Would you like to overcome your trauma?

Interview with Cornelia Sollfrank, by Zoe Crosher

15 November 2000, Los Angeles, USA (continued by e-mail)

I: In terms of your own work, what do you think about the desire of curators to want to put net.art in museums and sell and commodify it?

CS: You know about Female Extension? This project occurred in 1997, a crucial year for net.art because the traditional art institutions and museums started to subsume the work of net.artists. Curators suddenly realized that something like net.art existed and they wanted to participate in the hype. At the same time, though, most of them did not have any idea what it meant to deal with net.art as a new medium and what the consequences for a big instititution might be. They just thought that they could set up some computers and suddenly they would also show 'net.art'.

In the winter of '96 & '97, I had a grant, a fellowship, which I used to investigate the net.art scene. It was not so hard to get a good overview, as there was not as much happening as nowadys. Coincidentially, when I went back to Hamburg–where I live most of the time–I found out that the Museum of Contemporary Art in Hamburg had launched a net.art competition.

What concerned me was that I knew of those involved in the scene, and there was no one in the museum who had any real idea about net.art, interactive installations, or any kind of electronic art! As a writer for the online magazine on net.culture 'telepolis' I conducted an interview with the responsible curator of the museum about the competition, called 'Extension'. He even admited that the museum did not have much competence in the field of net.art, but that he was willing to learn. At least he did not try to pretend.

I: Do you think the institutions want to part of this avant-garde because they feel it escapes them?

CS: Refering to the situation of 1997 - Absolutely. Art institutions stay alive by incorporating new tendencies, and they gain reputation by doing so. This was the case in the late 90s with net.art. Meanwhile the stubborn nature of this art form makes that many institutions loose interest. Others go for it seriously and develop staff, competence and budgets…

I: What was the final show in Hamburg like? Did you participate?

CS: Of course I wanted to take part, but also to comment on what was happening at the same time. I did not feel like just sending in one submission - it just did not seem like enough. And

the contact with other contributing artists, like Jodi, showed that they were all quite unhappy because the contest seemed so ridiculous. Even the 'call for entries' was absurd because it wanted artists to send the data of the work to the museum; one had to physically transfer the data onto the museum server, which makes not much sense. If you have a piece on the web, you could just send in the URL and that's it. The museum wanted to get hold of the data; they wanted to have it on their server, for whatever reason.

In the end, I came up with two projects. One was an official contribution, which I sent in under my real name. It was a project about the museum as internet provider, called 'Access Art'. I suggested to set up a space with computers in the museum, a technical set-up to provide internet access in order to have the whole technology of the museum as itself an object on display. I wanted to reveal the servers, the cables and also the person who was running it, rather than the opposite tendency, which is to hide the technology and just to have a clean, colorful surface, a screen. I wanted to have all the uggly, grey, functioning machines in the space as objects. That was my official submission. And then I had another project, the one of higher relevance to me, I put together because I hated this competition and I wanted to destroy it. They had automated everything and I thought that if I could flood the competition, then the entire process would break down. Consequently, I invented 350 female net.artists to flood the competition, which was a lot of work just to think of the names!

I: Did you come up with 350 different products, or did you come up with a program to generate 350 different projects? How did you do that? What do you mean by flooding?

CS: First of all, flooding is a hacker/cracker technique. For exampel DoS, Denial of Service attack, means to remotely disable machines by flooding them with more traffic than they can handle. But this is on a technical level. The flooding technique I have used for Female Extension was kind of a mix. First I created 350 net.artists, and registered them all for the competition. Basically, I made up the names by searching international phone books. Each of these artists had a working email address, many from different countries. I had a network of people to help me set up the addresses from all over. In a next step, the museum sent back a password for each of these fake participants. After the deadline for the registration, the museum sent out a press release saying that 'Extension' was a huge success and that more than two thirds of the enormous number of applicants were women. They were ecstatic all the newspapers took up the story, talking about how surprising it was there were so many women net.artists!

Creating these identities was the first step. Then of course I had to send in the individual entries to the museum. I had planned to make 'paste&copy' random html code, until an artist friend from Berlin, Karl-Heinz Jeron, told me about the possibilities of automating by writing a program. So, what we did, was, with the help of a perl-script and search engines, randomly producing html-code. I had thought of typical net.art names, like socket-connection, cyber star etc. and attached these names to the websites, and completed by one of the passwords, sent the single sites in as submissions of the virtual artists. We did all this from one server, so if they had really traced this back they could have discovered our sabotage.

Two years later I took up the idea of automatically produced net.art again, and in cooperation with three different programmers developed the 'net.art generator' (www.obn.org/generator).

I: I wonder what would have happened if they prematurely had found out!

