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ARTFAGCITY

The Digital Art World's (Secret) Feminism

by CORINNA KIRSCH on OCTOBER 4, 2013 · 2 COMMENTS FEATURE

Ann Hirsch, Annie on the Bar, from My Slutty Vh1 Myspace photo series, in collaboration with Dmitry Minkovsky. Ann Hirsch's Playground, a two-person performance loosely based on the cyber-sexual escapades of the artist's adolescent self, takes place tonight at The New Museum at 7 pm.

The major issues facing feminism and digital art go far beyond a numbers game. Seeking a male-female ratio in exhibitions is just one part of an overarching discussion that's centered around how to present femininity within digital art and how to carve out a space online and IRL, in-print and on blogs, about feminism's future. In an attempt to move the conversation off Facebook, I surveyed dozens of young artists, curators, and writers who're actively engaged with the digital art world, and asked them about the major issues facing feminism in the digital art world today. From private Facebook groups to list-servs, there's plenty of talk about feminism and digital art online, but you might not know about it; you'd have to be privy to these virtual salons.

Secret Girl Groups, Listservs, and Message Boards

Most of the female arts professionals I spoke with are part of various listservs and "secret girl" groups on Facebook, and are active about vocalizing their concerns with the future of feminism and digital art online. These conversations largely occur on Facebook, which makes sense given that's where friends, colleagues, and Internet friends post their upcoming activities.

When asked why these forums were formed, they do have advantages: There's often job listings, resources, and advice from others in the arts with similar experiences to your own. They're often viewed as less "trolly" and less "angry." The downside: nobody else knows when there's important discussions happening. So, for the most part, those I spoke with want to move beyond Facebook, and private groups, but don't see a solid alternative.

"The dialogue needs to be public," Berlin-based curator and writer Ché Zara Blomfield mentioned, when discussing venues beyond Facebook for discussing feminism and digital art. "We've learnt it's not suitable on FB (it's removed, taken behind the scenes (DM's), edited, or becomes too personal). Ideally, the dialogue becomes visible in a serious way, in mainstream art press: Frieze, Artforum, ArtInfo, etc., rather than just mentioned, and sidelined."

Around the Art F City office, Paddy Johnson complained that it's hard to search Facebook for past comment threads—it's not a great archive. So whenever good discussion does happen, it's pushed further and further back down the user or group's timeline.

Other complaints about Facebook seem common to the Internet in general. "Forum/meeting politics are just terrible," artist Ann Hirsch mentioned over email. "Facebook comment threads (outside secret girl group) are honestly the worst possible place to discuss this stuff. But I guess they do work to bring the issues up, so who knows."

Of course, this problem with Facebook is one seen all over the Internet: any controversial thought's bound to turn into a flame war. It's everywhere.

Artist, writer and curator Lucy Chinen wrote to me that she doubts online forums, especially on Facebook, can provide a comparable alternative to speaking up offline. That's because of how, over time, "Every message board begins to form a voice. I think the tricky part is that the longer a group spends with each other the stronger and more specific that voice is," she told me. "I think that voicing your opinion on social networks can only do so much," she added. "It usually becomes very embedded with personal or immediately emotional responses because of the nature of the format."

In this sense, the most vocal members of a group end up being the most dominant ones. The group ends up sounding like, and being run by just those few members (and it's a fairly common occurrence with any community-based or open-source project, like Wikipedia). That denies the sheer variety of voices online, while at the same time giving a space for those voices to exist. While listservs and private Facebook groups do serve a purpose of being able to talk about issues of sexism and the like (among a group of

friends), it can, as Chinen mentioned, give off the appearance of “preaching to the choir.” That statement was echoed by others, like artist Sara Ludy who thinks the all-female groups feel “like a conference room with a two-way mirror.”

One response to the problem was best expressed by curator and administrator Zoë Salditch, who, writes that it’s “certainly no secret that I’m a feminist. I express it in everything I do, online and in-person. I champion women by recommending them for talks, exhibitions, projects, and jobs. Whenever I see the absence of women or misogyny, I call it out … The more opportunity to talk about these issues in different venues the better.” Of course, that’s the way it should be, because it grants greater visibility to the daily, lived concerns of those working in the arts today.

Still from Bunny Rogers's "9years" blog.

Femininity Vs Feminism

Several respondents spoke up to express concern about a type of overly feminine net art that’s grown increasingly popular over the last four or five years.

This can include the glossy skinned, 3-D rendered self-portraits; the sentimental teenage girl selfies and webcam vids; the cutesy anime girl posturing; and the color pink, all which seem devoid of a critical position—or a stance of any kind—just replicating what we already see and know around the web.

