

Revisiting cyberfeminism

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Abstract

In the early 1990s, cyberfeminism surfaced as an arena for critical analyses of the inter-connections of gender and new technology – especially so in the context of the internet, which was then emerging as something of a “mass-medium”. Scholars, activists and artists interested in media technology and its gendered underpinnings formed networks and groups. Consequently, they attached altering sets of meaning to the term cyberfeminism that ranged in their take on, and identifications with feminism. Cyberfeminist activities began to fade in the early 2000s and the term has since been used by some as synonymous with feminist studies of new media – yet much is also lost in such a conflation. This article investigates the histories of cyberfeminism from two interconnecting perspectives. First, it addresses the meanings of the prefix “cyber” in cyberfeminism. Second, it asks what kinds of critical and analytical positions cyberfeminist networks, events, projects and publications have entailed. Through these two perspectives, the article addresses the appeal and attraction of cyberfeminism and poses some tentative explanations for its appeal fading and for cyberfeminist activities being channelled into other networks and practiced under different names.

Keywords: cyberfeminism, gender, new technology, feminism, networks

Introduction

Generally speaking, cyberfeminism signifies feminist appropriation of information and computer technology (ICT) on a both practical and theoretical level. Critical analysis and rethinking of gendered power relations related to digital technologies has been a mission of scholars but equally – and vocally – that of artists and activists, and those working in-between and across such categorizations. The genesis of cyberfemin-

ism took place at the crossroads of feminist theory, media art and online networking. While these networks have since largely disintegrated, cyberfeminism continues to have a legacy (or several). Ever since the term was coined in the early 1990s, it has been subject to multiple and often contradictory definitions and appropriations. To the degree that cyberfeminism has been identified with diversity, playfulness and the impossibility of exact definition, it has always lacked a clear point of reference: it has been understood as postfeminism (a highly unstable concept in itself) and as synonymous with feminist studies of new media that investigate interconnections of gender, embodiment and technology. There has been little consensus over the meanings and boundaries of the concept. If anyone can, and everyone should invent her own cyberfeminism, as the Old Boys Network (OBN) declared at the first Cyberfeminist International of 1997, the concept might seem fluid to the point of accommodating virtually any referent.

In what follows, I revisit cyberfeminism from two interconnecting perspectives. First, I address the meanings of the prefix “cyber” (i. e., what has been the “cyber” in and for cyberfeminism): what kinds of technologies cyberfeminists have engaged with and how these are connected to the transformations in digital media and networked communication since the mid-1990s. Second, I ask what kinds of critical and analytical positions cyberfeminist networks, events, projects and publications have entailed (i. e., what has been the feminism in cyberfeminism). Through these two perspectives, I address the appeal and attraction of cyberfeminism and pose some tentative explanations for this appeal gradually fading in the perpetually changing landscape of contemporary digital culture.

A brief genesis

As an interdisciplinary field of investigation, cybernetics is most commonly defined as the science of control and communication in animal and machine systems. Its principles were mapped out in the 1943 “cybernetic manifesto” co-authored by Julian Bigelow, Arturo Rosenblueth and Norbert Wiener (Hayles, 1999, pp. 93–94), debated in the Macy conferences in the 1940s and 50s and further defined in Wiener’s writings (Wiener, 1988; 1999). As a broad discursive field, cybernetics has enabled the conceptualization of humans, animals and machines as cybernetic systems (characterized by self-organization, performance built on feedback mechanisms, the storage and processing of data) that are analogous to one another in their functions (if not structure). Cybernetics has influenced a range of disciplines from the computer sciences to robotics, informatics, anthropology, sociology, psychology and media studies, al-

though its legacies are perhaps most evident in theorizations of complexity, in studies of new media, digital culture and biotechnology.

Cyberfeminism signifies “cybernetic feminism”. However, to the degree that the prefix “cyber” was floating rather freely in the discourses of the early 1990s in the plethora of references to cyberculture and cyberspace in journalism, fiction, advertising and research, it can also be seen as referring to feminist activities situated either online or in various immersive electronic environments – that is, to “feminism in cyberspace” (Gillis, 2004, pp. 185; also Sollfrank, 2002; Volkart, 2004). Cyberpunk author William Gibson famously coined the term “cyberspace” in his 1982 short story “Burning Chrome” to describe a disembodied digital parallel reality reached via neural connections where all the world’s data is stored. The term was widely adopted as descriptive of online communications and virtual reality experiences in the course of the 1990s and, as has been the case with cyberfeminism, its later definitions have been both broad and diverse.

