

The Truth about Cyberfeminism

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The question "What is Cyberfeminism?" is definitely the one I am asked most often. Everybody, faced with the term for the first time, wants an answer. But even after years of dealing with this question, I refuse to give a definite answer. And even if I had one, I would not give it. This is part of my artistic strategy to deal with Cyberfeminism, which is based on the idea of creating a new comprehensive label for an interdisciplinary gender-related discourse on the net.

The First Cyberfeminist International, the first cyberfeminist conference which took place in September 1997 in Kassel, Germany, agreed not to define the term. Instead, we wrote the 100 Anti-Theses. These Anti-Theses clearly define what Cyberfeminism is NOT. Here is a little selection:
--Cyberfeminism is not an ism --Cyberfeminismus ist keine entschuldigung --
Cyberfeminism is not ladylike --Cyberfeminismus ist keine Kunst --
Cyberfeminism is not a horror movie --Cyberfeminism is not ideology --
Cyberfeminisme n'est pas une pipe --Cyberfeminism is not a single woman.
But even after reading all the 100 Anti-Theses, you probably will still feel kind of unsatisfied regarding the question you started with...

These days when looking for information, it makes sense to do a search on the net. If you make a search with the most popular engines, you will find about 500 links to Cyberfeminism. You will find manifestos, texts, individual biographies, and art projects. You will find euphoric proclamations, utopian concepts, but also critiques on cyberfeminist concepts and theories. I highly recommend doing this search because you get a good feeling for the diversity of information summarized under this term, and you will certainly come across the crucial thinking and writing concerning Cyberfeminism. Many women (and some men) who often do not know each other and each other's work, are grouped under the same umbrella, and all continue to write the story, but at the same time it is clear that everyone has a different concept of what Cyberfeminism is.

One link you will certainly get is the one to the Old Boys Network(www.obn.org). It is the website of the international cyberfeminist organisation, a network I initiated with two other women in 1997. In the mean time it has grown and changed a lot, and if you are interested you can find more information about the Old Boys Network on our website. Generally speaking, OBN is concerned with the primary question: "What is Cyberfeminism?". If you are looking for quick answers, you could have a look at the FAQ on our website. (FAQ stands for Frequently Asked Questions, and is a file in question-and-answer format. Many websites have FAQ files containing information about a certain topic, thus eliminating the need for personal responses to queries and questions.) The OBN FAQ file contains different and even contradictory answers as they have been given by the individual members of OBN. Here are some quotes:

"Cyberfeminism is...
-- a feminism, of course--focussing on the digital medium.
-- a vehicle for discussing certain methods in theory, art or politics.
-- the updated version of feminism dedicated to new political issues raised by global culture and media society.
-- a new product and a marketing strategy at the same time.
-- much more than every other feminism linked to aesthetic and ironic strategies as intrinsic tools within the growing importance of design and aesthetics in the new world order of flowing pancapitalism. ..."

Yvonne Volkart, a Swiss art critic and theorist and also member of OBN, says that Cyberfeminism is in fact a MYTH. In the introductory talk to the second Cyberfeminist International she said: "A myth is a story of unidentifiable origin, or of different origins. A myth is based on a central story which is retold over and over in different variations. This characteristic makes it fit current, postmodern needs very well. A myth denies ONE history as well as ONE truth [at this point you definitely know that the title of my lecture is meant ironically!] and implies a search for truth in the spaces, in the differences between the different stories. But speaking about Cyberfeminism as a myth is not intended to mystify it, it simply to indicate that Cyberfeminism only exists in the plural."