CS: It easily might have happened, but it did not. They did not realize what was going on. I had a spy in the museum, was always in contact with him, he kept me adrift of the situation. But nobody became suspicious. They did not even think to consider the possibility of my actions. Then the jury came together, all well known and competent people, but not exactly specialized in net.art. My spy was also around the jury and told me afterwards that they were wondering what all of these web sites could mean, but they could not find a connection. Obviously, they never figured out the system behind it. It is possible to see the underlying system if you are web-literate. If you look at these pages, another and another, you become aware that there must be a system behind, taking random text and random images and combining them together. All together I consider Female Extension, as a piece of net.art itself, maybe one which had most relevance in the year when it was produced. Nowadys, it is historical.

I: The jury was probably commenting on how all net.art looks alike! How different were the pieces?

CS: I do not know what the jury thought, and they never expressed their opinion. There are still some examples in the documentation online (www.obn.org/femext), but the generators are far more developed now. For example, generator II is really complex and works for half and hour processing the data. After this processing, there forms a huge conglomerate of websites, where it is not just one site but a site with endless links. generator II is based on the 'dada engine', a program which is available on the net and focuses on text, actually inventing new words and building nonesense sentences.

I: So did any of the 350 female net.artists and the first generator project win?

CS: No, unfortunately not. The jury came together and gave the three pizes away. There were so many women, but like it is in real life, you know. The boys - it was only boys who got the prizes.

I: How many women were there in the rest of the competition?

CS: I am not sure. I would say probably thirty-five percent.

I: Can you speak more about female participation and web art?

CS: I do not have any statistics, and never did profound research on that, so I can only speak about my personal impression. It looks like as if there were pretty much women around, I would estimate around 40%. But mostly they do not market their work as aggressively as men are used and trained to do. That might be one reason why, on the long run, it's mostly boys who gain reputation (and win prizes).

I: So did the musem ever catch on to what was going on?

CS: Yeah, but later on. They did not realize what I had done and they had their winners. And I asked myself what to do with this thing now? I spoke to friends and other artists, and they insisted that I had to make it public, otherwise it would be lost. No one would ever find out about the subversion that was going on. So that is what I did. The last night before there was the press conference announcing the winners, I wrote a press release that described my action. At the press conference there were, I don't know, thirty journalists to whom I handed out my press release. For the museum people, it was absolutely shocking. I knew the guy who had initiated the competition because of the interview I had conducted with him. Before he knew what I did, he had invited me to give a speech at the awards ceremony, which I had agreed to do. So when he saw the press release, he turned pale. It was really hard for him. I mean, it was really bad. And even I felt a bit bad. Sometimes it seems like you are hacking an abstract system, but it is something else when you affect people. I think it really caused some damage to him personally, and I feel sorry for that part of the story.

I: But it did show an underlying problem with the structure of the competition.

CS: Sure. It was obvious to me that I had to do it. But it still was a strange moment, you know, to sit next to this person as he was realizing what I had done.

I: He probably thought that he had the whole thing under control, that everything had gone smoothly.

CS: Yeah. So this was a bit of an awkward moment. Afterwards there was this dinner party, and it seemed like he had recovered a bit by the time it started. He then said that my project was the best contribution to the competition and that he wanted it documented on the museum server. I told him that I considered it a piece of conceptual art and that he had to buy it if he wanted it.

I: That's great!

CS: Except that he was not willing to pay for it! That showed again the museum's attitude towards net.art, you know. They think it is for free. Everything is for free, right, because it is there anyway, which is true in a way, but not in the way they think it is. This attitude only works in the context of a gift economy. It is free, but you have to put something back, give something back. If they would have something to offer to the net.art scene, to help people accomplish things on the web like facilities or financial assistance it would be a different story.

I: Why should they fund painting or sculpture or fund the lifestyles of painters or sculptors and not do the same for net.artists? Why not provide for net.artists' lifestyles in the same way?

CS: The main problem is that it is not so easy to commodify net.art. And some institutions meanwhile seriously started to support the scene. Like the Guggenheim Museum, or the Walker Art Center. They commission new works, and so contribute to net.culture. Another way would be to give special grants and fellowships to net.artists so that they can simply go on working. And in New York City there is a gallery, Postmasters, which also tries to foster digital art of various forms. I got in touch with them in the winter of 1996. I went to an opening, and started to argue with the gallerist, Tamas Banovich, because I assumed he was one of the idiots who just wanted to surve the wave. He was too busy that night, but asked me to come back the following week. I did go back, and we ended up having a conversation that lasted half the night. Since then we have become friends. I think, he is really great, very open-minded and is making a lot happen. At the same time he sees the problematic points, also in terms of commodification and is thinking of possible ways.

