Hacking the art operating system

Cornelia Sollfrank interviewed by Florian Cramer during the annual congress of the Chaos Computer Club (German Hacker's Club) in Berlin.

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FC: I have questions on various thematic complexes which in your work seem to be continually referring to each other: hacking and art, computer generated, or more specifically, generative art, cyber feminism, or the questions that your new work entitled 'Improvised Tele-vision' throw up. And of course the thematic complex plagiarism and appropriation – as well as what can be seen as an appendix to that, art and code, code art and code aesthetics.

CS: Surely code art and code aesthetic are more your themes than mine. I think I should be the one asking the questions here. (laughter)

FC: …no, this refers very specifically to statements made by you, for example in your Telepolis interview with 0100101110111001.org, which I found excellent because of its rather sceptical undertones. If that really is more my area though, then by all means we can bracket it out of the interview.

CS: No, no. I didn't mean it like that. Quite the opposite in fact. However that is what is so interesting and difficult about the relationship between these complexes – and which I often find myself arguing about. A lot of things appear to run parallel, or better put, one invests more in one area for a particular period of time, then returns back to something else. To keep an eye on how these various activities link together is not easy.

FC: When I look at your work, I notice that on the one hand you are a very important net artist, on the other hand – what nevertheless seems closely related to the this – you work as a critical journalist for among others, Telepolis, and frequently write about hacker culture: for example, you've written about an Italian hacker congress and interviewed the Chaos-Computer-Club spokesperson Andy Müller-Maguhn about the Cybercrime Convention. Am I right in supposing that when you write about hacking, you always maintain an aesthetic interest in net art – and that, vice-versa, when you are writing about net art, you investigate to what extent it tends towards computer hacking.

CS: I see myself foremost as an artist, and that is my point of departure for everything else; it gives me the motivation too to slip into other roles. Being a journalist is more a means to an end, because as a journalist I obtain information that as an artist I would not obtain. That means, I instrumentalise this function, as I did at the ars electronica 2001. The theme there was 'Takeover' and I was invited to participate on the panel Female Takeover. An interview

that I did for Telepolis with the head of the ars electronica, Gerfried Stocker, helped me understand what he thought about the theme – and how this somewhat vague concept came about. That's why journalism and scrutiny are basic tools of my art. My product though - I don't know if I should refer to it like that – is ultimately artistic, or if you want to call it that, aesthetic.

FC: In the conclusion to your review on ars electronica you write: "perhaps art no longer needs ars electronica either�?. I have to add that I warmed to that remark. (laughter)

CS: But perhaps it does! "Perhaps�? is what is written and meant. (laughter)

FC: The motto of the event does not imply that art wants to appropriate technology, rather to the contrary, that technicians want to control art and make artists superfluous.

CS: I saw another 'Takeover' there. Stocker felt it was a 'Takeover' by people working in the free market who have virtually taken over art. And basically for the very reason that they are more creative than artists. His whole concept of art circles around creativity; nothing else seems to occur to him about a possible definition of art. (Quoting our good colleague Merz here, creativity becomes something for hairdressers!) Sure, Stocker's thesis was meant as a provocation to artists – on the lines of look at yourselves for once, what a bunch of boring shits you are compared to the young laid back super–kids in the companies who come up with the wildest things. But even that can be interpreted in various ways. You could open up a wider spectrum to 'Takeovers', just like we did when we discussed and engaged with the issues of 'Female Takeover'. By the way, one result of our panel was that at a future ars electronica there should be a 'women only' ars electronica.

FC: In order to come back to the question of defining contexts – such as art and non-art, art and hacking: it occurred to me while reading your article on the hacker conference in Italy that usually the domains of art and the hacking are kept apart from one another. Even if in Italy this division was not so rigorously kept in force. That seemed to be a sociological observation, and not a thesis that you support and want to concretize. Is hacking then for you art and does hacking have something to do with art?

CS: Both. As far as sociological theories on art and hacking go, I've come increasingly to the conclusion over the last four, five years in which I have been involved in hacking, that hack culture always has something bordering on a national…(laughter) flavor. That's why it is interesting for me to visit other countries and especially Italy, where it appears as if there does not exist the slightest fear of contact between artists, activists, philosophers etc. They coexist there naturally, dialogue with each other and create a common language in which they can communicate (laughter), which is something I haven't experienced in Germany. As a female artist in the Chaos Computer Club, I have come face to face with some of the worse preconceptions, accusations and verbal abuse of my life (unfortunately).

FC: You said: as a 'female artist' in the Chaos Computer Club. What do you put the emphasis on? Being an 'artist' or 'female artist'?

CS: On both. As far as gender goes there is a basic frankness involved. When one deals with the same themes identically and speaks the same language, gender means less hurdles to cross. (laughter) Since that is seldom the case it becomes one. The bigger problem however is art. That left me utterly dumbfounded. I was having a nice chat with someone at one or other of the Chaos Computer Club's parties and was asked what I do. When I replied "an artist�?, the reaction I got was a hoarse exclamation: "I hate artists�?, which left me thinking, oh, that's a pity! That usually makes for an abrupt end to any conversation you might have. I find it very difficult to find new topics to talk about, or reasons to stay and ask questions. That has no doubt to do with the fact that hackers see themselves as artists – and more to the point the only genuine ones – and that everyone else is just an idiot and hasn't a clue (laughter). On the other hand though a connection to art has arisen out of the formative days of the Chaos Computer Club. For example in Bielefeld, where padeluun and Rana Tangens see themselves as being active as both artists and gallerists – although they are by no means equally loved and cherished by everyone at CCC.