The prefix “cyber”, as it has been picked up and recycled during the past decades, is exceedingly slippery, standing equally for things computer generated, computer mediated and networked, cybernetic views of the human, society and culture alike, and seldom explained or contextualized as such. Cyberfeminism is an equally evasive point of reference, yet one that can be traced back to a limited number of agents and networks through which the discontents of the term can be better mapped out (see Wilding, 1998; Wilding and CAE, 1998; Sollfrank, 2002). According to an often-quoted narrative, cyberfeminism was born in Adelaide, Australia in 1991, as VNS Matrix, a group of four female artists – Virginia Barratt, Julianne Pierce, Francesca di Rimini and Josephine Starrs – “decided to have some fun with art and French feminist theory” (Pierce, 1998, p. 10). The VNS Matrix coined “A cyberfeminist manifesto for the twenty-first century” in homage to Donna Haraway’s influential “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” (originally published in 1985), and displayed it on a large billboard:

We are the modern cunt
 positive anti-reason
 unbounded unleashed unforgiving
 we see art with our cunt we make art with our cunt
 we believe in jouissance madness holiness and poetry
 we are the virus of the new world disorder
 rupturing the symbolic from within
 saboteurs of the big daddy mainframe
 the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix
 VNS MATRIX

terminators of the moral code
 mercenaries of slime
 go down on the altar of abjection (VNS Matrix, 1991)

With their playful appropriation of feminist theory, the tradition of feminist cunt art and futuristic cyberpunk imageries, VNS Matrix's projects (such as *All New Gen* and *Corpusfantastica MOO*) attracted considerable attention within the digital arts in the early- and mid-1990s. The strategies of the VNS Matrix included critical appropriation, ironic commentary and playful exploration: their version of cyberfeminism was a matter of cyberpunk fiction, the virtual spaces of MUDS and MOOS (multi-user domains and dungeons), game cultures and creative writing – and, obviously, that of media art.

British cultural theorist Sadie Plant has been equally credited with coining the term. Plant used VNS Matrix's line "the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix" as motto for her own cyberfeminist manifesto, "Feminisations: Reflections on Women and Virtual Reality" (Plant, 1996a). In her writings published in 1995–1997, Plant outlined a broad narrative of women, technology and networks spanning from prehistory to the era of early computing, networked communications and the rise of cybernetic self-organizing systems. This metaphorical narrative ties women and machines together as tools (and others) of masculine culture and promises complicated and intertwining webs that will eventually overturn the phallogocentric hegemony. According to Plant, the digitalization of culture equals its feminisation while the rise of intelligent machines parallels female emancipation. Revisiting the cyberculture literature of the 1990s, it is quite easy to see that Plant quite quickly became the best known of cyberfeminist authors. Her essays were widely published, while her narrative of feminisation remained optimistic in its premises of automated emancipation through complex systems. Due to Plant's visibility, cyberfeminism became associated with her work and, consequently, critiques concerning it – be those ones of de-politicization or techno-utopianism – became extended to cyberfeminism as a whole. At the same time, Plant was extensively critiqued by her fellow cyberfeminists (Hawthorne and Klein, 1999; also Squires, 2000; Paasonen, 2005).

The Toronto-based media artist Nancy Paterson is the third main figure associated with the term due to her 1992 essay, "Cyberfeminism", emphasizing gender diversity and cultural subversion (Sundén, 2001, pp. 221–222). Paterson defined her version of cyberfeminism as "very much an emerging philosophy" characterized "by a focus on cultural diversity, trans-gender politics and recognition of the ubiquity of technology" (Couey et al., 1996). Paterson (1992) was interested in mapping out new departures for feminism through critical engagements with

electronic media, the internet and virtual reality applications and the political and artistic discourses in which these are embedded. Paterson's essay was distributed via Gopher and the Web, yet neither it nor her artistic work has been as widely referenced or reprinted as that of Plant or VNS Matrix – it can even be argued that her role in articulating cyberfeminism has been forgotten to a degree.

