"…it always goes back to feminism."

Interview with Kathy Rae Huffman, by Cornelia Sollfrank 8.5.98, Osnabrück @ European Media Art Festival, Grrl Power Possie

C.S.: I would like to talk to you about your recent activities, which mostly deal with the issue of women online, especially with online art projects by women. How did you get involved in this kind of work?

K.R.H.: A lot of the projects started off slow, were overlapping from time to time, and brought together various colleagues. The first actual "female" work was a lecture called 'Cyberintimacy' in 1995 for the Willem Flusser Symposium, Muenchen, which was a collection of information and some media works — primarily by women commenting on their Internet communication experiences. This invitation followed a curated show of video called 'CyberSpaces', all about virtual spaces, Internet, and interactive television, for the Telepolis exhibition in Luxembourg.

Next, in early 1996, I started a project called DAR~links for the Ars Electronica server. DAR~links was acurated show that took place over the period of a year. The idea of DAR~links was to profile websites by women working in different styles, different countires, different concerns, showing that women have technical abilities as well as content, and I thought that the websites by women were the most interesting.

C.S.: Was it all art projects?

K.R.H.: Yes. I selected the websites, wrote about them, contacted the artists and told them that they would be involved in the show. Basically it was an online gallery in the ars electronica center for this women's work. The concept was to add one per month. I started with Debra Solomon's piece, 'One to one' and it ended in 1996 with Helen Cho (San Francisco). It included Olia Lialina, Marina Grzinic/Aina Smid, and many others.

I presented an expanded version of Cyberintimacy at the 1995 Kassel Interfiction II festival. In Kassel, Margarete Jahrmann and I (having a lot of fun go-go dancing in the Lolita Bar) came up with the title pop~TARTS, which became our column for the Telepolis online magazine (a direct outcome of the Telepolis exhibition). In 1996, when Eva Wohlgemuth and I presented the Siberian Deal Internet project at the n5m conference in Amsterdam, Maggie and I took the opportunity to announce the launch of pop~TARTS. We organized a meeting of women there, to get some feed-back about what would be interesting for a column in the online magazine telepolis. We wanted to know how other women wanted to participate, but most of them were very suspicious about the fact that Telepolis would really support and sponsor a women's column.

C.S.: What is your main focus for pop~TARTS?

K.R.H.: pop~TARTS is co-written with Margarete Jahrmann, and we look for intersections between theory and practice of websites with a focus on women, women's issues and communications projects. It's evolved, it's been an evolving work, it was started off to be a multimedia column that was supposed to have a lot of involvement by other women. The first year was very hard for Telepolis to get their graphic interface to accept our huge amount of data, so we –all of us– had to change our expectations. We looked very carefully on what it could be. There was one concept for pop~agents who would all report things. It didn't work. Now it's much more straight forward text on events, on certain topics we choose. We build a topic column. There's actually a lot of e-mail response, especially to the topic, more to the non-female projects than to the female projects. I dont' know why.

C.S.: So there are also non-female topis on pop~TARTS?

K.R.H.: Yes, especially if they reflect on gendered activity. We thought the concept of micronations was really interesting, that artists were building communities online, which require passports, id-cards etc. We pointed out the fact that these were mostly male dominated projects, and that they were staking out the turf. We felt that women weren't so much interested in staking out the turf, but more in making communication links, building community and networks, without these boundaries. So we focussed on this kind of dialogue. It was a series of several texts. The most recent texts link the fe.male_data-set and Micronations, and concentrates on 3D-worlds that are built by women. And we think it's an interesting new aspect that women look more to real 3D-worlds, rather than this fake concept of Micronations.

C.S.: One of the most well-known projects you initiated was FACE SEETINGS, a communications project for women which brings together offline and online communication.

K.R.H.: Right. It's together with Eva Wohlgemuth. We've known each other for a long time, and we already had realized the Siberian Deal Internet project together in 1995.

While I was travelling in Russia in 1994, I met a group of Internet providers (Relcom). We found the graphic interface Mosaic while sitting in a basement in Moscow. It was great to be introduced to all this in Moscow. I knew about e-mail, using it a little bit, but didn't have an account of my own at that time. When I was in Russia, working on the symposium for the exhibition for the Soros Center, I had lots of time to talk to artists, who were really looking towards Internet as a solution to communication. Alla Mitrofanova was there frequently, and she had been to London and was talking about the Cybercafe she had visited there, and we would all sit around that very cold winter discussing this stuff. I always connect my introduction to Internet to that experience in Russia.