FC: …Felix von Leitner for example, one of the most skilled computer experts in the CCCler, enjoys giving padeluum a regular bashing…

CS: In the German CCC that has a lot to do with the person involved in padeluum – who many simply can't stand. padeluun embodies for some what they are accustomed to in art, and which means the subject is put to an end.

FC: Is that not a problem perhaps of the definition of art? Because since the middle of the 18th century, and at the latest since Romanticism, we have a definition of art that is no longer focused on the 'ars', the actual skill involved, but rather on the genius and the aesthetic vision? If one nonetheless sees hacking as art, this cannot have a lot to do with the older definition of 'ars'

CS: That can also have to do with a newer definition of art, if it is exists in the minds of people. For me this has less to do with skill directly, because one person alone in our times does not have the skill to produce something relevant, rather different people with different skills have to come together. A typical hacker would fit into such a team. However it is very tough to get a foot into the German hacker culture with that idea. You probably don't know my work with women hackers?

FC: I know the interview that you also did with a female hacker at a Chaos Computer-Congress in 1999.

CS: …Clara SOpht…

FC: …right. And you are working on a comprehensive video documentation of this theme!

CS: I'm making a five part series. Due to my experience in the CCCs, I narrowed my research down and tried to find women who see themselves as hackers. Besides postings and numerous mailing lists and newsgroups, I asked a diverse number of experts. Bruce Sterling, for example, who has written an erudite book "Hacker Cracker�?, and is seen as an expert in the American scene, or the American hacker hunter, Gail Thackeray, who was the co-founder of the Computer Crime Unit in the USA. They are really specialists who know the scene very well, and all of them confirmed that there are no highly skilled women in this area. That proved very depressing for me. In my fantasies, I imagined there were all this wild women, complete nerds, exotic, anarchistic and dangerous, courageous enough to want to cross borders and break all conventions… psychopathic and with criminal tendencies, politically active, artistic and more: however they just didn't exist. That's when I switched from the journalist-research modus to the artistic-modus and said to myself, I have to try and reshape this boring reality. And that's why I did the interview with Clara SOpht for example, who doesn't really exist. (Laughter) I just started to invent female hackers.

FC: Oh, I see! (laughter) Great!

CS: I did show the videos which come out of this process in the art scene, where they went down really well, although sometimes certain clever people ask what they actually have to do with art. Depending on the situation I then reveal that the female hackers do not exist or STILL do not exist. I preferred showing them though in a hacker context. For example I gave a talk at the CCC congress on women hackers and showed the interview with Clara SOpht. It was pretty well attended, including a lot of men, who watched everything and then attacked me for not defending sufficiently Clara SOpht privacy, because she had stressed that she did not want details about herself being publicized. At the end of the event I mentioned casually that the woman did not exist and that I had invented her. Some people were gobsmacked. Quite unexpectedly they had experienced art, an art which had come to them, to their congress, and talked in their language. I found that very amusing. These little doses of 'pedagogy' can trigger off a lot and no doubt help CCC to develop itself further.

FC: You were being a hacker, but in a different system from that of computer codes. You were a 'social hack'.

CS: Exactly – my favorite hack in the CCC concerned the Website of the Hacker Clubs, the 'Lost and Found' Page, which I always liked to study after every congress. I found it fascinating to discover what things hackers have on them and have forgotten. I then turned that around. While I was working on the theme 'women hackers', I deliberately left things in

the CCC so that they would turn up on the 'Lost and Found' page and cause commotion and upheaval. By that, I mean I left things there which normally only women have or possess. The main object was a small electronic device with a display and two little lights that women use to calculate their fertility cycle. I handed that in to the 'Lost and Found' and added that I had found it in the ladies' toilets. Five hackers grouped around this device and studied it…(laughter) to find out what it is. This ominous device became the center of a lot of heated discussions before it was finally pinned up as a large photo in 'Lost & Found' Page. Those are examples of some of my small hacks at the CCC – back then while in the process of leaving clues to female hacker and characters who do not exist.

FC: In the early nineties the art critic Thomas Wulffen coined the phrase 'art operating system'. Can you relate to that in any way? Or do you find it problematic? Your artistic hacks that you've mentioned do not engage directly with the art operating system!

CS: I can relate to that in a big way because what interests me most in art are operating systems, the parameters which define it, and how they can be changed and the possibilities used to develop new medias. What also belongs to operating systems is the concept of the artist, the notion of an artistic program, from the working title to the interfaces – who and what will be exhibited and who will look at it. This system is actually what interests me most in art. To intervene and be able to play I have to know how it functions.

