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The Future is Femail
Some Thoughts on the Aestetics and Politics of Cyberfeminism

> "What intrigues me, is being alternative and completely conformist at the same time."
>
> k.d. lang

(0.1) Something Like a Preface

The following text mirrors the attempt to reproduce a lecture I gave not only "during" but within the framework of a meeting of more than forty international artists, theorists and activists from thirteen countries: The First Cyberfeminist International; a meeting that took place during a warm September week in 1997, was framed within another framework: The Hybrid Workspace, which was framed by another framework: the documenta X. As my first lecture on Cyberfeminism had taken place only two and a half months ago, in the same city - Kassel -, but in a different framework, an interdisciplinary congress dealing with the relationships between media and arts, I was especially interested in the fact that for this second opportunity to discuss the same issue not only the context, but also the public had shifted significantly. Whereas my first Kassel lecture's public had been people working in the field of cultural sciences (i.e. art history, philosophy, literature, media theory), well trained in feminist theory, but for the most part newbies to the field of internet practice -- and most of them had never heard anything about Cyberfeminism before, my second Kassel lecture's public were artists as well as theorists more or less trained in feminist theory, but intimate with the internet - and more or less identifying with the issue of Cyberfeminism.

Consequently, I did not want to repeat my first lecture mechanically, but at the same time I was very curious if and how some of my theses would be discussed within a different framework and by a significantly different public. And as my talk centered on questions of visual representation of gender, I was especially interested to discuss my observations with those who - being artists (re-)presenting their work in the visual field of the World Wide Web - were themselves concerned with this issue in their everyday practice. Though there were fruitful discussions and face-to-face conversations following the talk, after leaving Kassel I was not "through" with the issue at all, hence I continued to read, to think, to speak and to write about it. Because of this the task of contributing a documentation of my thoughts presented at Hybrid Workspace turned out to be more complicated than expected: though I'd already written it, I felt I would have to rewrite it again and again. To come to a point at last, I decided to handle my problem as follows: By adding further questions, discussions, references, scepticism, loss of enthusiasm, new enthusiasm and like between the lines, I tried to preserve the original talk for the main text as much as possible. Doing this, with respect to the original athmosphere of the talks determined by very different skills in the use of English correspondig to the fact that the majority of us were not native speakers I also dared literally to fall back upon my own words and renounced a professional translation. I hope readers will excuse this and will be able to follow me on a rather bumpy and clumsy path anyway.

(0.2) The Future is Femail!

Now, just to add an ad for Cyberfeminism - and to start with my Kassel starter, let us admit that....

The Future is Femail. This is a fact most men seem not to be capable of accepting - except in the case it is called Barbarella and has the body shape of Jane Fonda. Just look at the example shown in the first issue of Konr@d, the new computer zine of Gruner&Jahr publishers, where the data highway is transformed into a fashion portfolio starring Naomi Campbell, her eyes modestly cast down and her knees bent inwards, as a supersexy and supersexed female Cyborg.

One of the issues of Cyberfeminism should be to question how to get even with old-fashioned fantasies of that kind and to throw a pinch of sand into the gears of cybernetic bachelor's machines (Junggesellenmaschinen), how to finish off the damned sexist-machistic colonialisation of Cyberspace...

(1) The Internet: New Ground to Break?

New media tend to be decribed as new ground to break, a kind of virgin soil waiting for conceptual and artistic reclamation, where all the carefully conserved and well traded structures and power politics cease to be valid either because they have not been able yet to gain a foothold or cannot be established for reasons of complete incompatibilty anyway. Unfortunately, this is an all too simplistic view. As we can learn from other fields of practice, any medium is as new, open, fluid, revealing and/or revolutionary as the people it is used by - and any use of any kind of media is to be reflected within its context, especially within the sociological framework where it takes place. A new medium can become a tool to create new structures as well as a place to install them only if the users (and, what might be even more important, those who have access to the related resources) are interested in changes - and, given that interest, if they continue to succeed in looking after it for a while.

According to this no one will be surprised that any development as well as any use of new media is accompanied by pertinent utopias and myths. But it follows as well, that there won't be a media revolution for its own sake - hence if you want to change the world, there is still a lot to be done. The fundamental potential of a new medium will have to be discovered, claimed and defended.