C.S.: Oh wow, that's very unusual for an American!

K.R.H.: Yeah, and then soon afterwards, when the Russians came to Linz, where I organized a screening in the Landesmuseum of videos from the east and west that use political content. It was interesting to me to show the Americans and Russians side by side. Marty Lucas represented Paper Tiger TV, and Tatjana Tedenko, a producer for Russian State TV, came and showed work by artists which was dealing with political issues - which she showed on Russian TV. We were all sitting around and having dinner, and Tatjana told us how wonderful Siberia was. Eva was there, and we said, it must be the worst place in the world… just terrible. So we came up with going to Siberia together. It was started as just to go there as a holiday with Tatjana, and check it out. And also from the same dinner came the project 'Checkpoint 95′, which was done at the ars electronica by Stadtwerkstatt Linz. It was a project where the Russians and the Americans met on the bridge - to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the end of the occupation of Linz (on the Urfahr side of the Danube) and the Americans (on the center city side). The Stadtwerkstatt TV created a big, city wide spectacle project. But it came out of a dinner meeting with Marty and Tatjana.

C.S.: So that was obviously a very productive dinner.

K.R.H.: Absolutely. And when Eva and I sat back to reflect, after the Siberian Deal project, and thought what we might do next, we really tried to be analytical, to have a look on what we had done and develop a new project out of those experiences. Maybe being smarter than we had been before, because we always had worked from our spontaneous feelings, as Eva preferred to do as an artist. I was important for her to feel it. So I said, ok, let's see what we've been feeling. What we had liked to do most together was cook. We had done most interesting meetings and discussions with people over dinner. Then, when we talked about Siberian Deal, the most interesting connections we made — and we both agreed that the most interesting were — the women. We wanted to go on in this way, and include them more profoundly. Our concept for FACE SETTINGS also involved travel, because we both like to travel, but also bring the groups we met together. It's always a matter of connecting back and forth, and we just tried to make it more physically possible.

C.S.: So you made a concept, gave it a name, made a logo and a website and started to organize events.

K.R.H.: First thing we did with FACE SETTINGS was to meet with a number of women, all from different countries, at the D.E.A.F.(Festival) in Rotterdam in 1996. All this has been paid from our own pockets. We only had a small research grant from Austria, which allowed us to visit California and for Eva to meet some of the early California feminist artists.

Eva Ursprung asked us to come and do the project in Graz, when she met us in Linz. We liked this invitation, because it was always in the plan to bring the five groups of women together in a real meeting. It was first for us to go there, then connecting via internet and finally — when they all knew each other — to bring the women together in a real meeting and see what they wanted to do. It was important that it grew like this. The plan is for a meeting during the summer 1998 in Graz at the Forum Stadtpark. It has been a real problem to raise the money, but there is enough now. Basically, we cannot do anything more with the project, except keep up the website and look forward to meeting everyone in Graz. That's it and the project will be

finished this year. We are not very good in making money. We ran around and presented it well, there was a lot of response, but….

C.S.: So you won't go on with FACE SETTINGS and the meeting in Graz will be like the final meeting?

K.R.H.: Yes. I mean that is ok with us, it was not intended to be indefinate or without closure. If the girls want to carry on themselves in some way, they can do this.

The mailing list, FACES, is a spin-off from the project. It started at one of the dinners. It was a suggestion out of the wish that people could stay in touch. That was one of the first "trial" dinners in Vienna. We had several unofficial" dinners there, just to get the women together and create a place where people can talk to eachother, because it seemd to us that nobody talks across social circles. They are all busy, doing their things. I think it's really important for people from different groups to have social experiences together, this is one way of talking more casually in a nonjudgemental situation. Everyone can just enjoy and listen to what everybody is doing and they feel much more connected.

C.S.: So there's two different levels of community. One is the real life social interaction, face to face, and the other is the virtual community, via mailing list and website. What is the relation between these two levels?

K.R.H.: What we tried to do, is to put the content of the discussion on the net and bring more people into the discussion, so that erverybody could reflect on the content. If there is a good party you remeber it as a good party, but if there is also a good discussion and dialogue, it's necessary that you can look at it later, but it's also a lot of work.

C.S.: Did you fix certain topics for the dinner discussion?

K.R.H.: Sure, but it is difficult to focus the discussion at a dinner party. That's why the dinner has to stay small. It worked better when the dinners were small (meaning about 12). When they got too big, it' was not easy to control the fun, nobody (even us) wanted that.