FC: But then isn't it difficult to be a net artist as well? In my perception of net art what astonished me most and what affects you too, is how petty bourgeois, reactionary and utterly humorless this contemporary art scene really is – although one always thought it was the most aesthetically permissive around. In the example of net art, one could see how in the very moment in which no new objects were being produced which lent themselves to being exhibited, that it (net art) lost its footing and was not given proper recognition in the art operating system. I still find it astonishing how much net art has to fight against this in order to be taken seriously in the first place by this art operating system. Is that not difficult for you, as an female artist, to want to try and hack the art operating system, and to do so of all things as a net artist?

CS: First of all I do not see myself solely as a net artist, but rather as an art concept artist. I find the net indeed very interesting, and to be active in it fulfills many of my wishes, but that aside, I also work with video, text, performance and whatever else is required for a particular project. That net art is not recognized in the art world and has problems there is primarily due to the fact that, in my opinion, there are no pieces/objects which can be exchanged from one owner to another in a meaningful way. An art which is not compatible with the market system is hardly of any interest, because in the last analysis the market is the governing force in the art operating system. Another further difficulty is the ability to exhibit. What justification is there to show net art in the 'White Cube'?

In that way all exhibitionists have to ask themselves: why should we actually show net art here in our museum? Some net artists quickly understood that they wouldn't get far with their

non-commodifiable, difficult to represent art culture in the market, and moved over and started working with installations. That has worked well – just as it did in the video arts. It is not a new phenomenon that is happening to net art. Before it, there was also ephemeral art, Fluxus(?) and performance art for example, or technically perfect reproducible art forms such as video and photography. All these art forms had enormous problems at the beginning, but then opportunities surfaced in the market and certain intermediaries really supported them and managed to create a space for them. And when everything becomes too much, then a new decade of fine arts is heralded in order to let the market recuperate.

In net art I think there is an interest in the art world. For a long period it was given a lot of hype, and at the moment I see a kind of consolidation. Ultimately there are a few big institutions like the Guggenheim, the Tate Gallery or the Walker Art Center that actively support the production of net art by giving commissions to artists. What goes wrong in net art is that artists – I'm talking about the group net.art and that scene – have not developed collective strategies as to how they should deal with the art operating system – which is one of the great strengths of the fluxus artists. There is missing a willingness to accept that a problem even exists in the first place.

That was fittingly enough one of the awful outcomes of the meetings we had. As far as I can fathom, people came with the attitude: " I'll show my work at the documenta or in Whitney Museum, but it doesn't mean anything�?. That is unpolitical and weakens everyone's position.

Vuc Cosic acted similarly at the Biennale 2001 in Venice. Leaving aside the strange circumstances which lead to him ending up in the Slovanian Pavillion, it was a success for net art and for him personally, and it was generally an interesting Pavillion. And instead of celebrating that – which would have been honest – he tried to convey through his actions that everything was utterly futile. Some people found this very unpleasant and there arose quite spontaneously the idea of defining what was happening. The result was the very controversial 'flower action'. In the name of the Old Boys' Network three cyber feminists handed him a large bouquet of flowers at the opening of the Pavillion in order to gratulate him and pay tribute to his achievements in net art.

I like this action, because it works at different levels: the Slovanian press were proud of their artist, and the Insider would remember very clearly Vuk's gesture – as part of the opening of the net.condition at zkm – of laying down a bouquet of flowers to symbolize the death of net art through its institutionalization. A wonderful gesture, I think. I believe too that it was also quite painful.

As I said, the lack of a collective strategy for net artists is a big problem. In 1997, a further symptom of this occurred in the form of the Hamburger Art Hall Net Art competition. Like the introduction of net art at the documenta x, artists here were very insecure and didn't know how they should deal with the idiotic and incomprehensible conditions. And so they contributed half-heartedly. Though at this conjuncture it would have been so easy to hack into the art operating system. It was definitely a missed opportunity.

FC: You see yourself as a female concept artist, and on your Homepage there is what could be seen as an analogy: "A smart artist makes a machine do the work�?. Is that supposed to mean that concept art first lets the machines transform the concepts has become real concept art?

CS: No, I wouldn't formulate it so radically, so one dimensionally (laughter). Ultimately one could takes slaves instead of machines to produce art (laughter).

FC: À la Andy Warhol Factory…

CS: Yes, somewhat similar. Or simply craftsmen and women, or keen art students who implement the master's idea.

FC: …Jeff Koons…

CS: Yeah Jeff Koons is the best example. I don't think that one needs a machine to transform this concept into art. If the aethetic program is developed with which the artist works then it doesn't matter who varies the program or produces it. The artist is a purely representational figure… He or she just has to fulfill well the parameters set by 'image' of the artist.

FC: I want to add on something there. Yesterday I read on the 'eu-gene' Mailing List for generative art - which was set up by among others Adrian Ward - what I feel is the first enlightening definition of generative art. It comes from Philip Galanter, a Professor at the New York University, and dovetails nicely into what you just said:

"Generative art refers to any art practice where the artist creates a process, such as a set of natural language rules, a computer program, a machine, or other mechanism, which is then set into motion with some degree of autonomy contributing to or resulting in a completed work of art."

I find that an interesting definition, because it not only reflects computer art, but also spans a lot more.

CS: Yes, I think so too. It's a good definition.

FC: Would you say that what you do is generative art?