If this can be claimed for any new media you choose, the relatively new medium internet and it's graphic interface, the world wide web, shall not be deemed an exceptional case. Relating to the fact that in the first years (leaving out it's prehistory in military technology) internet was perceived as a kind of "underground" technology where different cultural and social practices could take place, it is still being associated with a bunch of pertinent utopias or myths, two of which might be of special interest for everybody dealing with the theories and practices of Cyberfeminism:

1. The internet seems to allow and to support communication and exchange across borders and hierarchies in a way that enables its users to leave structures of power as established by other media   --
i. e. the one way structure of the so called mass media -- behind. ("Utopia of a non-hierarchical distribution and communication of information").

2. The fact that normally net communication is based on language or a visual representation formed by the users themselves (the so-called net persona) suggests that one can communicate without respect to actual persons, and this would also mean: without reference to the bodily gender (the sex) of the person that communicates. ("Utopia of a net-existence independent from real life sex")

Taking both net-utopias literally, one could conclude that the internet as a new medium should be especially appropriate to encouraging women to act independently from the traditional, highly gender-coded hierarchies and systems of reference.

(2) It's a Men's World

On the other hand many people perceive the internet as a space dominated by males, as a men's world. Why? Let's try out a quiz and quote some possible reasons:

1."Women and technology" - One of the current internet myths is that internet itself is a "male technology" and because of this fact it is a male coded domain from the beginning - an assertion which is justified by the nexus between military technology and computer technology, i. e. the common history of these technologies which go back to the arpanet. This argument is being used by some essentialist or esoteric-minded Eco-Feminists as well as by all those who pronounce women peaceful by nature or for whatever reason being better than men only to cut them off from resources or to prevent them from filling leading positions.

This is sheer rubbish, of course. More serious is another argument referring to the current complex of pertinent phantasmata in the field of computer and internet technologies, especially fantasies in the course of which the computer is perceived as a kind of bachelor's machine. The subject of male technology "seems to work like a self fullfilling prophecy wherever it has to work as a motor for fantasies of exclusive professionality - and this is the case wherever technology gadgets are sold as toys for boys".

But of course, at this point we also could ask: Is it really a problem that women are ignored by the market?

2."The real existing sexism": Looking at the statistics, internet seems to be a male dominated domain indeed. At first glance, a closer look at the internet itself might confirm this impression: male dominated newsgroups, mailing list and so on. Personally, I do not believe in the importance of numerical proportions. When you look at a Harem, where quite a lot of women are grouped around one man, it is not interesting how many people of one or another gender are there to speak for themselves, it is the question of hierarchy, the possiblity to speak that counts.

Of course, it is still important to encourage women to use computer technologies and to show them how to use the internet for their own purposes. And of course this is still a problem of access to certain resources (an unpaid housewife might have more problems to raise money for a personal computer, a modem, and internet access - and to gain some minutes to use it).

But once you have access to the internet you will discover another aspect of the fact that female voices are underrepresented in the internet (and at last one reason for it, too): the real existing sexisms, from the special attention you are paid to the mean verbal harrassment you encounter almost wherever you log in with a female ID.

Within the spreading branches of the World Wide Web we can find a growing world wide market for any kind of pornography, and whenever you feed your search engine with the key words "woman/women" or "girl/girls" you will be flooded immediately with thousands of URLs with pertinent offers.

3."Old boys' club internet": Last but not least let us take a look at the users. One could say: If computers and internet technology are being sold as toys for (old) boys, the World Wide Web is the playground, we'll say - as mentioned above - the most profitable soil for marketing strategies. But what about the people working in and with the internet, be it as microslaves, as engineers or as hackers, be it as artists or critics? Let us take a closer look at the "scene" of net art and activism. At first sight, compared to other "scenes" (i. e. the music business, the established art scene and art market, the universities and so on), the situation for women working in this field seems to be far better.