C.S: I can imagine that it's very seductive to fall into private talk with the people next to you.

K.R.H.: Of course there has to be time for private talks, but then it has to turn to the topics. A lot of meetings are conducted over dinner. It's not a new concept, it's very common i.e. in the business world.

C.S.: But the groundbraking innovation of FACE SETTINGS was, to take the dinner not just a real event, but also to take it as a metaphor and transfer it on the web.

K.R.H.: Additionaly, dinners are very important in the feminist tradition. From the Judy Chicago dinner party on, there have been a lot of cooking projects. It's something very familiar and …natural. Somehow it's not a big problem for women to cook a dinner. It's easy and it's fun, and if you like to do it, you get a lot of satisfaction.

C.S.: Do you think the metaphor worked also on the web?

K.R.H.: Sure, I think so. We were all really excited about it, and we think the images look good. We like scanning the vegetables, we like making links between vegetables and theoretical texts, we like doing this kind of thing. It's really enjoyable to make it, to sit together and to go over the conversations, to remember the people, to reflect on the discussions, and we engage everyone in a lot in e-mail to get responses. All together, it was very, very time-consuming. It's a very exciting project to make. What we don't want to do (and what we had to decline a lot) is doing catering. We don't want to come and make a dinner for an event and then go, without being connected to the project. I think the last time we did this was at the First Cyberfeminist International. It didn't work for us, because it was not a group we were like engaging in this ongoing dialogue.

C.S.: But there it was a time problem, because you had to leave the next day.

K.R.H.: Yes. And we were happy to do the dinner, to be in this special context.

C.S.: I really would have wished that you stayed longer and get more involved.

K.R.H.: It was not a good timing — as Eva was starting teaching and I was working on the exhibition for the Steirischer Herbst, Zones of Disturbance, which opened that following week. But, what I am talking about… there have been several other places (festivals, exhibitions) which invited us to come and cook dinner, but we said 'no'. It's not the idea for FACE SETTINGS to do that. We are waiting now for the meeting in Graz in summer.

C.S.: What is the plan for Graz?

K.R.H.: Eva Ursprung is the curator and she has to make the final decisions. It's pretty much fixed that there will be women from Scotland, Spain, Russia and Belgrad, Yugoslavia. Of

course there will be many from Austria and some Americans. It's a good chance to meet with a great deal of fun and community spirit.

C.S.: So what is the concept? Is there a curating selection or is it open to everybody?

K.R.H.: It's just because of the funding for the travel expenses that we have to make a certain pre-selection. It would be great if all women could come who attended the dinner parties, for this final step. For us, it will be a closure and reflection on the entire project. We will find out how -or if- it might continue. There is a great deal to be learned about how to support, how to build an information system. It's just open. It's interesting when you get into this situation, you start to feel you should do a lot more than you are doing, and you are already doing tripple time — with no money. Maybe it's a female sense of feeling responsible — I don't know. We have to set personal limits.

C.S.: It seems to make sense to me, that small groups do small projects together — and then connect with each other, because there is no longer money for real big events or infrastructure.

K.R.H.: FACE SETTING was never supposed to be such a big thing. It was supposed to be very defined and manageable. And the countries were choosen, because they are geographically in border areas that weren't in the serious connectivity like, let's say Berlin, or Amsterdam or New York. They were places where connectivity existed, but maybe the women there weren't very connected. So, we knew some connectivity points for them, and could help them with foreign connections. We liked to be there, maybe even liked something destinctive about the cooking, or the theory. Like the girls in Belgrad, they are very theoretical, they are amazing women. These are not just women from the art community. They are from sociology, psychology, literature, from theatre and I think it's important to bring those different kinds of people together, because they are all interested in the online experience.

C.S.: Are they organized themselves?

K.R.H.: They have a group around 'Profemina', a feminist magazine that's produced there. And there has started up some kind of a local network of women in a mailinglist-chat. It's in Serbian. This is from both Belgrade and Novi Sad.

C.S.: Let's talk about FACES now, the mailing list.

K.R.H.: Well, it also came out of a dinner in Vienna (as I said before). We announced it in Liverpool in April 1997. I was very nervous about it, was afraid that it could become too big.

I knew that it would be a lot of work and so I suggested that we start very small to get our feet wet, because I never did this before, neither did Diana McCarty (co moderator). We wanted to find a female webmistress and finally found Vali Djordjevic, who was working at International Stadt in Berlin. Vali got us online.

C.S.: How did you start with the list, how did you choose the basic group?