CS: Not everything that I do. But definitely the work I've done with the net art generator. Whether these processes from which he speaks apply to my work… I'd have to really give that some more thought. What seems to support this though is that my point of departure is founded on not being creative, in the sense of creating new Images or a new Aethetic. Rather, I work with material that is already available. This material is then reshaped under certain structural conditions or simply reworked. But I couldn't give a NAME to this program. (laughter)

FC: I ask myself, however, whether for you in "Female Extension�? – where you set up several hundred Websites under different female artist names for the net art competition at the Hamburger Art Hall, and which were in fact generated by a computer program – the generative is simply a vehicle, a means to an end. "Female Extension�? was also a 'social hack', a cyberfeminist hack of the net art competition. How your generators were programmed was actually pretty irrelevant!?

CS: In principle, yes. (laughter) However after 'Female Extension' I continued to develop the concept of net art generators.

FC: What springs to mind now is that in one of your net art generators, you used the 'Dada Engine' by Andrew Bulhak, which is also the basis for his very humorous 'Postmodern Thesis Generators'.

CS: That's right. Unfortunately that is also the most complicated generator and often causes problems.

FC: So the net art generators were not inspired by the 'Postmodern Thesis Generator'?

CS: No, that was different. While the competition at the Art Hall in 1997 was taking place, it was clear to me that one of the crucial points was: museum want to incorporate net art. I wanted to intervene and clarify things: on the one hand for the artists or net artists. I felt we had to watch out with how we dealt with the situation, so that the potential of net art – which had been acquired was used in a subversive way – was not thrown away, given away to easily, and on the other hand, that the museum was given a lesson. That's how 'Female Extension' came about.

At the start I intended to make all the web sites manually, using copy and paste, because I was not capable of programming them. The programming happened more by chance through an artist friend of mine. I was very happy with the results; the automatic generated pages looked

very artistic. The jury was definitely taken in by it, although none of my female artists won a prize. Through 'Female Extension' and the social hack I got caught up in the idea to conceptualize the generators in even more detail. Three versions have now been around for some time now: one, which works with images, one which piles images and texts on top of each other, and one that is a derivative of the 'Dada Engine'. This one is specialized in texts and invents wonderful word combinations, sometimes even with elements from different languages. Two more are in development for particular applications.

FC: There is a corresponding simultaneity that can be perceived in various aesthetical processes in your new work 'Improvised Tele-vision'. You are referring to Schöneberg's piece 'Verklärte Nacht'. It was recoded by Nam June Paik, who let the record run at a quarter of its normal speed, and then its recoding by Dieter Roth, who restored Schönberg's music to it original tempo by speeding up Paik's version. Then you join in, by building a platform for the 'Ultimate Intervention', upon which the user can decide which tempo to choose. That immediately reminded me of the literary theory of Harold Bloom, his so-called influence theory, according to which literary history is the product of famous writers, who each in turn take the place of their predecessor as an oedipal super-ego (laughter) … and who then manage to disconnect from him/her.

CS: Oh yes? The sub-heading for 'Improvised Tele-vision' was originally 'apparent oedipal fixation', which I then threw out again. (laughter) It was the 'apparent' which was so important to me.

FC: I guessed as much. There are – from my point of view - these tremendous artists, like Schönberg, Paik und Roth, who take each other down from the pedestal in order to put themselves on that very pedestal.

CS: Exactly. [Laughter.] By the way I've heard this theory in art history from Isabelle Graw, who uses it in a lecture about Cosima von Bonin to talk generally about female artists.

FC: …and clearly your work uses it too. You wrote yourself that you would leave open the speed at which the piece can be hear.

CS: Yes, with the exception of the original speed, which cannot be played on my platform.

FC: …with the exception of the original speed. You nevertheless write: "The decision is to be made by observer/listener and not by the composer, or an intervening artist or female artist�?. But you nevertheless set massive limits, for example by not allowing a one to one recording to be heard.

CS: Whoever wants to hear the original can get hold of it without any problems. For me what is interesting is the fact that the three artists who worked on the piece before me wanted to determine the one and only tempo possible. That is a gesture which I bypass by offering a tool by which the piece can be played at completely arbitrary speeds.

FC: Isn't the contextualisation in connection with Schönberg, Paik, Roth a defining feature? And also the decision to pack all four interventions into a room, as you did in the case of the room installation, which forms the second part of the work?

CS: Yes of course! My rhetoric about the ultimate intervention which is made possible by the internet, such as participation, interactivity and self-definition etc. is really a pure piece of irony! (laughter)

FC: Yes, that was precisely my question. Whether you really take that seriously or not!? Or whether that is just some naïve term for interactivity.

CS: It is not naïve, but rather I am making fun of it. And I take my assumptions and lead them through the room installation to the point of ad absurdum. On the four walls of another room there are portraits of all us four. They create the impression of being painted on canvas – but in fact they are nothing more than Photoshop manipulated photos – which were then actually printed onto canvas and stretched onto adjustable wooden frames. Next to each one of them there's an artist's text which refers to 'Verklärte Nacht'.

