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## An interview with Sadie Plant

Switch Staffs

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## An interview with Sadie Plant

Switch Staffs on Apr 8 1999

issue 11

### An interview with Sadie Plant

Interview with Sadie Plant - Research Fellow and Director of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at the University of Warwick, UK. She is the author of *Zeros + Ones : Digital Women + the New Technoculture* and *The Most Radical Gesture : The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*. Interview by Brett Stalbaum and Geri Wittig:

**Brett Stalbaum/Geri Wittig** Your work tends to challenge hierarchical orthodoxies in their varied cultural manifestations, but your approach doesn't challenge them with replacement hierarchies, but rather with distributed models. How does this strategy relate to emerging electronic activism?

**Sadie Plant:** It seems to me that the old political struggles - largely between left and right - were waged between equally monolithic and hierarchical structures, whereas the post-cold war battleground has far more to do with the opposition between such structures and more distributed and lateral systems. Not that this is an easy line to draw: hierarchies can - and do - easily emerge from more distributed networks, as the phrase "bottom-up" implies. What would really oppose hierarchical structures would be something more akin to "bottom-sideways." Nevertheless, I think it is an instructive and important distinction, especially in the electronic domain. If a wide range of centralised, corporate and/or state organisations are encroaching on what used to seem like the far more open and chaotic spaces of the Net, there is the enduring possibility that the distributed nature of electronic networks will always mitigate against any complete enclosure.

**BS/GW:** In a 1995 interview with Matthew Fuller, concerning the Criminal Justice Act, which had recently been enacted in the UK, you suggested that the power structures which intended to increase their power and control would inadvertently undermine that control by stimulating the need for bottom-up oppositional tendencies to emerge. This inadvertent undermining of intention seems to have the potential to affect either side of an oppositional power struggle. Why do you think hierarchical activist structures, that are working positively towards change, are nevertheless so resistant to distributed models and small cells of activists working autonomously? Do you think some hybrid of these two models, centralized and distributed, could develop?

**SP:** In practice, such hybrids do tend to develop: the poles of top-down and bottom-up are rarely found as pure forms - some measure of informality always creeps into the most hierarchical structures, and likewise there is rarely a shortage of centralising tendencies at work in even the most distributed networks. But I think there are a surprising number of small autonomous cells at work - certainly the UK is alive with such activities, and although they often do become more organised, if they survive at all, the very fact that such nodal points continually emerge seems to provide much of the cultural energy here.

I guess it also depends on what one is trying to achieve. In the last instance, pragmatism seems to be far more important than matters of principle, even principles about modes of organisation. And for all my enthusiasm for decentralised networks, I always remember the warnings made in an anarcho-feminist pamphlet published some twenty years ago about "the tyranny of structurelessness" - the absence of formal structures can allow dominant personalities etc. to arise. So once again, it seems important to always take account of the specifics of the particular movement

or event, the people and the elements involved, the aims and purposes and so on.

**BS/GW:** A bottom-up, distributed model has been developing for many years in the realm of activism and what starts out as the outsider element often becomes integrated into places of power, where change can often continue to take place from within established structures. For example, in the AIDS activist movement in the late 80's and early 90's, individuals in groups such as ACT-UP, who had no previous medical expertise, by necessity became very knowledgeable in treatment issues. Many of these people were invited into and integrated into state medical advisory establishments. Similar dynamics are taking place in the field of technology art, with artists delving into study and discourse in a multitude of scientific and technological disciplines, not only from within the academy, but from within industry. What do you think are the implications for academia? the artworld?

**SP:** I used to be fascinated and very concerned by this dilemma - the situationist notion of recuperation is still a very good way to think about it, and that's how I came to be so interested. But I now think that what is really important is the sense of momentum and dynamism in the system - the fact that small scale, grass roots movements continue to emerge. Even if or when they do become absorbed into the establishment, political or artistic, there are always new tendencies coming up behind them. If one looks at dance music, for example, which moves very fast and continually changes, it is probably a mistake to regret the fact that, say, jungle or drum 'n' bass get absorbed or recuperated into the mainstream - what is vital is the emergence of new music, new undergrounds in their wake. Even if they are destined to become part of standard culture, they can still stir things up in the meantime. What I really fear, and what it is perhaps most important to oppose, is the possibility that such a dynamic would cease to operate: it's the movement, the continual emergence of activity, that is really important.

**BS/GW:** What do you see as the relationship between the cultural discourse regarding the dangers and control of drugs and the discourse regarding the dangers and control of information technology?

**SP:** Well, this is a very interesting one. I've just finished writing a book on drugs, which doesn't address this question directly, but certainly made me think about it in some depth. Perhaps the most interesting direction to take such thoughts is that the study of drug control - particularly in terms of the international surveillance and policing operations - can tell us a great deal about the potential for controlling information of all kinds (and, of course, the possibilities of evading such controls.) Drugs change perceptions, modify behaviour, alter moods and the very possibilities of thought, and this is widely perceived as a threat by governments and international bodies alike. One of the most fascinating things about all psychoactive drugs is that they are neurotransmitting chemicals, closely related to the chemicals already at work in the brain. There are many historical and functional parallels between drugs and software - both are difficult to detect and, just as data is moved around the Net, these communicating chemicals shuffle information through the neural system. And they can also "change the operating system" - and this, it seems, is one of the underlying rationales for attempts to control both drugs and information. It might be said that a monopoly on operating systems is what both the medical profession and the information corporations would like to achieve, and it is also this "street-level", that informal transfers of drugs and information continually contest. The drugs trade and the war on drugs also present a perfect case of the dangers of opposing one kind of centralised control with another: Microsoft's battle with the US government, for example, is a struggle between two hierarchies which parallels the drugs cartels' battles with the agencies of the US government, the medical profession etc. The only real opposition to both these disputes is an entirely different kind of small-scale activity which resists or even ignores them all.

**BS/GW:** In differing ways both Donna Haraway and Manuel De Landa explicate a cybernetic-materialist analysis of the body, wherein the body is no longer solely a container for consciousness, but becomes expanded and integrated with emerging technologies. How do you position the body within the discourse of communication technology?

**SP:** I very much agree with the broad terms of the positions you describe. The Western notion that the body is simply a holding bay for some other thing called consciousness seems to me to be a literally archaic and often reactionary idea, harking back to notions of the soul, the spirit etc. Cyberspace seems to have ushered in a new era of interest in gnosticism, the mind/body split, and disembodied notions of consciousness, but I see the implications of cybernetics working in completely different directions - erasing the mind/body distinction rather than reinforcing it. As the complexity and intelligence of both organic and inorganic matter becomes increasingly apparent, the notion that the materiality of the body renders it passive and inert becomes increasingly redundant. And much of the current research on neurochemistry, neural networks, and complex systems of many kinds seems to suggest that many of what were once thought to be idealist, immaterial, intangible constructs are in fact the products of extremely complex material events. Add to these more subtle developments the possibility of prostheses blurring the boundaries of the supposedly natural and individuated body, and the increasing interconnectivities of neural and

information networks, and a very different notion of the body begins to emerge. Change comes to both the reality and our perceptions of both sides of the equation: the mind seems more material, and the body acquires a sense of its own intelligence.



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