Carolyn Guertin (2003) sees cyberfeminism as emerging simultaneously in three different parts of the world: Australia (VNS Matrix), the UK (Plant) and Canada (Paterson). Such spontaneous co-emergence would certainly be in line with the cybernetic principles of autonomous systems and self-organization. These cyberfeminist articulations differed from one another in terms of both politics and theoretical argumentation. The 1990s witnessed the emergence of multiple, more or less interconnected articulations of cyberfeminism that did not, however, organize into a clearly definable movement. It is also important to note that cyberfeminist activity and networking has not been limited to the Anglophone world but has taken place in different continents and in a range of languages – and not least in Eastern Europe: the Cyber-Femin Club of St. Petersburg, for example, started operating as early as 1994 (Mitrofanova, 1999, p. 12). In this context, cyberfeminism became a discursive arena for investigating gender and technology that was detached from the “state feminism” of the Soviet era and which facilitated diverse takes on feminism and politics. In this historical conjuncture, the attraction of cyberfeminism seemed to be found in its openness and diversity, as much as in the potentiality and novelty of digital media technologies. In this historical conjuncture, the attraction of cyberfeminism seemed to be found in its openness and diversity, as much as in the potentiality and novelty of digital media technologies.

Germany was one of the hubs of cyberfeminist activity due to the activities of the Old Boys Network – the core group consisting of Verena Kuni, Helene von Oldenburg, Claudia Reiche and Cornelia Sollfrank, but the network encompassing a far larger group of artists, theorists and activists. The First (1997), Next (1999) and Very (2001) Cyberfeminist Internationals, organized by OBN, provided platforms for people drawn to cyberfeminism to meet, explore and critique digital technologies as well as the discourses in which they have been embedded. While the participation in the internationals was indeed international, the context of the events was largely European and there were fewer North American participants. With their emphasis on the interconnections of digital arts and activism, the internationals provided multiple articulations of cyberfeminism that were generally different from those proposed by Sadie Plant. In addition to the internationals, Listservs such as the women-only FACES (est. 1997) and OBN (est. 1997) provided networked fo-

rums for the exchange of thoughts and resources (Wilding, 1998). These networks were centrally about creative practices: media art projects, provocations, interventions and (often considerably poetic) manifestos.

Media studies scholar Jenny Sundén (2001) sees cyberfeminism as divided into theoretical and practice-based variations: while the former are characterized by philosophical sophistication, the latter stand for hands-on and activist initiatives, and the two come together in cyberfeminist art projects (also Sundén and Sveningsson-Elm, 2007, pp. 3–8). When further considering the definitions of both “cyber” and “feminism” within these theoretical and practice-based activities, it is possible to divide them roughly into three categories and, consequently, to outline three different meanings for cyberfeminism. In the first instance, cyberfeminism stands for feminist analyses of human-machine relations, embodiment, gender and agency in a culture saturated with technology. As machines have become increasingly prosthetic, both literally and metaphorically, it has become necessary to rethink the categories of the organic and the machine, as well as the implications of conceptualizing human embodiment in terms of genetic data. Such uses of “cyberfeminism” as a broad tactical term can be identified in Haraway’s cyborg manifesto, Plant’s (1996a; 1996b; 1997) and Rosi Braidotti’s (1996) work, the projects of the VNS Matrix and the Old Boys Network.

A second possible definition of cyberfeminism points to critical analyses of cyberculture in relation to feminist thought – here, cyberfeminism becomes a critical feminist position for interrogating and intervening in specific technological forms and practices. Cyberfeminism understood in this way encompasses Haraway’s (1991; 1997) writings on metaphorical cyborgs and the relations of nature and culture, Sarah Kember’s (2002) research on artificial life, Alison Adam’s (1998) historical analyses of artificial intelligence and N. Katherine Hayles’ (1999) research on the histories and paradigms of cybernetics – quite independent of whether the authors in question identify with cyberfeminism or not (e. g. Adam, 1997). This definition can also be extended to the projects of the artist and activist collective subRosa that has, since 1998, addressed the intersections of information and biotechnologies on women’s bodies, lives and work (subRosa et. al., 2003). Based in the United States, subRosa runs www.cyberfeminism.net and continues its work on reproductive technologies, genetics, discourses of race, organ traffic and cell research.