What one hears is a piece which I composed and upon which four tracks of the original by Schöneberg are laid, the version by Paik and that of Roth, which is practically the original, but not really because of the vinyl cracklings and the fact that the speed is not quite the same and is therefore not synchronous, and can only ever approximate the original. On the fourth track I play Roth's version backwards. This is also a reference to Schönberg and his later composition theory and twelve tone music, in which the melodic motives of crabs and crabs returning are played backwards. I was gobsmacked how good the playing backwards worked together with the 'Verklärten Nacht'. I then mixed these four tracks into a new piece. This music can be heard in the installation and has nothing to do with the release, the ultimate intervention, but is rather an additional variation of the composition. And I also found the visual transformation of the portraits important; that makes it clear again where I position myself and inscribe myself in the genealogy. I, as a woman, as an essentially younger woman, accuse them of arranging (Setzung), whereas I leave everything open, moan about how they put themselves on the pedestal and by doing so put myself on that very same pedestal.

FC: Precisely. But is that not the tragedy of every anti-Oedipalen intervention, that it automatically – whether it wants to or not – becomes inscribed in the Oedipal logic again? That's what I see in this piece!

CS: If that is the case, then that's definitely tragic. Probably that's the reason why I've made it into such a theme. I find the public's reaction amusing, which was partly very aggressive. I received such accusations as: "You don't want to be any different than they are�?. (laughter) What it is actually about, however, is showing the processes involved, how it functions. That I cannot extract myself from it, if I want to be inside, is logical. And that is a decision that I made. Nevertheless I want to know and reflect on what the conditions are – in other words, I want to make that precisely my theme. If that is intolerable, then I can always step back. But I lack the belief that a real alternative is possible. As long as I manage to handle this, like how I'm handling it now, then I find it acceptable. It is a state of being simultaneously inside and outside.

Another example for this, which once again leads us back to the market compatibility of net art, is the invitation of a five-star hotel to partly decorate their interiors. Actually I was always fairly sure that I was the last possible artist anyone would invite for such a task. But it did interest me and I began to experiment with this. Fortunately I had the net art generators which could produce for me, which meant I just had to find a way to materialize the 'products' being created. Normally I print on canvas or paper and frame everything. That's how I create a series or photo series, and it is astonishing what actually transpires. It is through the arranging however that I manage to tell stories, which of course is massive manipulation. In that way I find the idea of the rematerialization of net art interesting – by packing it into accessible formats and then seeing what happens. I started by being convinced that it was not actually possible. The whole episode took place with a fair bit of raised eyebrows. However, I extended the idea further at my first gallery exhibition that I recently had in Malmö (Sweden). And it was overwhelming to see what the images were like and how they were flushed out of the unconscious of the net and onto the surface.

FC: Is that still concept art?

CS: Yes, of course. At least for me it is. I have now offered the hotel to let me do series for them. I insist that my images are hung in endless rows in a long corridor (which for other artists would be an interesting place). And of course I hope to make a good deal on it: first of all the money on offer is interesting. But over and above that, this will be the first sale in the history of net art that is worth mentioning! [laughter].

FC: That reminds me a little bit of Manzoni and his strategy in the fifties to sell air in tin cans…

CS: Yes, whereby I don't sell air, rather real images (laughter). What is interesting however is that there is no printing technology involved which insures that the images remain in tact. They might well pale over time. I sell them as products, though in a few years they could very well be just white paper, which I also find an attractive thought. (laughter)

FC: And with that you once again have an Oedipal reference to Dieter Roth, who came up with the chocolate objects in the sixties and which are now preserved by specialised restorateurs…()

CS: Yes, or the work with rubbish and bacteria. The ephemeral is a very important aspect. And the example of the hotel was a successful masterstroke for two reasons. One because I received money, which is always important, and two, because I set an example to the net art colleagues who lease or sell their web sites for ridiculously cheap sums.

FC: I want to try to make the jump from here to cyberfeminism, which is difficult… let's start with the key word "strategy�?Š

C.S: I can say what this term means to me or how I work with it, and maybe in that way we can build a bridge.

FC: Perhaps I should begin like this: what always troubled me with the term 'Cyberfeminism' was less the 'feminism' than the prefix 'cyber'. Does that have to be?

CS: [laughter] That's amazing! If the feminism had troubled you I could have related to that. (laughter) But you seem to be PC… (laughter). The theme 'Cyber': that is "what it is all about". I first heard about Cyberfeminism rolling off the tongue of Geert Lovink, and I said to him: what kind of nonsense is that? That was back then when everything went 'Cyber': 'Cybermoney' 'Cyberbody' etc.

FC: Yes exactly.

CS: I pigeonholed it together with all that and treated it like it was utter nonsense. But the term lodged itself in the back of mind without me knowing what it is. Then I asked Geert again what it meant and if he could send me a few references.

FC: [Laughter.]

CS: But there was virtually nothing available in 1995/96. He sent me sure enough a reference from Sadie Plant and VNS Matrix – and 'Innen', which was a female artist group which I was in myself. He sent me back quasi my own name as a reference. That was a real little surprise. That he had done this was definitely no coincidence. So I thought to myself, OK, I assume he knows [laughter] which references he sent to me. I kept mulling over that in my mind. Then came the invitation to 'Hybrid Workshop' at the documenta x. Once again Geert was

involved. He wanted me to plan a week or block – not on Cyberfeminism, but rather on one or other female issue. And this invitation was the catalyst for me to start working on the term 'Cyberfeminism'. By then I had found real pleasure in it and discovered that there was an enormous potential was involved and which both Sadie Plant or VNS Matrix had not capitalized on. They had only dabbled in a few areas.