I: But I don't think net.art and gallery art are mutually exclusive. I have been doing some net.art installations and performances in gallery spaces. I felt a little hypocritical when I did the thing in Munich. It could be initiated by artists, but it could also be initiated by museums. But it seems they don't. For example, they exhibited Netomat at Postmasters, which could have been at least projected. In order to view it, you just ended up sitting there in front of a computer screen and a keyboard. Why don't the institutions try harder to commission some sort of installation?

CS: Postmasters is just a gallery, not a big museum. And institutions usually try to do so. From what I have seen, curators really do think about how they can make net.art installations happen in a space that makes sense. That is a crucial point for all shows in 'a white cube'. On the other hand, I think there are works which simply demand that you just sit in front of a computer screen, especially if it is about the interface and about the screen and nothing else.

I: Did you go to that show in Orange County "Control Shift"?

CS: Where is Orange County, first of all?

I: It is south, between here and San Diego. It is a really Repulican area. That's where Disneyland is. It's an extension of the huge conglomerate which is Los Angeles, just further south. So this place, University of California at Irvine, had a show called "Control Shift", which curated work and various new games and gaming networks. It was very gallery hipster. The show had these orange kidney-shaped stations with wall-to-wall white carpeting that made it look really cute and IKEA. So you sit down on this white carpet in front of a computer monitor, right? But you can't really get beyond that, can you? Isn't it interesting that you can have the same kind of presentation in a museum that you can have in your own house? Why don't they simply give you a list of websites associated with the show and send you home? Why even charge admission to the museum? Yeah, bingo.

CS: I was part of this show called "Tenacity" at the Swiss Institute in New York, which was about 'stubborn practices in the information age'. But it was not simply a net.art show. I think we are in a phase now where net.art projects more and more become part of larger theme oriented shows. And this makes sense, not just to put the focus on the medium all the time but also to try to find other references in the works. And making it all together an experience in a real space, which is worth visiting a gallery space is the actual task of a curator - which was nicely fulfilled in the given exampel.

But there's also negative examples. Did you see the Whitney Biennal this year in NYC? They also showed net.art, in a very ridiculous and funny way. There was one space, a dark room with several benches, like a movie theater or a church, and people were sitting next to each other in rows and watching the projection while one person in the back, another, very courageous visitor was operating the single computer in the space…

I: That's very much what 'Control Shift' was like as well. They had seven or eight stations in the beginning, with massive projections that someone could operate with a joystick. It was like flying the Starship Enterprise. The set-up was more about being wowed by the technology where the technology is more seductive than the underlying concept. And that is my problem with the "Control Shift" show, that you were simply looking at really pretty graphics. Or that things are so interesting because they are 3D and come out at you — it still lacks any content! But there is the flipside where often times work which is "technical" immediately gets marginalized. People won't look at the content because they can't get past the technical! The first time net.art was included in a gallery show was in Documenta in 1997!

CS: What they did was another exampel or curatorial cluelessness - they had one room which contained all the terminals and these computers were not online because the curator was afraid that the visitors would check their email. There's real dangers coming along with the internet!

I: Have you always used the net as a venue?

CS: I am using different media like video, photography, performance, installtion, writing, computer… all the time. Depends on what is best for the purpose. But I am proud of a really old CompuServe email address. I think it is from 1991.

I: You mean like 100111.1111?

CS: At the moment they have a dot and then four numbers behind the dot. I have one with two numbers behind the dot.

I: Wow.

CS: I still keep this email because it is an antique, it is very cool. And I got online because a friend of mine had moved to New York, and we were looking for a cheap way to keep in touch. So I got a modem for my laptop, which was this really strange machine — a Toshiba with no hard drive!. My very first contact with the internet was through email and communication, and it stayed like this for many years.

I: Your work lends itself to the idea of networking, right?

CS: Yes, I basically think that art has a lot to do with exchange, communication, with 'information processing'. This is the case for any artist, but working in artist groups, collectives and networks is a more formalized way to live and pratice that kind of exchange. And it fosters an image of the artist which leaves the idea of a lonesome genius behind.

I have been doing collaborative work since 1990. The first group I worked with was called "Frauen-und-Technik" ("Women and Technology") which is also a saying in Germany. When, for example, a woman makes a mistake in driving or something similar, people will say "Oh! Frauen und Technik!"

I: That women and technology don't go together.

CS: Exactly. But we did not much refer to our name contentwise, but put the focus on issues of representation. Our work was based on reflecting marketing and advertising strategies, which had gained big popularity in the late 80s. People had started to talk about 'Logos',

'Corporate Identity' and 'Corporate Design'. And we used all such things to promote the group. I mean, that was our work - communicating our existence.

I: Did you fabricate things, activities that the collective was doing?