But taking the literature being published, the authors being printed, the lecturers being invited to and heard at bigger conferences, it is more than obvious that - especially in Europe - women are still underrepresented, especially in the range of important positions and well paid jobs. Even if you take the inevitable presence of male bigmouths for granted, one has to ask for the reasons why the traditional gender relations are still that vital in an area widely discussed as a "temporary autonomous zone". One has to realize that, similar to his R.L. ancestors from the turn of the last century, the "Data Dandy" however proud he may be of queering the space, will also continue practising misogyny as a traditional part of his radical chic. And if feminist critique is an important issue of net criticism, he will always be the better feminist.

As we have seen, far from being an undefined or neutral space where tradional structures and politics have lost their basis the internet is - as Kay Schaffer used to put it - a "contested zone", a battlefield undermined by the same power politics and gender wars that are being fought everywhere else in our society. The question is how to deal with the new level of technology. At this point, Cyberfeminism becomes an issue of interest.

(3) But What the Hell is 'Cyberfeminism'? A Definition Beyond Definitions

"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 same time." (Julianne Pierce/VNS Matrix).

Cyberfemism "is" and "is not", there are loads of definitions. No wonder that in the preparations for the "First Cyberfeminist International" meeting during the dX harsh disputations flared up on the FACES mailinglist whenever the question "What is Cyberfeminism?" came up. And no wonder at all that after one week of intense discussions and exchanges in the end there was no consensus manifesto, but a chain of one hundred "Anti-Theses" that would tell you what Cyberfeminism is not. But of course we have to ask ourselves if Cyberfeminism - once understood not only as a Zeitgeist phenomenon but as a movement or a tool - will be able to escape the corset of a (self-)definition instead of installing or incorporating itself as a "model", and as such as a "tangible" body of discourses that finally will be rated, gendered, sexualized and put in a corset again.

Indeed the discourses on the issue in the current practices seem to prove the absolute heterogeneity of possible Cyberfeminisms, and they can show in how many different ways possible concepts of Cyberfeminism can be defined, discussed and brought into practice. This kept in mind, we have to ask: Is Cyberfeminism nothing but a poor attempt to sum up feminist activities on the net?

But how to deal with the gestures of rejection Cyberfeminists articulate against "traditional feminism"? And what about a possible critique of Cyberfeminism that could be stated from the so called "traditional feminist" point of view?

We will have to take a closer look to the theoretical framework of Cyberfeminism, where the issue was brought up prominently by the British cultural theorist Sadie Plant. As Plant put it in an interview with RosieX from Geekgirl magazine, her point of departure for a theory of Cyberfeminism was the impression that "there is an intimate and possibly subversive element between women and machines - especially the new intelligent machines - which are no longer simply working for man as women are no longer simply working for man." In consequence, she describes Cyberfeminism as an alliance developed between women, machinery and the new technology that women are using. It seemed to me a lot of women really love this type of technology and because of the 'toys for boys' complex it was curious that they did. I thought women should be encouraged to go with their desire, to start with I simply used the word 'Cyberfeminism' to indicate an alliance. A connection. Then I started research on the history of feminism and the history of technology. It occured to me that a long standing relationship was evident between information technology and women's liberation. You can almost map them onto each other in the whole history of modernity. Just as machines get more intelligent, so women get more liberated!"

Following Plant, this correlation is being based on the fact that from the beginnings in a male dominated culture "women have always been the machine parts" being "the means of reproducing the species, reproducing communications [...] which is obviously similar to the role of machines and tools." Regarding this connection as a cultural heritage, women should take it as a positive opportunity to use the alliance to technology as a basis for liberation. Even more radical is Plant's thesis that according to this strong connection between women and techology the technological development itself could be perceived as a "feminization" of culture that will lead us to an increasing dissolution of gender by the way of "feminization" of "male" identity: men connecting themselves to or indentifying themselves with machines switch to role models traditionally being identified with women. "We will see enormous changes in the whole notion what it is to be human. Women are just starting to realise that they have been defined by a male definition. As men slide out of this definition of identity, as they become more feminine, I doubt women will stay where they are. [...] Women too will become more feminine - even though we have no idea what that is. We are going to experiment with it: we are going to find it out."