In a third possible definition, “cyberfeminism” stands for analyses of the gendered user cultures of information and communication technologies and digital media, their emancipatory uses, as well as the social hierarchies and divisions involved in their production and ubiquitous presence (e. g. Paterson, 1992; Springer, 1996; Squires, 2000). Considered in this vein, cyberfeminism can be extended to describe feminist studies

of new media (or “cyberspace”). This is the sense in which cyberfeminism has been most commonly understood in the Anglophone academy, and the framework in which cyberfeminism is most often discussed today. Whereas European (and Australian) articulations of cyberfeminism have tended to be closely connected to media arts, creative and hands-on practices (workshops, projects and exhibitions), this has perhaps been less evident in North America where cyberfeminism has been appropriated as a scholarly point of identification somewhat synonymous with feminist internet research (e. g. Blair et al., 2008).

In a slightly broader framing, 1990s online riot grrrl projects and bitch manifestos with their politics of parody can be seen as constituting the most public and “popular” of cyberfeminist interfaces (Sundén, 2001, pp. 222–223; Paasonen, 2005, pp. 207–225). As this listing makes evident, there is quite a variety in the technologies that cyberfeminists have engaged with, from the histories of computing to artificial life (alife), biotech, ICT, digital visualisations of human embodiment and the hypothetical technofutures of cyberpunk fiction. Cyberfeminist work can be traced back to a range of disciplines, practices and paradigms. The considerable range of points of reference has implications as individual texts are re-read and re-applied to discussions on yet different technologies.

This has also been the case with Haraway’s cyborg manifesto. Originally published in *Socialist Review* in 1985, the essay focuses on the divisions made between nature and culture in feminist theorizing and formulates a critical feminist position in relation to technology and the natural sciences. Stacy Gillis (2004, pp. 186) identifies the manifesto as an “ur-text” of cyberfeminism while Natalie Magnan ironically titled it “the holy text of cyberfeminism” at the 2001 Very Cyberfeminist International. Haraway’s ironic cyborg figuration has been extensively adopted in discussions on embodiment, technology and cyberfeminist politics and, in acts of re-appropriation and referencing, its framework of 1980s socialist feminism has somewhat faded from view. Although Haraway herself has not written on cyberfeminism, her work has been recurrently interpreted as representative thereof.

Irony and the multiplicity of meaning

The relationship between cyberfeminism and feminism is as tortuous as the one between the concepts “cyber” and “cyberfeminism”. In fact, many people feeling ill at ease with the denominator “feminism” have felt more comfortable embracing cyberfeminism. In her presentation at the Next Cyberfeminist International, webgrrl Corinne Petrus (1998, p. 75) explained that she does not consider herself a feminist: “but maybe I want to call myself a cyberfeminist. There is one thing I like very much

about cyberfeminism and this is, that nobody knows what it is exactly. It has no boundaries yet". Here, the prefix "cyber" stands for novel possibilities that are based on the departure from feminism as well as on the elasticity of the term itself. Cyberfeminist internationals encouraged cyberfeminists to articulate their own personal agendas, definitions and politics (Sollfrank, 1998; also Reiche, 2004, p. 9) and such "customized" definitions made cyberfeminism easy to apply and appropriate.

In hindsight, it seems evident that this openness and fluidity was not only crucial to the appeal of cyberfeminism but also posed a resilient dilemma. Had it not been possible for everyone to map out their own individual cyberfeminisms, it would have been considerably more difficult to mark cyberfeminism apart from feminism – which, as an umbrella term, is equally diverse and open to conflicting definitions. Maria Fernandez and Faith Wilding (2003, pp. 18–20) point out that many cyberfeminists have felt ambivalent and uncomfortable towards feminism. This discomfort, again, is often connected to an unfamiliarity with feminist histories, practices and theories. Like variations of postfeminism, third wave feminism, new feminism, and power feminism articulated in the course of the 1990s, cyberfeminism has been posed as new kind of feminism accessible to diverse groups of women, and young women in particular (cf. Gillis, 2004). In a recurring rhetorical move, these new feminisms celebrate female sexuality, empowerment, and independence and situate themselves in opposition to "1970s" or "second-wave" feminism. In order to be seen as diverse and novel, cyberfeminism necessitates a departure from that which is seen as rigid and fixed. Such fixity has been recurrently attributed to older forms of feminism, figured as essentialist, anti-technology and even anti-sex. At the same time, cyberfeminist practices have included tactics familiar from the 1970s, such as separatism and cunt art (Sollfrank, 2001; Fernandez and Wilding, 2003). Reading feminist work on gender, technology, and cybernetics written since the 1970s (from Shulamith Firestone to Mary Daly and beyond) makes it difficult to make clear-cut categorizations concerning the second wave and its aftermath. While there are glaring differences in the technologies that authors have engaged with and the theoretical tools and concepts that they have employed, shared concerns are equally evident.