Although I agree with Yvonne in her understanding that there is not ONE history and ONE truth, I would, paradoxically, like to undertake an experiment at this point, and try to write a little history of Cyberfeminism. The invention of Cyberfeminism dates back to 1992. Independently from each other the English cultural theorist Sadie Plant and the Australian artists' group VNS Matrix started to use the term. It resulted from the fusion of the words "Cyberspace" and "Feminism". Interestingly, the choice was for the prefix "cyber", and not for "techno" or "virtual" to indicate something new. Actually "cyber" is derived from cybernetics. Norbert Wiener, the founder of cybernetics, based his theory on the assumption that there is an analogy between organic and technologically regulated systems, which transmit and process information. In the mid 80s the science-fiction author William Gibson added another meaning to the original one in his cyberpunk trilogy. He created cyberspace, the spaceless, virtual world of electronic networks, an ethereal space of collective hallucination. In cyberspace the body has vanished, flesh only exists as wetware. This vision clearly indicates a holistic and maybe even a sexist fantasy, as women are mainly regarded as fembots and cyberbabes. In light of the sexist ideas inherent in the word cyber, the addition of the word feminism creates an ironical twist and offers space for alternative interpretations for what cyberspace could be.

Additionally, creating "cyber" feminism was a smart marketing idea. Gibson's novels had initiated a lot of hype, and the prefix cyber began to be used in all kinds of possible and impossible combinations, i.e. cyberbody, cybersex, cybermoney, cyberfood, cyberhippies, cybertrash and so on. It indicated a new era in which everyone would be free from all material problems relating to the body (freedom from pain, sex, hunger, thirst...). Adding such concepts to feminism sounds paradoxical because, at least until the 80s, when the categories of man and woman were deconstructed or expanded by introducing "gender", feminism clearly referred to the "natural" and physical entity of bodies (man/woman). And feminism is still widely identified with "old school feminism" -- especially the broadly popular efforts associated with, for example, the women's liberation movement of the 1970s. These movements typically emphasized an ideological and intentional understanding of politics, expressed themselves in terms of "men" and "women," often took separatist and technophobic forms, assumed a moral high ground in their efforts to compensate for social discrimination and female victimization, and aimed to achieve clearly defined goals (e.g., legislative reform, etc).

The more differentiated forms of feminism which emerged in the mid 80s and 90s, which mostly took place in the academic world, were more theoretical than the political rhetoric of the 70s feminism and required deeper thinking and gave fewer instructions regarding political action. Simply by attaching the happy "cyber" hype to the term feminism in the early 90s opened up immense potential. The synonym for an unreflective, euphoric understanding of new technologies, which "cyber" definitely is, breathed new life into the debates around gender and feminism -- and it sells again.

But let's go back to the history: although VNS Matrix and Sadie Plant came up with the term in the same year, they use it in different ways. Plant associates Cyberfeminism with a relation between women and technology, which she describes as intimate and subversive. For her, Cyberfeminism is the "theoretical answer to the fact that more and more women give their innovative input into electronic art and virtual technologies."

In her latest book "Zeros and Ones" she fully expounds this theoretical answer. Her basic assumption is that a female signification comes along with the digitalization of society. To argue her theory she takes up different threads and weaves them together into a model of a new society. The spread of non-linear, decentralized and unhierarchical structures plays the central part. Plant recognizes them as the return of the "female principle". This process does not result from political or other intervention, but happens automatically, without any effort. Making this assertion transfers power and creativity to the new technologies, their inherent characteristics and the constellation they arise from.

Plant sketches a utopian model, and claims it as reality. The female and the digital society are her inspiration, and she brings them together in a way from which neither can escape anymore. What was meant to be a positive utopia causes a feeling of uneasiness by its immanent hopelessness. For her argument, Plant co-opts Irigaray's ideas of female symbolisation; traditional ways of historiography (producing heroes/heroines and figures of identification like Ada Lovelace); Freud's concept of weaving women symbolizing their penis envy; and the universality of the Turing machine that is compared to female mimicry. Apparently she didn't leave any questions unanswered. Here I'd like to propose another experiment, which is to read Plant as if she were making an ironical assertion. That gives back subversive power to her rigid concept. Unfortunately, it is not meant that way.