Even if Plant's radical affirmation of the techological development seems to form a clear contrast to Donna Haraway's critical reflections and her thesis that "technology is a deadly game", the notion of a feminist potential of cyberspace owes much to the author of the already legendary "Manifesto for Cyborgs". With the "Manifesto" Haraway argued against the cultural dichotomies between "male technology" and "female nature" to propose a different notion of a hybrid or fragile self whose capacities are no longer built up on a concept of identity and demarcation, but rather on diverging concepts of embodiment, difference and solidarity. For Haraway, there is no consistent or "natural" notion of "femininity" or "womanhood" and especially no state of being that could be called "women". In the contrary, we'd have to realize that "women" is just a category constructed by and within our tradition of social and scientific practices. With this in mind, her figuration of the Cyborg can be understood as a discursive vehicle to escape from the associative power of a concept itself highly infected by cultural dichotomies.

Of course, Sadie Plant herself is far from understanding "femininity" as an essentialist pledge, but rather as being a result of cultural contigency:"We cannot trace out what 'female' means - we can only learn from history how 'femininity' was defined." From her point of view the decisive point for the developement of a future "feminisation" of culture is to be seen in its autodynamic potential attended by effects of deterritorialisation that counteract and subsequently dissolve the power of top-down-structures, thus nourishing a new subversive energy. An energy, as Plant puts it, that already takes effect for example wherever women artists work consciously with means of replication and simulation rather than referring to traditional strategies of representation. At this point, it seems to be near at hand that electronic media - as they are principally supporting different techniques of replication and simulation - should match a correspondent artistic practice perfectly. Sounds like good news for feminist artists working with new technologies: Is Cyberfeminism just another name for a new born feminist avant-garde?

But we know that in talking about the artistic use of electronic media we have to distinguish between different facilities, i.e. between text-, sound-, image-based media and the so called multi-media, between network based systems and the different uses, different protocols and so on. And we already heard about the specific problems women working in and with electronic networks have to face once past the subliminal shift from "Mythos Internet" to the harsh reality of daily internet practice. Especially if we do not want to rely on deterritorializing effects of "feminisation" only, we will have to ask ourselves about specific effects of new media technologies that might seriously interfere with the break with concepts of representation as claimed by Sadie Plant. To answer this question in relation to the aesthetics and politics of Cyberfeminism, the World Wide Web as an expanding field not only of feminist activities, but also of artistic practice seems to be an appropriate area to discuss.

(4) Label it! On Netchicks and PopTarts

Similar to the multitude of different notions and concepts of Cyberfeminism discussed in the field of theory we can find a broad range of Cyberfeminist presence on the Web: from personal homepages to ambitious zines, from webrings, jumping stations and networks to artistic projects there is a growing number of sites provided by women that are not only dealing with feminist issues, but also associate themselves explicitly with the label "Cyberfeminist". But how can we distinguish between "feminist" and "Cyberfeminist" webwork? As I have already pointed out, regarding the discussions about the relations between Cyberfeminism and the so called "Old school feminism" on one hand, and the continuing disagreements between different feminist and Cyberfeminist positions on the other hand side it does not make very much sense to define Cyberfeminism as the sum of feminist activities. According to my account of a possible Cyberfeminist theory as discussed above in the context of Sadie Plant's notion of Cyberfeminism I would tend to propose another definition. I would like to define Cyberfeminist practice as both a political and aesthetic strategy - and, as I would also like to add: "a strategy working consciously with means of replication and simulation rather than referring to traditional strategies of representation". But how far does this definition fit into a medium like the World Wide Web that by itself is loaded with one of todays most common means of representation: the image? Well, representation is not only built up on visuals, and do not forget that basically the WWW is nothing but a big hypertext. Unfortunately, this doesn't make things better at all.

Net politics begin with the naming of a domain or a site - and in general this will be a name that defines not only its geographic or physical origins, but also the contextual and ideal framework a project is situated in. According to this, let us look at how feminist and Cyberfeminist projects deal with this tool. What can be noticed here generally is that on the one hand a majority of feminist as well as Cyberfeminist sites refer to a spectrum of terms more or less explicitly associated with femininity resp. the female sex. On the other hand the way this term is related to the female sex seems to be a first criterion to distinguish between feminist and cyberfeminst presence on the Web.