This “online-feminine” can be found just about all over the web, and in some male and female artists’ practice. Based on the popularity of this genre, it is no surprise that galleries have taken notice; Martos Gallery opened up its fall season with an all-women show called “Lonely Girl,” which predominantly focused on this type of “feminine” work.

Maggie Lee, "Hookups Endorsement Diploma," 2013. Courtesy Martos Gallery.

Ché Zara Blomfield wonders if “young female artists, or perhaps young girls on the internet, believe feminism means being ‘openly’ feminine.” Jennifer Chan, too, echoed a concern about overall “misconceptions of feminism.” What’s feminine isn’t exactly feminist, surely, but more worrisome about the net-feminine trend is that it’s not historically grounded. “There’s a lack of dialogue [right now] around the historical female position, i.e. the role of the mother, the caretaker,” Bloomfield mentioned.

This lack of historicity isn’t just a problem common to this overly feminine art; dude art suffers from the same short-sighted-ness. Typical dude art stereotypes like pizza screengrabs, crying tweens, squirting penises in MS Paint, and Axe body spray may very well have a relationship to more than just the present, but most times, it’s hard to tell if these works, or their artists have a position. It’s become so easy to reappropriate and reblog images, that indifference seems to be the norm. The problem with both forms, is that they present an image without reference—an image only about itself.

All this points to a problem larger than what constitutes good or bad art. Digital artists, or artists taking the Internet as a reference point, end up merely reflecting on what’s online. And since so much of what’s online is about women and women’s bodies, this content has naturally created a touchstone for many digital artists.

In her own work, Ann Hirsch explores her self-created online persona, in all its

problematized sexual versions. She, too, says there's a difficulty in feeling the need to present sexualized work, but without falling into the trap of online stereotype:

> People love consuming female imagery online. Porn is so dominant. So I think a lot of women want to just hide themselves, to not deal with having their bodies be scrutinized. While on the other hand, other women play to this romanticized online version of themselves to get attention and often find themselves giving off this stereotypical sexy female vibe in order to do so. So it is just tricky figuring out how you, as a female artist, fit into that landscape. I'm constantly battling with that.

"Annie," Hirsch's online character, references an Internet with a history of AOL chat rooms, and the complexities of communication with your peers, strangers, and others. It's smart work, proving that web-based about female sexuality can be done, and it can be grounded in larger concerns.

The Numbers Game: Male-Female Inequality in Exhibitions

Despite its flaws, "Lonely Girl" is rare in both the art and digital world for being an all-women exhibition, with all artists under the age of 30. Many of the respondents have organized exhibitions of women to provide a counterbalance to the many male-dominant net art shows, and have piped up online whenever there's a dude-centric exhibition. Most recently, Daniel Keller's Liquid Autist, a show including no females, prompted a flurry of contentious Facebook comments, followed by even more discussion on private Facebook groups. In the contemporary art world-at-large, blue-chippers like Gagosian and mega-museums like the Met have been called out for showing too many dudes. There have been demands for affirmative action in museums. The tug-of-war over male-female equality in exhibitions is far from over.

Still, it would be naiveto believe that seeking an equal ratio of men to women is the solution. Wanting equal numbers doesn't get beyond, as Jennifer Chan put it, "the nature of female artist representation instead of quotas." Of the same opinion, Lucy Chinen noted that she would "hate to legitimize the equality of an exhibition or book by

the number of female names listed, [although] I do think that it is important to also have more female voices and perspectives present." Overall, there's a need for greater scrutiny about what these numbers mean. Many of the respondents struggled with the additional questions this need brought up. "Is there actually (that many) more male artists? Do female artists operate more consciously and not say 'yes' to exhibitions so quickly? By being a female artist do you still fall into a category of having to make work about being a female?"

Rachel de Joode, a 30-something-artist who's been around a bit longer than those in Lonely Girl, has organized an all-female series of exhibitions (and she's not the only one); she explained that series "was more an investigation for myself in the role of young female artists in the art-world." de Joode, like most of the women I spoke with, try to use Facebook to promote the activities of their female colleagues. It's necessary, given the commercial art world's focus on launching male careers, where, she mentioned, "'young-man's energy' is something the art-world wants and craves for." Museums and granting institutions, she added, are more benevolent to a male-female ratio. Still, the problem remains as she, and others I spoke with see it that, "Art is in the end (unfortunately) about galleries, collectors and sales and 'the young male artist' is considered a better investment than 'the young female artist'.