Former VNS Matrix member Julianne Pierce (1998, p. 10) summarizes the issue by stating that cyberfeminism is an "incredibly important 'movement'" that "is certainly 'feminism', as it advocates that women participate in creating and defining the present and future of techno culture. However, somehow the 'feminism' is the problem, some of the old guard see it as a vacuous fashion statement (a sort of cyberspice), and the young guard don't need feminism anymore". Pierce suggests

abandoning the term “feminism”, or updating it in a plural form to correspond to its many strands that confront “the top-down with the bottom-up”. For her part, Sadie Plant (1996b, p. 182) suggests that cyberfeminism “may not be feminism at all”. For while Plant recognizes the importance of feminist struggles to the possibilities of women today, she considers feminist activism as both outdated and unfit for the contemporary situation in which patriarchy’s tools and machines (women, computers and media) have grown out of control and “mutate into complex machines which begin to learn and act for themselves” (Plant, 1996b, p. 173).

The relationship between “cyber” and “feminism” is, then, far from a simple one and many cyberfeminist articulations have involved a certain logic of “thinking against” the notion of feminism while paying less attention to both the continuities and inner diversity of feminist thought across different decades (see Wilding, 1998; Paasonen, 2010). The first cyberfeminist international agreed not to define cyberfeminism and produced “The 100 anti-theses of cyberfeminism” (100 things that cyberfeminism is not) instead:

1. cyberfeminism is not a fragrance
 2. cyberfeminism is not a fashion statement
 3. sajbrfeminizm nije usamljen
 4. cyberfeminism is not ideology
 5. cyberfeminism nije aseksualan
 6. cyberfeminism is not boring
 7. cyberfeminism ist kein gruenes haekeldeckchen
 8. cyberfeminism ist kein leerer kuehlschrank
 9. cyberfeminism ist keine theorie
 10. cyberfeminism ist keine praxis
 11. cyberfeminism ist keine tradition
 12. cyberfeminism is not an institution
- (OBN, 1997)

Written in a combination of (at least) English, Croatian, Serbian, Polish, Dutch, Spanish and German, the anti-theses continue to define cyberfeminism as not for sale, abject, a picnic, caffeine-free, anti-male or a banana. The anti-theses are telling of the importance of both international networking and playful irony in cyberfeminism. In fact, irony became something of a cornerstone of cyberfeminism from Haraway’s ironic cyborg figuration to VNS Matrix’s ironic art projects, the ironic practices of grrrl zines (Ladendorf, 2002) and OBN’s politics of irony. Cornelia Sollfrank (1998, p. 61) sees irony – humour and seriousness combined – as the quintessential cyberfeminist strategy, a productive tension that makes it possible to join contradictory views. Cyberfemi-

nists have appropriated terms referring to 19th century socialism from manifestos to internationals in the name of irony. Among other things, irony has been targeted against “old boys networks”, male dominance in gaming and cyberpunk imageries, the sexualization of female bodies and stereotypes attached to feminism.

However, since irony involves interpretation, the act of recognizing something as ironic, there is little guarantee that the views of people producing and reading the texts necessarily meet. Literary scholar Linda Hutcheon (1994, p. 14) notes that as a practice of saying one thing and meaning another, irony involves both misunderstanding and messy meaning. Irony is a means of joining contradictory views, but it may well function as a kind of boomerang if ironic distance is erased and things are read in a more literal fashion. As its referent, point and location is left unclear, irony becomes a problematic – or at least a heavily limited – strategy. In cyberfeminist texts, irony has been used to create distance towards both “cyberculture” and “feminism” in ways that may obstruct, rather than facilitate, critical dialogue.