At first hand, this can be mentioned as an indication for the unease of a younger generation against concepts developed by an older one that worked on a different basis not only considering the historic situation and the socio-political context, but also considering the media available to work with - and therefore leading not only to a different self understanding, but also to different strategies. As RosieX from the CyberFemZine "GeekGirl" remarks, even the idea of a "movement" itself "is based on an older style feminist rhetoric which tended to homogenize all women with the same wants/needs/desires to embrace each other [...]. It's just not applicable for women who use the internet as a medium for their message or is that massage? Heh, a bunch of us girls really like each other but we certainly don't pizz in each other's pockets for ideas and strength."

Whereas feminist projects tend to relate to terms like "woman" or "femina" or to go back to names grasped from the pool of history and mythology like "Ariadne", "Elektra" or "Sappho" - thereby following similar concepts to many projects during the first and second wave of feminist movement that tried to point out the need for consciousness about a "female identity", "herstory" and so on - looking at projects associating themselves with the concept of Cyberfeminism we can find a remarkable predilection for the use of a special slang I would like to describe as an ironic play with the so called toys for boys, recognizing traditional notions of "female identity" as already prestructured by the male perceptions of "the female". For example, there are quite a lot of names using and sometimes also fusing the world of computer technology with phrases normally used as vulgars for women, for female sexuality or for ugly feminist, as in Clara Sinclairs "Netchicks Homepage", Akke Wagenaars "RadicalPlaygirls", Crystal Tiles "Feminist Pop Tarts", the german "Cyberweiber" - and yes, we can even put the notion of "Cyberfeminism" into this category.

Another major part of the projects refer in a similar way to the word "girl" changing it into "grrl" and thereby citing the Riotgrrl movement that emerged from the music scene during the eighties and transferring it into cybersphere, as it is the case in site-names like "PlanetGrrl", "GeekGrrl" and so on. Similar to the Riotgrrl movement in music (or the Bad Grrls in contemporary fine arts), this is also about the need to be part of a scene and at the same time keep one's distance to the gender politics it is ruled by. As Chrystal Tiles from the "Feminist Pop Tarts" puts it:. "A very practical reason grrrls/geeks/nerds use these codewords in titles or our site is to make it clear that we're not naked and waiting for a hot chat with you! I mean, just do an infoseek search using the keyword 'girl' or 'woman' and see what you find. Cybergirl.com (not to be confused with Cybergrrl!) is a nekkid-chick.gif site or something [...] Ever heard about the cliche 'It's not a man's world, it's a boy's world'? Well, I think of girl, geek, grrl, etc. as words women of whatever age can use to signify that we refuse to play the circumscribed, no-win, lady/cutie/muffin/angel/whore/bitch game, and a way to fight back against the boys will be boys and old boys stuff that is so subtle, yet so powerful in our society."

Following this, it seems that within the "Name Space" of the World Wide Web Cyberfeminist Grrlism is not only a means to create and to claim "free spaces" for women in the net, but a strategy of masquerade as a tool to undermine dominating gender politics that keep control over the "female data set" (i. e. visual or linguistic objectifications of that which male netusers regard as "female") as well.

Furthermore we will see, this strategy is not only important for the naming, but also for the visual design of Cyberfeminist web projects, as I will try to demonstrate in my sketch of an "iconology of Cyberfeminist webdesign" following below. By trying to find categories and common grounds I do not intend to return to the problematic issue of a "female", "feminine" or "feminist aesthetic". Rather, my purpose here is to describe Cyberfeminism by the means of its aesthetical and political strategies - and thereby to develop perspectives on the representation of gender in the visual field of World Word Web.

(5) Masquerades of the Cyborg

Regarding the Web as a visual field and stating that Cyberfeminist politics include the screendesign, we will have to take a closer look at the constituting elements like the construction of a site, the use of logos and frames as well as colours, background textures and so on.

