spaces is, simply enough, the metaphor of our daily physical, Cartesian space. And like our offline space, virtual spaces are inhabited by bodies with "**complex erotic components.**" This working metaphor is, of course, totally arbitrary as Stone points out, since there is nothing in the logic of digital networks that necessarily prestructures itself as Cartesian, or body-based, or desiring. So then, why are online communities so based on desire, space and bodies? This is the cyberfeminist question for Stone.

Sherry Turkle echoes this sentiment in her "**Constructions and Reconstructions of the Self in Virtual Reality.**" For Turkle digital technologies focus heavily on the question of identity. Like Stone, Turkle describes what happens in online communities, spaces where role playing and genderbending are par for the course.

Virtual space, then, is imagined as a prosthesis, as an enormous extension of our physical bodies. Through this giant phantom limb (the net) we must, of course, interact. Stone shows that communications technology is conventionally thought of as "**1) an apparatus for the production of community... 2) an apparatus for the production of body... [and] 3) a mediating [agent] between bodies and selves...i.e., interfaces.**" Community, body, interface--an unlikely offspring of binary code! Most fundamentally, participants in online communities like the object-oriented social spaces called MOOs "**learn to delegate their agencies to body representatives that exist in imaginal spaces contiguously with representatives of other individuals.**" The creators of one of the most popular MOOs, LambdaMOO, describe this relationship of bodies in social terms: "**LambdaMOO is a new kind of society, where thousands of people voluntarily come together from all over the world.**" As Stone and others show, a participatory social practice (i.e. community) based on an imagined ether-scape of desiring and interacting bodies is basic to how we conceptualize digital spaces.

Cyberfeminist pioneers VNS (VeNuS) Matrix provided the front line guerrilla tactics for Stone and Plant's theoretical efforts. VNS Matrix emerged from Adelaide, Australia, in the summer of 1991. Francesca da Rimini (also known as Gashgirl and/or Doll Yoko) gives her story of how it all started:

"Like all good coagulating stories it starts with slime, and maybe ends with blood. I live on the edge of the Australian desert in a small town of lies and whispers with a palpable palpating underbelly... It was the summer of 91. Definitely not the summer of love. We were four girls. We were hot and bored and poor (for me not much has changed, except I am no longer bored). We decided to try and crack the porn cartel with some chick porn. We made some images on stolen computers, Beg, Bitch, Fallen, Snatch. We decided it was more fun playing with computers than

endlessly scanning our pussies and so Velvet Downunder morphed into VNS Matrix. Tagging ourselves the virus of the new world disorder and fuelled by red wine and g-slime (which could only be replenished by engaging frequently in pleasurable distractions)."

VNS Matrix were Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce, Francesca da Rimini and Virginia Barratt. They have perpetrated a series of cyberfeminist interventions including a "bad code" anti-video game targetted at girls (or at least not targetted at 14 year-old boys) and featuring characters such as "Big Daddy Mainframe." Da Rimini (as Doll Yoko) writes, "cyberfeminism/s has become the field from which i work, from which multiple lines of flight erupt anarchically, generating dialogues, relations, conceptual and physical objects."

To appreciate the full force of the VNS Matrix cyberfeminist manifesto, it is worth including in its original form:



Their slogan "the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix" immediately jumps out of this provocative rant. It is meant to highlight a fundamental material coexistence between the machine and the female body. Originally ignorant of the work of Sadie Plant VNS Matrix built their own theory-based activism centered around women and technology. Julianne Pierce notes, "at the same time as we started using the concept of cyberfeminism, it also began to appear in other parts of the world. It was like a spontaneous meme which emerged at around the same time, as a response to ideas like 'cyberpunk' which were popular at the time. Since then the meme has spread rapidly and is certainly an idea which has been embraced by many women who are engaged with techno theory and practice." Pierce notes that cyberfeminists have never been anti-technology, rather they adore machines and use them integrally in their political action, art and writing.