Perhaps ironically, cyberfeminist articulations emphasizing diversity and irony have not always been easy to combine with analyses of power and inequality (as they link to diversity and new media alike). Plant’s (1997) narrative of feminization, for example, connects Lady Lovelace, switchboard operators and South-East Asian women working in silicon chip factories as female networkers and manufacturers of technology without paying attention to the – in this case, rather glaring – differences and inequalities between the societies, professions and agencies. Similarly, while the 100 anti-theses of cyberfeminism highlight the differences among and between women, and individual women are invited to outline their personal cyberfeminisms, these are not necessarily followed by reflections on power, location and difference as they operate between individual cyberfeminists and within cyberfeminist networks (see Fernandez, 2001, 2003; Fernandez and Wilding, 2003). We may “all know” that “all women are different”. However, without analysis of how locations, positions and networks of privilege function in and through these differences – be this online or offline – this amounts to little else than a truism (also Paterson, 1992). A discourse on difference needs to be self-reflexive so as not to produce a “doubletalk” in which diversity and multiplicity are emphasized without questioning the normative position of white (perhaps middle-class, perhaps heterosexual) Western women as the key agents of (cyber)feminism.

Re-embodiment technology

The prefix “cyber” draws from both scientific and popular investigations into cybernetics which regard the body as a system of feedback loops

and autonomous responses – less as a material object than an informational pattern (Hayles, 1999, p. 100), whose operations can be explained and modelled, often through machine analogies. Although cybernetics has contributed to the critique of the autonomous, liberal subject, it can also be associated with the Cartesian paradigm separating the mind from the body (Penny, 1995). As a critical discourse both academic and artistic, cyberfeminism has been centrally about re-embodiment technology and emphasizing the importance of the embodied and the carnal in cyberculture which was, throughout the 1990s, defined by Cartesian articulations of leaving the body behind, abandoning flesh in virtual reality and separating wetware (as meat) from software and hardware (cf. Brophy, 2010). Such articulations were rather recurring in cyberpunk, from Gibson's fictitious protagonists leaving the “meat” behind when “jacking in” the computer terminal to John Perry Barlow's (1996) “Declaration of the independence of cyberspace” outlining a new “home of Mind” “that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live”.

In contrast, cyberfeminist interventions were from the start very much focused on cybernetic spaces as ones inhabited by bodies – from VNS Matrix's clitorises connected to the matrix to Plant's (1997, p. 181) descriptions of disks being “sucked into the dark recess of welcoming vagina slits”. As Yvonne Volkart (2002) points out, by “bluntly sexualising cyberspace and digital technology”, early cyberfeminists pointed out the gendered underpinnings of the discourses of computing and network society. These commentaries were part poetic, part ironic, yet, in Volkart's view, they also bordered on mimicry in the sense of reiterating familiar connotations concerning sexuality and the female body. Australian media artist Linda Dement described her projects as driven by a desire “to put some guts into the machine” (Sofia, 2003, p. 516). Her 1995 CD-Rom, *Cyberflesh Girlmonster*, illustrates the point with its ample landscape of mouths, eyes, ears, clitorises and nipples morphing into each other and giving rise to monstrous kinds of carnalities. VNS Matrix's “Bitch Mutant Manifesto” involves a similar fusing of the fleshy with the cybernetic: “Your fingers probe my neural network. The tingling sensation in the tips of your fingers are my synapses responding to your touch. It's not chemistry, it's electric” (VNS Matrix, 1995). Another line from the manifesto, “Suck my code”, was reproduced in stickers at the first cyberfeminist international that was organized as part of the Hybrid Workspace, a temporary 100-day media lab at Documenta X exhibition for contemporary art at Kassel. The stickers (e.g. “Suck my code”, “(.) (.)”, “xyberfeminists do it on the net”), the 100 anti-theses, the manifestos of VNS Matrix and Sadie Plant all gave rise to a considerable cloud of snappy sound bytes. Sound bytes are catchy and easy to circulate – for, easy as they are to remember, they stick. At the same time,

their stickiness and accumulation meant that catchphrases gained much more visibility than conceptual critical cyberfeminist work in less-easily digestible format.