At first let us ask what a Cyberfeminist website could look like. Is there a possibility for an imaginary with a Cyberfeminist bent? For quite a lot of theorists in the field of Cyberfeminism the use of new technologies is more or less closely associated with the desire to erect a new symbolic order in cyberspace that allows not only for imagining notions of identity and sexuality beyond the binary code, but to incorporate them as well. In this context, the figuration of the Cyborg as outlined by Donna Haraway plays an important role as a synthetic techno-flesh being that in itself already dissolves the gendered knot beween body and cultural identity: "The Cyborg as an imaginary figure and as lived experience changes the notion of what in the end of twentieth century is being understood as the experience of women [...] Up till now (once upon a time), female embodiment seemed to be given, organic, necessary, and female embodiment seemed to reside in mothering and its metaphoric extensions. Only by being out of place could we take intense pleasure in machines, and then with excuses that this was organic activity after all, appropriate to females. Cyborgs might consider more seriously the partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment. Gender might not be global identity after all. Cyborgs are creatures of a post-gender world. Nothing connects them to bisexuality, preoedipal symbiosis, non-alienated work or other temptations to come up with organic wholeness by the way of submission of partial power under a higher entity."

"Cyborg gender is a local possibility, a partial identity. There is no drive in Cyborgs to produce total theory, but there is an intimate experience of boundaries, their construction and deconstruction. Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our tools to ourselves. This is a different dream of a common language.

It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relatioships, spaces, stories. I would rather be a Cyborg than a goddess."

But how to imagine a feminist Cyborg that is "embodiment" and at the same time able to escape from the traditional matrix of representation? From the beginning, the imagery of female machines and mechanical she-dolls was a highly gendered one, the image of a perfect creature built and directed by man to fulfill his needs and desires - and last but not least, being that perfect, also an incarnation of all male fears. Just think of E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Olympia", the "Eve Future" of Villier d'Isle d'Adam, the RoboMaiden "Maria" in Fritz Langs "Metropolis" and so on. No wonder, the over-sexualized Cyborgs of today's popular science fiction imagery everywhere present from comic and magazines, movies and videos to software images, computer games and cd rom fit perfectly into this tradition. As Claudia Springer has mentioned, especially the popular representations of Cyborgs rather tend to intensify the characters and attributions of gender than to neutralize them: "giant blown up muscles for the men, enormous breasts for the women, flowers wherever female consciousness appears on the matrix."

Where old fashioned images won't cease to claim their power, desire for diffence has to look for other paths. In this situation, another notion near at hand to discuss is the concept of hybridity, itself founded on the idea of difference rather than of identity: the longig for breaks and displacements of meaning, undefinite moments and oscillations that come into being when traditions and significants are being shifted. Correspondingly, Donna Haraway characterized her Cyborg - a hybrid being herself - as an ardent adherent of partiality, irony, intimacy and perversion" . Following that, we may conclude that the potential of a Cyberfeminist figuration - and here I am coming back to any kind of public image, be it a logo, a corporate identity or a screendesign - could be based on a strategy of difference and hybridity. Or, if we prefer to speak in terms of visual representation (as Judith Halberstam proposes it in reference to Judith Butler) as a strategy of masquerade that maybe the only option to outline different images and different visions of possible alliances of women and technology. A masquerade of course, that we will have to examine again and again with the same questions Butler already posed in context with her comments on "Gender Trouble":

"Is masquerade following from female desire that had to be masked and therefore been changed into a defect now being urged to come to light somehow? Or does it -just the contrary - follow from denying that defect, thereby trying to give the impression of being the phallus? Is femininity being constructed by masquerade as a reflection of the phallus to veil the bisexual possibilities that otherwise would disturb the construction of heterosexual womanliness? Or is masquerade transforming aggression and anxiety of revenge into seduction and flirtation, as Joan Riviere puts it? Is masquerade at first a means to hide or to repress femininity and therefore a female desire that could be able to found a difference that is not supressed by the male subject and that would reveal the necessary failure of masculinity? Or is masquerade just the opposite, the means by which femininity is founded, the excluding process of formation of an identity that rules out masculinity effectively and banishes it beyond the boundaries of any specific feminine gendered position?"

Finally, to be more specific by picking up again Sadie Plant's idea of a "Cyberfeminist alliance" and thereby coming back to our reflections about possible strategies for visual artists working on and with the World Wide Web: Is it possible to understand masquerade as a strategy of representation beyond representation, let's say: a representation that in the same moment undermines traditional concepts of representation by using techniques of replication and simulation, irony and parody?