What is interesting in Cyberfeminism is that the term is a direct reference to feminism, which means it also has a clearly political agenda. On the other hand though, due to this disastrous prefix, which sure enough is a real burden and very loaded, it also shows that there is something else there, an additional new dimension. That this 'Cyber' is present does not mean that much – apart from the fact that in all this hype it worked quite well. Taking a pre-fix that has popped up out of a good deal of hype, and what's more using it and attaching it to something else, creates a real power. Especially when everyone cries out (apart from you of course), Oh my God – feminism! It was this potential not to begin again from scratch with feminism, but to find a new point of departure – as well as the motivation to get people to begin engaging again with this term. Theoretically we could have made an attempt to redefine feminism. But History is simply too prominent and the negative Image too powerful.

FC: The difficulty I have with this no doubt stems from an academic point of view. We are in the midst of a discussion about net culture, which includes mailing lists like Netttime and other forums, where one no longer has to discuss the absurdity of 'Cyber' terminology. That's been done. Then along comes something that one knows is not to be taken completely seriously. However when I set foot in academic circles, I found myself being criticized – like I was at the German Studies Conference – for deconstructing dispositively the terms 'cyber'/'hyper'/'virtuel' which are still used there as discursive coordinates. These terms have gathered their own dynamic and have been written down and canonized for at least the next ten years. And it is precisely here that 'Cyberfeminism' fits in, as a term which does not sound so experimental or ironic when one puts it into the context of something like Cultural Studies.

CS: But what do you mean? Is that actually a problem?

FC: Well, isn't it the problem that one thereby creates a discourse which in academic operating systems can gather its own dynamic and then vanish?

CS: …in that case, yes. I fully support you there.

FC: Another problem: what always becomes very apparent in the context of Feminism when one reviews its History from the Sufragettes to Beauvoir to the difference feminism of the seventies right up to Gender Studies is that 'Feminism' as such does not actually exist.

CS: No, that's obvious.

FC: There's an anthology of American feminist theory, which sensibly uses the title 'Feminisms' – uses the plural. Shouldn't it also be called 'Cyberfeminism'?

CS: It's been called that often. For example in the editorial of the second Reader it's referred to as 'new Cyberfeminism' and then 'Cyberfeminisms'. Or in a definition by Yvonne Volkart: 'Cyberfeminism is a myth and in a myth resides the truth, or that, which it engages with is the difference between the individual stories/approaches. I feel those are really good definitions of Cyberfeminisms and are not anti-definitions.

FC: You set up the cyberfeminist 'Old Boys Network', whose Internet Domain is registered in your name. Due to your organisation the 'Cyberfeminist International' had its first gathering at the documenta x. Is the impression I have right that it is still a group or a discourse consisting mainly of women who are active in net art culture?

CS: No, that's not right. We did have our first big gathering at the documenta, but even here in this documenta, the different contexts modified everything. Not only the art world, but also the media scene for example.

In the 'Old Boys Network' we had always tried out different organisational forms. An ideal form does not exist. One has to somehow organize network, because it doesn't do so by itself. Finally however there was no form that functioned really well, which meant we always had to conceive of new forms. For a while we had what could be identified as a 'core group' of five to six names. From those less than half were female artists. There is always a predominance of already established theory, from the female literary experts to the female art history experts…

FC: That refers to theory that situates itself in the context of art. But that reeks as ever of net art.

CS: For me personally that's correct. But there are many people in the OBN who would refuse to see it that way. Our goal was always manifold. Our main idea was not to formulate a content with a political goal. Instead we said that our organizational structure was as important as the content. To be a cyberfeminist also makes demands on us to work on the structure and not just to turn up at conferences and hold a seminar paper. On the contrary, it means to tend to financial matters, or to make a website, a publication or create an event – hence to engage in developing structures. 'Politics of dissent' is a very important term. It means placing the most varied points of departure next to each other, finding a form for them so that they can coexist and act as a force field to set something going. That's why we tried to incorporate women from the CCC – female hackers – as well as female computer experts.

Fourteen days ago at the third 'Cyberfeminist International', for the first time there were several women from Asia, as well as women from 'Indymedia' [The anit-globalisation news network]. It is very important to keep extending the connections.

FC: I find it very interesting that you talk so much about structures when I ask you about the term Cyberfeminism. Is it then just another platform, another system that you have programmed generatively as an experiment to see what will happen?

CS: That's pretty extreme, but yes one could say that. When I was asked to define Cyberfeminism, what was always important for me was building structures, and like the Old Boy Network disseminating the idea through marketing strategies.

FC: In 1997 Josephine Bosma asked you in an interview: "Do you think there are any specific issues for women online?" – and you answered: "No, I don't think so really".

CS: [Laughter.] I still believe that.

FC: Yes? – That was my question.

CS: After four and a half years of Cyberfeminism and contexts such as 'Women and the Medias', and a round of lectures, presentations and workshops, I've come to the conclusion that one can divide this area into two areas. One is the area of 'access', meaning, whether women have access to knowledge and technology, and which is a social problem. The second area is if the access exists, and the skills are there, what happens on the net or with this medium? What factors determine WHAT is made? About that there's very little which is convincing. Mostly it is a lot of arid ill-defined essentialist crap, with which I want to have little to do with because it reaffirms the already existing and unfavorable conditions rather triggering something new. Feminist media theory that extends beyond this would find a place on the market.