For exampel we made a brochure about ourselves, and we produced all kind of merchandising products, bearing our logo which were spread all over, also in the art context as art products, and in our performances we were wearing uniforms made ourselves available and gave autographs… Much to our surprise these techniques worked also well for our group, and we were able to generate a certain publicity. During the production time of the shows we did for the documenta art TV 'Piazza Virtuale' in summer 1992, we started to realize how hard it was to stay with the concept of not producing any 'content'. It is mega hard work just to stay at the surface of things all the time. What we did there was a series of game shows titled 'envy of penis games'. We sort of played penis envy games, based around this interpretation of "Frauen and Technik", like why a woman would want a big computer, motorcycle or whatever. I think the best thing about these shows was the title. And the group also was too large - we were 10 - to work together for a longer time; after two years or so we split up into two smaller groups. The one I continued wo work with called itself '-Innen'.

I: What does that mean?

CS: In German the ending 'in' indicates a female person, and 'innen' is the plural. If you say a male teacher, you say "Lehrer", for a female teacher you say "Lehrerin". We included the dash to indicate that we are ready to connect to any existing structure and situation. We can come in and add

"-Innen", the female ending, to anything. So that was the concept behind the name "-Innen".

I: And the work you did, was it a continuation of 'Frauen-und-Technik'?

CS: Very much. For example we exaggerated the uniform principle by dressing up the same way. We absolutely wanted to look the same. And with "-Innen" we continued to work on TV and about TV.

In the year 1994 we produced shows, and during the production process we developed a television theory which was a mixture of Lacanian theory and writings on media. We even developed a kind of own media theory about TV. One could say it was extremely eclectic, and actually, quite absurd, but in itself it was coherent. The theory concerned the individual sitting in front of the TV - what happens to him/her from a psychological or psychoanalytical point of view. We used the concepts of the "real" , the 'imaginaire", and the "symbolic" and attempted to adapt them to the medium of television. First, we experimented with a

performance piece using a technique of Lacan, who came up with the idea of using mathematical formulas for philosophical content. Since we liked this approach we designed mathematical formulas that would explain our theories about television. We had a huge heart-shaped screen on the stage, and the four of us sat next to it wearing white lab coats in order to make us look more scientific and serious. On the heart screen we projected our mathematical formulas, and one of us would stand up and explain to the viewers what the formula meant. We also incorporated excerpts from daily soap operas and explained how our theories and formulas worked within the context of the soap opera. Another part was soap operas where we dubbed the audio so that the characters in the show would be talking about our television theory, which was really funny. For example, we dubbed the voices so that they were talking about narcissism in the media. After these performances, we wanted to continue our experiment by doing the game shows in TV.

The first game show was called the "Narcissism Game." It was a multiple-choice test where we read the question to the viewers and listed three possible choices. The public called in and tried to pick the right answer. Of course the correct answer related to our theory. That's how we trained the audience to give the right answers: they had to learn about our theory in order to correctly answer our questions. The more they participated the more they began to understand what we were getting at.

I: Was it hard to captivate the audience? Was it hard to get an audience response?

CS: We always had people calling in.

I: Did people realize that Lacan was the father of your absurd theory?

CS: Of course only people who are familiar with Lacan, they realized, but they didn't have to know his thought to understand what we were getting at. Our game shows really made sense in themselves and you could understand most of what we were saying simply by watching. The second game show we did was called "Self Ideal," where the callers could design a new self, an ideal self, an ideal image of themselves by answering several of our questions. Depending on the answers they gave we calculated and generated a new self image for them. Then we read it to the callers and that was the prize they could win for themselves. People really loved it! I think we were really on to something with that show because the questions and constructed selves were seriously based on psychological theories. Certain types of people who answered would give certain types of answers to our questions, and we, "-Innen," could decide from this that the caller must be a type like this, like that, like the type that would give an answer such as they did. It made sense.

I: It sounds therapeutic.

CS: It certainly was fun for the participants, … and maybe in that sense therapeutic. The third game was even more therapeutic. We called it the "Trauma Game." People could send us their traumas, and we would attempt to overcome their traumas live and on the air.

I: What were some of the traumas?

CS: They were great! We loved the traumas! For example, one guy was allergic to feathers, and he told us an anecdote about how he developed his traumatic allergy. When he was a little boy he had to vacuum his room. One day his mother went shopping and by mistake he sucked his little bird into the vacuum. It died of course, and since then feathers have traumatized him.

I: How did you fix his trauma?

CS: We didn't. Of course, we never fixed any of the traumas; we just said we would. That was the point. A caller would choose from a set of envelopes that contained different trauma stories. Then the same person would choose a candidate in the studio. We were the candidates, and we all looked the same. Once they chose one of the women from "-Innen" she would stand up and have the trauma read to her. Then she would stand there for thirty seconds in a meditative state of mind, with a watch, tick tick tick, in time with the music. Afterwards the modeartor asked her, "Did you overcome the trauma?"

Published in *net.net.net*, CalArts and Museum of Modern Art, Los Angeles, 2001