With this in mind I would like to finish by looking at that what we could call the current reality of Cyberfeminist practice on the World Wide Web, thereby trying to condense the results of my investigations in this field into a short summary of that what I called before an iconological reflection" of the aesthetics and politics of Cyberfeminism. In so doing, I am proceeding from the assumption of the World Wide Web as a kind of graphic interface that can be understood as an arena of visual representation where aesthetics and politics are woven together inseparably.

(6) Blue Stockings and Tupperware Aesthetics

Looking at the majority of websites devoted to feminist issues, in the first instance we will find a lot of them following what I already described as the traditional practices of first and second wave feminist movement. However plain and unpretentious the design of a site, there will be at least the good old Venus' Mirror as a sign to show the project's orientation, others will use the colour purple to design their letters, some even do not hesitate to use a floral patterns for their backgrounds and frames. And of course there is the traditional way of labeling, by calling the projects after "big names" from "women's history", be it mythological as "Artemis", "Ariadne", "Electra", be it historic like the zine "Blue Stockings" refering to suffragette's movement or just simply by "naming the public": "WWWomen", "lesbian.org" and so on. No doubt this politics of definition makes sense in a world wide business center, where you want to place and distribute your offers by using a clear concept for sales promotion - but thinking of Cyberfeminist strategies as mentioned before we will still look for something different. Given the fact that there are lots of projects calling themselves not "only" feminist, but "Cyberfeminist", this group will be our field of research.

Indeed, browsing through the variety of Cyberfeminist activities from personal homepages to those run by groups and associations, from e-zines to artistic projects,there's no question that the range of webdesigns is being broadened significantly - but yet the impression will remain that in sum there are common features as well, allowing us to continue our reflections about how Cyberfeminist aesthetics and Cyberfeminist politics might correlate. And of course, we will also have to ask in this context, how far the practice correlates with the strategies projected and claimed in Cyberfeminist theory. For example, regarding the fact that representations of femininity on the web are widely dominated by the male gaze (be it to sell pornography, be it to sell technology as toys for boys) it is no wonder this is also an issue for Cyberfeminist activities longing for a practice of difference.

But at the same time, we will have to bear in mind that working on this issue means to get into the complex of representation, body and gender politics where difference is always in danger of being confused with and mistaken as "the other", a perspective from which any visual notion of "women" will be an image mirroring traditional points of view.

First of all, a really remarkable part of Cyberfeminist iconography refers to an already existing pool of images of "strong" and "liberated" women, i. e. the cross-dressing vamps of the "roaring twenties", the super-women known from comic strips like "Superwoman", "Spiderwoman" or "Hellcat", the sexy biker bitches and supervixen pin ups invented by the sixties, up to the angry grrls of nowadays rriot grrl movement - in short: in the majority stereotypes of liberated women that still bear a lot of sex appeal as well. And regarding the webdesign itself, it is also remarkable that quite a lot of them - if not addicted to the current fashion of techno-pop imagery with brilliant colours and psychedelic background patterns - tend to prefer pastels to create a new "tupperware aesthetics". Even if the Cyberfeminist housewife no longer deals with household technology only, the GeekGirl operator girl is no longer surrounded with phones and wires, but with motherboards and chips, even if some of the SuperGrrls wear intellectual glasses and even if the "All men must die!"- homepage threatens the surfers with blood red weapons of all kind: In the end, all these images refer to a repertoire of one dimensional images of femininity - and we will have to consult them carefully again and again to ask in what way the intended shifts and breaks support a different notion of female identity and are appropriate to undermine rather than to confirm the traditional stereotypes of gender.

Please note:

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and followed by an appendix with a choice of commented links related to chapters (4) & (6),
 "A Cyberfeminist iconology in short".

This appendix will be completely overdone and republished together with a documentation of its former version(s): "Iconologies of Cyberfemimisms, 1996-2001. A comparative Approach".

An extended version of this text with additionals chapters discussing selected artist's projects, full references and a bibliography for further readings was published under the title "Die Flaneurin im Datennetz. Wege und Fragen zum Cyberfeminismus", in: Konfigurationen. Zwischen Kunst und Medien. Ed. Sigrid Schade / Georg Christoph Tholen, München 1999, pp. 467-485.

An english version with full references is in preparation, meanwhile please consult the bibliography below (pp. 13 ff).

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