In what produced a temporary antagonism between the **nettime** feminists and their more radical fringe, da Rimini (writing as Doll Yoko) posted in June, 1997 to the nettime list that "as artists, [VNS Matrix] were serious bout usin strategies like irony 'n inversion of cultural stereotypes to raise some of the many issues around women and technology .. access .. education .. jobs .. portrayal of girls/chix/women in popular/games culture etc etc." Da Rimini's sentiment is typical of the VNS Matrix brand of cyberfeminism, a crude, confrontational liberationist politics for women in the digital matrix.

Throughout all of cyberfeminist theory the theme of bodies and identities dominates. As one critic notes, "**Bodies generally are all the rage on the Net--whether they are obsolete, cyborg, techno, porno, erotic, morphed, recombined, phantom, or viral.**" Indeed, much of the focus on bodies steams from the process of forgetting the body or trying to forget about forgetting the body. As Stone and others have written, the advent of cyberspace is the story of bodies migrating and morphing into new contexts. In fact, Lynn Hershman Leeson goes so far as to claim that "**new [web] users are forming the largest immigration in history**"--a powerful idea to keep in mind, that computer use could possibility constitute a real immigration of bodies from the offline to the online.

Another interest of the cyberfeminists, the "posthuman" body is the focus of *TechnoMorphica*, a recent book of art and essays from the Dutch **V2_Organisation**. Unlike **Donna Haraway's** early work on bio/techno hybrids, *TechnoMorphica* benefits

from contemporary developments in areas such as augmented reality, nanotechnology and prosthetics to arrive at a more shockingly immediate description of the future of art and the future of theory. If this intriguing anthology must have a theme, it would be the "new cyborg," the rearrangement of the organic world around the model of the intelligent machine. The well developed transformation of machines into organisms and organisms into machines is the model for the new cyborg. Amazingly, the book includes a 180 page, full color, frame-by-frame photo documentation of Australian artist Stelarc's "Stomach Sculpture," a swallowed video probe exploration of the inside of the artist's digestive track. Says Stelarc, **"the body has been augmented, invaded and now becomes a host--not only for technology, but also for remote agents."** He elaborates on the "Stomach Sculpture" in a recent CTHEORY interview: **"with the stomach sculpture, I position an artwork inside the body. The hollow body becomes a host, not for a self or a soul, but simply for a sculpture."** Another piece that uses video footage of the inside of the body is Mona Hatoum's "Corps Etranger." Hatoum creates a haunting audio/visual space using video footage from a micro-sized video camera traveling down the esophagus and into the stomach. The footage is then staged within a larger immersive installation booth that includes a soundtrack of the artist breathing. Hatoum's interest in the immersive environment plays itself twice over: the user is plunged into the viewing booth, then plunged down into a sickening biological space lit up only by the techno eye. The body is at once reviled and revealed.

In the same way cyberfeminism aims to exorcise the essentialized female body through a complex process of revalorization and rebuilding. The Cartesian subject is irrelevant here, as Plant explains: **"Basically the two positions that are established at the minute are either that you talk about disembodiment or you talk about embodiment. Either you're out of the body in some stratospheric zone or you're in the organism. I think that neither of those are correct. When people talk about getting out of the body they are still assuming that there is some kind of great transcendent space like heaven for the soul, or something non-material at any rate, to occupy. And as far as I'm concerned that isn't there. The universe isn't like that, it's a material process not some sort of idealist construction. So you can't get out of matter, that's the crucial thing. But you can get out of the confining organization of matter which is shaped into things and of course, organisms. The organism is literally organized around its organs, the vocabulary says it all really."**

Contemporary cyberfeminist art, including VNS Matrix's self-described "cunt art," follows Plant's guideline to the letter. Like Fluxus artist Shigeo Kubota's performance "Vagina Painting," VNS Matrix focused on a raw, fleshy, expressive use of the body. Other cyberfeminist, technology-based art includes Eva Grubinger's **"Netzbikini."** The Netzbikini project parodies the act of buying a bikini, by offering bikini patterns that one can download from the internet and sew together out of "sheer, transparent net fabric." The project turns interactive as users are invited to submit photos of themselves in their new bikinis. The photos are exhibited on the Netzbikini site. Nancy Paterson goes in a different direction on the question of the body. Her **"Stock Market Skirt"** is composed of a blue taffeta and black velvet party dress, a computer and a stock market ticker. The dress is connected to the computer, which with the help of a robotic device is able to raise or lower the length of the skirt. As the stock market rises and falls, the computer reads the market prices and varies the length of the skirt accordingly. These two pieces show the various ways cyberfeminist art has considered the body.