The hybrid workspace of 1997 also hosted workshops on tactical media, migration and digital media, divisions of East/West Europe and technoscience. The Next Cyberfeminist International of 1999 was organized as part of the Next 5 Minutes tactical media event in Rotterdam. In other words, cyberfeminism was in its European incarnations part and parcel of the critical artistic and activist/hacktivist networks addressing the technological hype, Western dominance and the operations of late capitalism involved in 1990s cybercultures, and the people attending the internationals also attended the other workshops and festivals. Cyberfeminism was coined as a feminist point of entrance into these debates, as well as an umbrella term for women working on tactical media and hacktivism who might not otherwise identify with feminism: as a network, cyberfeminism was made of both similarities and differences. While scholars bent towards carefully defining the concepts they use have been troubled by the ephemeral and elastic nature of the “cyberfeminism”, for others this elasticity, combined with snappiness, has contributed greatly to its attractiveness.

Shift in discourse

So why have cyberfeminist workshops, panels and initiatives become more rare within European media arts? And why is the term currently mainly deployed in academic discourses? In the case of OBN, the explanations have to do with the lack of resources, the burden that the active group members experienced when organizing the internationals (Sollfrank, 2002) and disagreements and conflicts among the group members on the uneven credit and acknowledgement related to collective projects (Reiche, 2002; Oldenburg, 2002). Moving beyond this one particular – albeit highly influential – network, I suggest that the fading of the attraction of cyberfeminism has centrally to do with shifts in the discursive environments that gave rise to these initiatives in the first place.

All in all, the prefix “cyber” has much less currency than it did in the early 1990s. The term “cyberspace” is used by some academics but by far fewer journalists or internet users to describe the media used or the experiences that they entail – and this is especially the case in other than Anglophone countries. While the prefix “cyber” has been used to address a range of human-technology relations, future forms of media and computing since the early 1990s, the set of meanings that it is most commonly associated with has gradually narrowed down to computing and the internet-based. Artists, activists and authors addressing a broader set

of technologies may have chosen other terms than “cyber” to describe their activities and focus – for example those of “tactical media” or “bio art”. Those addressing online cultures, again, may find the indeterminate qualities of the term “cyberfeminism” (combined with what is already almost a vintage nuance of the “cyber” prefix) equally awkward when describing their work.

On the one hand, the range of internet users has grown considerably more heterogeneous in terms of location, age, gender, class and ethnicity in comparison to the early and mid-1990s. Mobile internet applications have been crucial to this transformation in many developing countries. In Europe, North America, East Asia and Australia in particular, the domestication of the internet as a communication and information medium has both contributed to the diversification of the range of internet uses and supported a discursive move away from “cyberspace” (as an alternative dimension of travel, adventure and communication) towards more situated and mundane formulations. Transformations are equally evident on technological and economic levels. The dot.com collapse of the year 2000 the latest marked the end of the hype and cyber enthusiasm of the previous decade. As many online business enterprises turned out to be markedly hypothetical, venture capital became much more difficult to acquire. This crisis fed the development discussed as “Web 2.0” which, from the perspective of online business, translates as the increasing centrality and visibility of user-generated content. As a form of labour, “content production” is less descriptive of a profession or a paid task than it is of internet usage more generally: of discussion posts, blogging, social networking sites or images and videos shared and circulated on online platforms. Peer-productions of all kind – like mobile internet applications in a different way – make it rather difficult to separate the online from the offline or “cyberspace” from real life without addressing their fundamental entanglement.

For some, the platforms of Web 2.0 mark an emancipation of users as publishers, creators, and discussants. Some others may point out that the possibilities of lay users to interact with and shape the medium are more limited than they were fifteen or even ten years ago. While it was entirely possible to set up a catchy web site in the late 1990s with a basic mastery of HTML – and, perhaps, a few touches of the cutting-edge such as JavaScript – this is no longer the case. Code has grown increasingly complex and necessitates rather specialized skills. Rather than building their sites (such as personal home pages and online journals) from a scratch, users make use of customizable templates and social media applications (from Blogger to YouTube, Facebook, PhotoBucket and Flickr) when publishing their images, videos, texts and music. Riot Grrrl ‘zines, with their DIY feel, have largely disappeared as other than

historical documents while *GeekGirl* – the most famous 1990s *grrrl*/cyberfeminist zine run by Rosie X – has resurfaced as a blog. The threshold of online publishing, participation, and customization is lower than ever before. At the same time, users have less access to the technical basis of the medium in the form of code. While the term “internet” can be used to refer to online practices of 1994 inasmuch as to those of today, it has a different referent as the medium has shifted from Telnet connections and Gopher to graphic web browsers, search engines and the current range of publishing platforms. This development has been one of increased usability bound up with commercialization and opaqueness of the platforms used.