K.R.H.: We started with somebody from each of the countries where we had the dinners. It was just a trial to get to know how to do it physically. And when we all felt comfortable, how to subscribe people, there were a lot of technical problems and it would have been terrible to have hundreds of people on this list. Actually it didn't take us very long to learn how to do it. We found out that the small group was not big enough to make an interesting conversation. So we started to put in more.

C.S.: Yes, I think the right number of subscribers to a list is an important factor of it's success — and not easy to control.

K.R.H.: The beginning was really thought about as a connection between the different groups which had met for dinner. It was simply a tool for us to keep in touch between the dinners, and it was a logical step and then a lot of people expressed interest, and asked why it was private and this and that. We did not have the ambition to have a major big list, encompassing all the women from media art world. We just wanted to let it take it's own course.

C.S.: So what is your experience after one year?

K.R.H.: Well, we did not want to be heavy-handed moderators, because we wanted people to feel free to say what they want. There is a lot of criticism that it is not moderated enough, nobody realizes that we have a bsolutely no money for this and that we spent hours online on our own expense, somehow it is real interesting experience, what they expect. They expect that someone presents the topics, we present the topics. We all have a lot to learn about how to put ourselves out into public discussion. I think women don't like to be in public discussion.

C.S.: Would you say that women, first of all, expect something, when they subscribe to the list and do not have the idea of contributing?

K.R.H.: Yes, they see what they can get. Maybe that is natural, maybe you join something like this to get information, but slowly it starts and then you give some information, because people feel associated.

C.S.: Don't you think that this could also depend on how familiar people are with the medium itself? Maybe you are just shy in the beginning, lurk a little, before you present your opinion to the public of a list?

K.R.H.: For me it is most interesting to observe how the discussions go between the generations of women. It seems that experience is the biggest devider, more than social or cultural differences. It's where people are in their lives. Younger women seem to have completely different ideas, especially of what is expected by older women and what they should get from them and vice versa.

C.S.: But how do you know how old a woman on your list is?

K.R.H.: I almost know them all personally (probably the others dont know this).

C.S.: So this is the opposite concept to anonymity and subject-free space on the net.

K.R.H.: It certainly is not anonymous. We asked everybody to submit a bio and to write who they are. We wanted to create a place where everybody feels comfortable and knows whom they are talking to.

C.S.: What was the motivation to create a women-only space on the net?

K.R.H.: I feel irritated with a lot of irc-chats and a lot of communication spaces and mailinglists, which are completely dominated by men. I think it is important that women have a place where they don't feel they have to compete with men.

C.S.: I think there is a lot of evangelism about the genderless cyberspace, even produced by female theoreticians. It's a kind of contradiction to ask for women-only spaces. It implcates cyberspace is not genderless, that there is male and female identification. How do you see it, when you say women need their separeted spaces on the net?

K.R.H.: You can have gendered space and genderless space. It (FACES) just happened to be a gendered space. I think it does not say anything about open forums where men call themselves women and women call themselves men. This is perfectly fine, because there gender is less important. But in this particular space it should be a place for women to find their discussion among women. Women should have a place where they don't feel intimidated (although they might feel intimidated by other women, but that's another thing) and maybe this is the most disappointing thing to me, how women can be very critical and non

supportive. I expect more. Still, it somehow works in a good way, but not everybody is as open and supportive as they should be!

C.S.: I think it's very problematic to ask for female solidarity nowadays. There are a lot of different political strategies which have problems to come together.

K.R.H.: For me I find it a goal to find solidarity among women. I have benefited greatly from my friendships and associations with women. What do these political strategies mean anyway? What are they, then, if it is not to create a better environment for all women…to be open and supportive. Otherwise, it is just personal another means for achieving career success. In that case, for me, a political stragegy would mean a self-serving use of others. I makes it more interesting to have dialogue among women from many points of view. This is one of the goals of the mailinglist. I feel much more inclined to write to this mailinglist than to any other. Maybe because I see that it serves many puposes…to be a free and casual space, or a place to post a text, like Faith, but ultimately it should be a discussion list, not a theoretical list.

C.S.: How many women are on FACES at the moment?

K.R.H.: 150.

C.S.: But there are only very few who post regularly and have initiate discussions.

K.R.H.: But when our server was down, I couldn't believe how many mails I got. Women expressed how they miss the list, although they didn't post. Some of them even felt guilty. Some apologized that they were too busy to post. So it's missed.