FC: The phrase 'essentialist crap': is my assumption right that your focus of attention on systems and the rules of games, and games in particular which you create in order to watch what will happen – whether that is Cyberfeminism or net art generating, and for which the output will be submitted in a competition – can be see as an anti-essentialist strategy, which includes your appropriation, plagiarizing and taking of already existing material?

CS: There are not that few female artists who take as their point of departure the idea that women have to develop their own aesthetic in order to counteract the dominant order of things. I've always had problems with that and didn't know what that could be without predicating myself again in strict roles and definitions. That is the problem with essentialism.

The difference can also be turned around again quite easily – even when I describe it. I think that doesn't take us anywhere. Besides one of the miseries of identity politics that was developed by certain communities and groups was that its actual intentions have completely been turned around. They have become target-groups for niche markets, and being, for example gay, has become a life style.

FC: That would apply to the art referred to in the two volume Suhrkamp Anthology 'Women in Art' by Gislind Nabakowski, Helke Sander and Peter Gorsen…

CS: I don't know it [laughter]…

FC: …or such art as Kiki Smith's, which I see as the antithesis to your art.

CS: Could be. My problem at present is nevertheless that the theme, Cyberfeminism, has to some extent driven me into the so-called 'women's corner'. What would be a broader definition and would include a more extensive notion of my art is hardly taken into consideration. That is why I am determined to take on other themes. The work with Schöneberg was the first step to expanding the spectrum – although as ever I still like to surround myself with many great women. [laughter]…
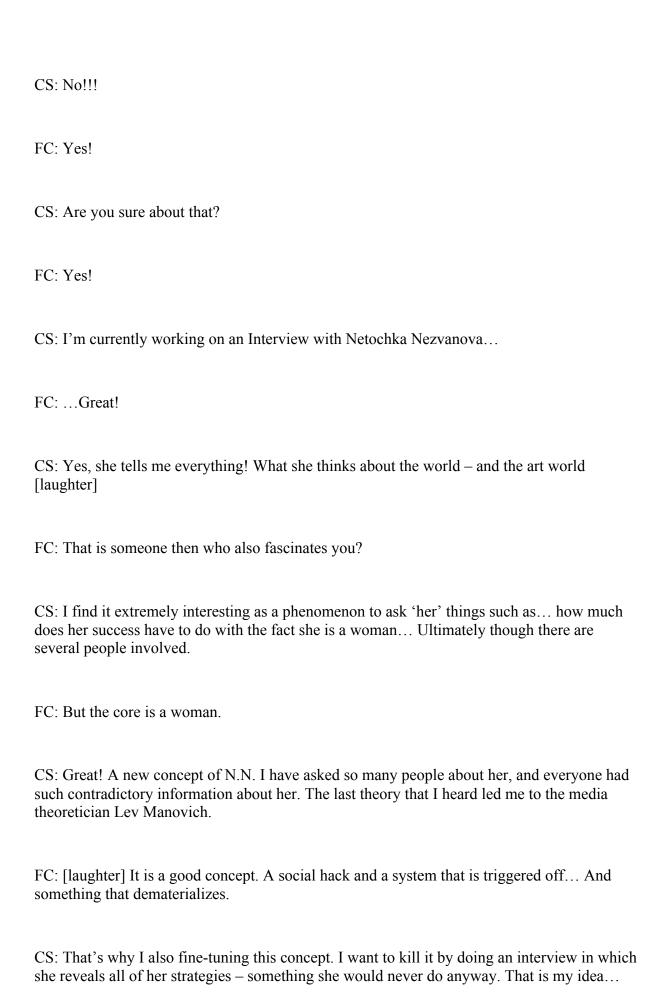
FC: When you say that you want to come out of the Cyberfeminist corner, I have to ask myself whether – as in the Schöneberg installation – your anti-essentialist strategy of constructing and producing from given systems and situations and plagiarizing, nevertheless has a feminist component?

CS: It always has that anyway, because I have a feminist consciousness and engage with the art operating system as such, irrespective of what I do. That was the case in 'Female Extension' and it is always implicit.

FC: What I have noticed is that women are amply represented in the code experimentation of net art.

CS: Yes?

FC: From what I've seen, yes. Jodi for example is a masculine-feminine couple, the same goes for 0100101110111001.org. Then springs to mind mez/Mary Anne Breeze or antiorp/Netochka Nezvanova, which we now know has a woman from New Zealand forming the core group.

CS: No!!!

FC: Yes!

CS: Are you sure about that?

FC: Yes!

CS: I'm currently working on an Interview with Netochka Nezvanova…

FC: …Great!

CS: Yes, she tells me everything! What she thinks about the world – and the art world [laughter]

FC: That is someone then who also fascinates you?

CS: I find it extremely interesting as a phenomenon to ask 'her' things such as… how much does her success have to do with the fact she is a woman… Ultimately though there are several people involved.

FC: But the core is a woman.