The cyberdiscourse of the 1990s sort was premised on disembodiment through technology: it mapped the internet as a disembodied cyberspace, explored virtual reality applications and forms of serious play taking place in virtual communities (MUDs and MOOs in particular). In contrast, contemporary online cultures are defined by the ubiquity of the web (that is hardly a virtual reality in the immersive sense envisioned two decades ago) and social media. This environment is corporate to a large degree, the communications taking place within it are far from anonymous by default and its uses of are seldom articulated through the tropes of disembodied travel and adventure. Due to developments in broadband, the web is also increasingly visual and multimodal a medium. The abundance of images, videos and webcams countered online on a daily basis, again, works against the premise of bodies and minds as being somehow separated in online communications – this idea being crucial to cyberdiscourse (e. g. Benedikt, 1991; Barlow, 1996; Brophy, 2010). According to this idea, users leave their bodies behind when entering virtual spaces and become free to explore new forms of identity and textual interaction. While there is reason to doubt this ever having been the case (considering, for example, the popularity of personal home pages, online diaries and photo albums in the 1990s), the separations of the two, like the separation of the online from the offline, is increasingly artificial and hardly descriptive of the experiences of internet usage characterised by ubiquitous access and multimodal representations of the self (through social networking sites, webcams, gaming characters, etc).

All this leads to the inevitable question of what cyberfeminism might look like in current web environments: what shapes might it take and what kinds might the fruits of its labour be? There is certainly no shortage of possible objects for critical engagement and intervention. In fact, the issues seem merely to have grown ever more acute since the mid-1990s, be this biotech, genetics, data mining, surveillance, immaterial labour, online pornographies, the labour involved in the production of hardware, digital divides, accessibility of information, gaming cultures

or the commodification of bodies in digital media – only to list some possible topics, all of which cyberfeminists have addressed in the past. In this sense, “new” cyberfeminism might look a lot its older forms, yet the work currently conducted on these topics is hardly ever identified as cyberfeminist. The discursive framework seems to have shifted.

Rephrasing the question, one might then ask if the strategies of cyberfeminism should be readjusted in the current technological landscape. As a strategy, cyberfeminist irony involves negativity and reactivity in the sense that irony is a response and reaction to something that it tries to ridicule, derail, challenge or subvert. This reactivity can be an efficient strategy, yet it comes with weaknesses. For as the “something” that is being reacted to shifts, moves or alters, irony loses much of its force and potentiality. Since cyberfeminism has remained a slippery concept in relation to both “cyber” and “feminism”, positive points of identification have been difficult enough to find. And since cyberdiscourse has undergone rather drastic transformations parallel to those occurring in the technologies that it has aimed to describe (or even predict), ironical commentaries of disembodiment or the dominance of male users are much less pertinent than they were some fifteen years ago.

According to feminist technology scholar Maureen McNeil (2000, pp. 229–230), the possibilities of cyberfeminism lie on its engagement with the attractions of technoculture and technoscience that many other feminist critics have failed to address. This is an important point. Cyberfeminists engaged with the hype and utopianism of the 1990s through ironic commentary, enthusiasm and ambivalence – in all cases, the lure of cyberculture remained central to all kinds of cyberfeminist projects that were both utopian and ironic (Volkart, 2004, p. 103). Utopianism and even enthusiasm vis-à-vis technology made cyberfeminism a positive point of identification while, at the same time, the omnipresence of irony – saying one thing and meaning another – troubled this positivity with a blurriness of meaning. The balance between utopianism and irony is a difficult one and it became all the more difficult once the techno-hype of the 1990s begun to wear off. Everybody is certainly still able to define and invent her or his own cyberfeminism but the term no longer has the same appeal as a point of identification.

In order to be both effective and affective, cyberfeminism would need to move beyond the negativity and reactivity of irony, and shift towards more productive engagements with contemporary technocultures in order to map out possible solutions for current social and economic inequalities that *also* take seriously the attraction and appeal of these very systems. This, again, is not a question of utopianism as figurations of ideal alternative societies, but one of strategies and tactics for living in the societies that we do. And if all this necessitates a move beyond both

utopianism and irony and experimentation with more positive and creative critical positions, it is fair to ask whether this kind of cyberfeminism would any longer be recognized as such.

Bionote

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