C.S.: Obviously it was good that it was down, to get some feed-back.

K.R.H.: It just needs to be there. What does this mean? If nobody wrote and nobody responded than it would be another thing. I also subscribed myself to three or four other female mailinglists and the volume of mail on FACES is about 100 times more, and the quality and the topics. What do you think, is going on? I like the example by this eyebeam-list , where they choose certain people with certain topics and they really, you know…. But then I had to stop subscribing to it, because I was travelling and had an overload, connectivity problem.

C.S.: Well, that's part of the techno game. Let's come back to female only.

K.R.H.: Neither Eva, nor myself or Diana has some career goal to be known as a female only worker. That's not our work. It's just that we all feel it is worthwhile activity.

C.S.: So connecting women on- and offline is part of your work and not your main identity.

K.R.H.: My identity is female. And I like it that I can represent women, because I felt when I came here to Europe, that there's desperately need for some more attention, desperately.

C.S.: When was that, what year?

K.R.H.: 1991.

C.S.: And you say there was a big difference between the situation for women there and here in Europe?

K.R.H.: I came from Boston and there was a big difference in the kind of quality of understanding of what female organisations and female professional organisations were about. Here in Europe I felt that it was very much especially separated from art that there were very few female-only groups. The -Innen group was one of the only I knew about. The groups which were there were definitely not thought of as being artists, thought of being more sexually, political, instead of being an art concept. I felt that they were somehow not respected highly. In Boston, I was a memebr of Women in Film and Video and we had a big conference every year, hundreds of people that came from all over. It was really great. There were meetings everywhere. It simply was not a problem. It was not an issue about it, it was just fun. And we had really good networking and support. You got a lot of information that you didn't get anywhere else. This just simply wasn't an issue.

C.S.: What do you think is the reason for this difference?

K.R.H.: I don't know what is the real reason for it here. But meanwhile there a lot of women that are actively involved. But sometimes they are a little embarrased about being a feminist. They agree with me, but they don't want to be called a feminist. What's wrong with being feminist? I'm going to reflect on this attitude a lot, also because I'm going to leave Europe again.

C.S.: Oh, are you?

K.R.H.: Yes, in fall I'm going back to the States. I'm going to take a professor job in upstate New York, in Alabany.

C.S.: What are you going to teach there?

K.R.H.: I'll be on the faculty of Rensselear Polytechnic Institute, part of the iEAR studios, which is an integarted electronic arts, sound, performance, video, computer graphics program. My work will be directing the undergraguate program, EMAC called, electronic media arts and communication, and it is the fastest growing course in the institute. It's co- administrated between the art department and a department which is called literature, language and communication which is a more theoretical communication program. And I really like the courses they are giving, a lot of gender politics, a lot of work on ethnics, things on this nature, and those are courses that are not part of the art department. So I felt this is really important and brings a lot of the things I've learned and grown to appreciate and bring them together.

C.S.: I can imagine that it is hard to do the kind of work you do, for such a long time, without getting any regular support.

K.R.H.: I'm glad it did this. I always had this fascination and respect of people working free-lance, especially artists, how they manage, and as a curator I always was very artist-centered, and I got a lot of problems with the administrations, because I was always asking for more. The problem of a free-lance life is, that you can't say 'no' to anything, you always have to say 'yes', because you never know, when the next thing is going to happen. Then you are so terribly over-commited and you try this sort of shifting game. Which things can be shifted, which things can't. And it makes you crazy. And then when you agree to write texts, this is even worse, because it's harder to write texts than to give talks, because it is in print. This is nerve-wracking. And then the travelling! I wanted to slow down the travelling, but the travelling also gets associated with the texts, and the programs and so on. Literally I have been in Vienna not more than two weeks this year so far. So I'm relatively homeless.

C.S.: I have one last question. There are several articles where you are called a cyberfeminist, and I would like to know, if you would call yourself a cyberfeminist or more genrally, if you think it is helpful to introduce and use the term 'Cyberfeminism'?

K.R.H.: I have this very clear feeling of what cyberfeminism is. For me it is the very radical statement of VNS Matrix. It's really hard for me to get away from this first impression, the cyberfeminist being very radical and very motivating. It was a real important step and I think cyberfeminism is one of a number of names which is interesting for the time, for the activity. Maybe cyberfeminism is when you use sexuality in a radical way in the internet, rather than being activist. You can call yourself post-feminist, or activist-feminist, or queer-feminist, …

be engaged in feminist activities, all kind of activities. It always goes back to the word feminism.