Following close behind the question of the body is the question of identity. The question of identity is always a delicate balance between a desire to critique essentialism and a desire to remain politically committed. Although not connected to digital studies, Elspeth Probyn, in her *Outside Belongings* is one person who has tried to define a theory of identity after antihumanism. There is thus a natural affinity with her work and the goals of cyberfeminism. Probyn writes, **"I want to figure the desire that individuals have to belong, a tenacious and fragile desire that is, I think, increasingly performed in the knowledge of the impossibility of ever really and truly belonging, along with the fear that the stability of belonging and the sanctity of belongings are forever past."** Probyn's longing, then, is to navigate a theory of practices--a theory of living--having already digested a steady diet of antihumanist rhetoric a la psychoanalysis and poststructuralism. The word "performed" reminds us of Butler whose original *Gender Trouble* was itself a struggle with questions of identity. Unfortunately Probyn's navigation of the unknown space after humanism leaves much to be desired. The exciting early convocations of Foucault, hints of a radically singular psychogeography of the self, an aspiration to perform a "sociology of the skin," the mention of Stuart Hall's concept of articulation, Deleuze's rhizomatics--all these ill prepare the reader for Probyn's lapse into analyses of the "richness" of her childhood, her mother's "passion for horses" and other autobiographical absurdities. An informal style not dissimilar to Stone, Probyn's first person narration would profit from a higher level of objective-ness, more new novel and less memoir. In the end, I say to Probyn's "longing" what Foucault says to Deleuze's "desire": **"I cannot stand the**

word desire; even if you use it differently, I can't help myself thinking or living desire = lack, or that desire says repression." Can we use the master's tools?

In the case of Butler, feminism and the question of identity are distinctly poststructuralist. Because of this she participates in a critique of humanist theories of subjectivity and social space more suited to the cyberfeminist project. In *Gender Trouble* she has yet to consider the "after" of humanism that is in Probyn, only a critique of what she calls alternately "**ontological constuctions of identity**," "**gender ontologies**" and "**metaphysics of substance**," in short, humanist metaphysics. And well done too. Butler deftly navigates through the Scylla and Charybdis of the theoretical left: avoid essentialism, maintain the political agent. As Butler queries, "**what sense can we make of a construction that cannot assume a human constructor prior to that construction?**" Butler, then, rooted in a deep materialism, posits a human subject that is both constituted by and constitutive of his/her social environment. Butler's affection for Derrida shines through clearly in this text as her marxist logics take on a decidedly poststructuralist flair: "**Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time. An open coalition, then...will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure.**"

Like Probyn and unlike Butler, the cyberfeminism of Plant, Stone and VNS Matrix seems at times to be experimenting with the post-gender, not merely a critique of gender. The potentiality of the posthuman (artificial life, prosthetics, viruses, cyborgs, etc.), something only available with the advent of technology, is instrumental here. Haraway's prescient claim that "**the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world**" might easily be turned around to fit the needs of the cyberfeminists, that the cyberfeminist is a post-gender creature in a virtual world.

But is this post-gender world possible? And do we really want it? Catherine Richards highlights a curious potential fate for cyberfeminism: will cyberfeminism become nothing but ironic nostalgia for past difference, that is, if we are ever truly post-gender will we only be able to wax poetic on the state of struggle in the gendered past? Asks Richards, "**if something about contemporary virtual technology erases gender as articulated, will radical cyber-feminism be consigned to nostalgic content as much as traditional lonely male heroism?**" Plant, Stone and the VNS Matrix are our best allies for navigating these difficult questions.

+ + +

Fragments of this text first appeared in my review of Plant's *Zeros and Ones*, published at the **Thing Reviews**.

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- 14 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1990), pp. 5, 33, 25.
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