The approach of the artistic ancestresses of Cyberfeminism, VNS Matrix, is quite different. Although they share Plant's sense that digital society is a feminization, their poetic emissions from and about the female body are always accompanied by a wink and a nudge. Moreover, their more literal efforts to contaminate technology with blood, slime, cunts [sic] and madness were anarchic enough to profane the prevalent myth that "technology" is just "toys for boys."

I cannot end my history without mentioning Donna Haraway, who wrote the seminal Cyborg Manifesto in the 80s. Her cyborg, the symbol for a future beyond gender, is considered by many to be the actual starting point for cyberfeminist thinking. However, Haraway herself never used the term Cyberfeminism or claimed any rights to it.

This brief history shows how the originators of the term Cyberfeminism have used it in very divergent ways. Beyond these differences in original meaning -- notions of "the feminine" and the constructed relation between the female and technology -- there is yet another, multiple variant: the ways in which the term has been adopted by the new "generation" of cyberfeminists -- who use the word in idiosyncratic ways to designate heterogeneous projects, ideas, movements, ideals, attitudes and activities. In a very short time the term Cyberfeminism has been appropriated in many novel ways.

Cyberfeminism is beginning to appear with some frequency in the context of art, politics and science. Its clear ending --feminism-- suggests a political demand or strategy. But it also might indicate an artistic method. Maybe Cyberfeminism makes artistic practice politically effective, or suggests artistic methods in politics? And what does "politics" mean within this

context?

As I pointed out before, there is a clear distinction between the feminist politics of the 70s and subsequent "feminist" efforts in the 1980s and 1990s, which already took more differentiated and less overt forms, very often repudiating some of the basic premises of their predecessors. And all these different and diverse feminisms still do exist side by side. It is in this context that Cyberfeminism has arisen--so it is not at all surprising that ideas about the feminine and relations to technology and politics should be wildly divergent.

The prefix "cyber" serves, of course, as a linguistic attempt to differentiate these theories and practices from those of first and second wave "feminisms" -- with varying success, depending on the contexts. However, as a field between these poles, it nevertheless succeeds in establishing a new frame of reference by its very existence. And so heterogeneous are Cyberfeminisms that one could just as easily argue that the term's construction is not the prefixing of "cyber-" to the body-word "feminism" but the reverse: "cyber" may be the body and "-feminism" the modifying suffix.

In this case, the primary questions might involve how "cyberness" in addition to the "feminine" relate both to older questions and to newer technologies. Thus, a happy and fruitful confusion predominates -- one that leads activists, artists, and theoreticians to constantly check their approaches, to formulate new ones, to implement Cyberfeminisms for themselves and for their interests, and, of course, to discuss these questions and concepts. It is not that real social conditions no longer require feminism; but more complex thought structures and more mobile constellations of power make concrete political approaches more difficult to identify and achieve on a mass scale.

These new starting points--different from their predecessors and from each other as well--require new forms of action. It doesn't matter whether the methods take political, artistic or philosophical forms, for the simple reason that politics can take an artistic form and art a political form, and so on. What is important is a common reference to the relations and alliances constantly being formed, as Cyberfeminism does not express itself in single, individual approaches but in the differences and spaces in between.

In a culture in which the accumulation and advance of technology is continually expressed in terms of freeing us from nature, there are certain basic tendencies we must recognize: new forms of subject-constitution, new distributions of competence regarding new technologies, new infiltrations of power configurations, and new forms of discourse which are established. It is in the fields where these phenomena coexist and are coextensive that Cyberfeminism functions as a unifying moment. It creates the myth of a political identity without forcing anyone to strive for it.

I would like to quote the German artist Joseph Beuys at this point. Explaining the strategies of his project "Büro für direkte Demokratie" (Office for direct democracy) he once said: "For me it was only important to hang whatever term on the wall; people just had to find the term interesting. Then this term could function as an entry point to the actual problem." (translation C.S.) I think the term Cyberfeminism is perfect, in order to take on that function. Using the term is part of the strategy.

Consequently, Cyberfeminism stands for political strategies, as well as for artistic methods -- and does so very well. Create your own Cyberfeminism, any you find out the truth about it.

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