CS: Great! A new concept of N.N. I have asked so many people about her, and everyone had such contradictory information about her. The last theory that I heard led me to the media theoretician Lev Manovich.

FC: [laughter] It is a good concept. A social hack and a system that is triggered off… And something that dematerializes.

CS: That's why I also fine-tuning this concept. I want to kill it by doing an interview in which she reveals all of her strategies – something she would never do anyway. That is my idea…

FC: In your interview with 0100101110111001.org you were pretty tough on both of them – which by the way I thought was good – because of your discussion of 'biennale.py'-Computervirus. You promised that out of it an aesthetic code-attitude would emerge which is not really interpretative, because no one can read the code. Would you nevertheless not admit that this intervention was a form of 'social hacking'?

CS: Of course. That's what it is first of all. The way how the code has been aestheticized is secondary, something that happened more by mistake because the artists probably had not thought so much about the traps of the art systems before. The virus clearly was a social hack. And it would have already been sufficient to call it ‚virus'. Even if the code would not have worked or would have been just some nonesense it would not have done any harm to the project.

FC: Is it then necessary to use labels like ‚net art' at all when the medium is not so relevant?

CS: I think it makes sense to use such labels at the start, when a new medium is being introduced, and actual changes come along with it; in the phase where the actual medium is explored like jodi did for example with the web/net, or Nam June Paik with video.

You could compare it with video art — which is in this sense a predecessor of net art. I don't think that it is useful any longer to talk of ‚video art'. The ways how video is being used today are established and it becomes more meaningful to refer to contents. That is, by the way, the problem of the whole thing called ‚media art'‹ too much media, too little art…

FC: Looking at your art, isn't it the case that projects like the net.art generator develop their concept, their systems of ‚social hacks' from the media?

CS: That's true in this case. But it is not necessarily the way I work. The term ‚net.art' functioned also as a perfect marketing tool. And it worked until the moment it gained the success it had headed for. Then everything collapsed. [laughter]

FC: Would it be possible for you to work in any context? We met here at the annual conference of the Chaos Computer Club. But would it also be possible to meet at the annual congress of stamp collectors, and this would be the social system you would intervene?

CS: Theoretically, yes. [laughter] I think anyone who managed to get along with the hackers, the hacker culture doesn't shrink back from anything — not even stamp collectors or garden plot holders.

FC: … or hotel corridors.

CS: No, theoretically a lot is possible, but not practically. My interest is not just formal and not only directed towards the operating system. It is an important aspect, but when the arguments and the people within the system are of no interest for me, I can hardly imagine to work there.

FC: That would mean at the hacker's convention your reference would be that people here play with systems, and critically think about systems?

CS: And what's also interesting for me is the fact that hackers are independent experts, programers, who work for the sake of programming, and are not in services of economy or politics. That's the crucial point for me. And that's also the reason why hackers are an important source of information for me.

FC: But that takes us straight back to the classical concept of the autonomous artist coined in the 18th century, the freelance genius. He is no longer employed, and gets no commissions, but is independent and does not have to follow a given set of rules.

CS: Maybe you're right, and my image of a hacker has in fact a lot to do with such an image of the artist. But reflecting upon the role of art in society in general, I would prefer to consider art as autonomous, to considering the individual artist as autonomous — given that the idea of autonomy per se is problematic. The idea of art as observing, positioning oneself, commenting, trying to open up different perspectives on what is going on in society is what I prefer. And that is exactly what is endangered. The contradictory thing about autonomy is that someone has to protect/finance it. And it is most comfortable when governments do so, like it was common here in Germany over the last decades. I think this ensures the most freedom. Examples which illustrate my theory are Pop Art and New Music; in the 60s and 70s artists from all over the world came to Germany because here was public funding, and facilities to work which existed nowhere else. I consider it as one of the tasks of a government to provide money for culture. And the development we are facing at the moment is disasterous.

A short time ago somebody asked me how I would imagine the art of the future, and after thinking for a while I got the image of a an open-plan office, packed with artists who work there, all looking the same and getting paid by whatever corporation; the image of art which is completely taken over and submitted to the logics of economy. This does not mean that I would reject all corporate sponsoring, but it should not become to influential.

FC: Doesn't the electronic artist make the running for the others, because they are so extremely dependent on technology?

CS: Absolutely, and I think this is really a major problem. They make the running for the others…

FC: … but in a purely negative sense.

CS: Basically yes. It is a difficult field to play on. Some artists are thinking of work-arounds, like low-tech, and as another example, I would highly appreciate if ars electronica, which obviously suffers from a lack of ideas and inspiration, would choose the topic of Free Software. They could do without their corporate sponsors, and only give prizes to pieces which are produced with the use of Free Software. It would be really exciting to see what you can do with it.

FC: But not to forget that Free Software is also dependent from corporate sponsors. You almost don't find any major Free Software project where no big companies are involved – directly or indirectly trying to bring an influence to bear.

CS: At the latest with the distribution …

FC: Yes, but it starts already with the development. The GNU C-Compiler for example belongs to Red Hat, IBM invests billions in developping Linux further, and these are, of course strategic investments. Almost every well-known free developer receives his salary cheque from some corporation.

CS: Are you saying that Free Software, in the end, is nothing but another utopia?

FC: No, I wouldn't say it's an utopia which does not become true. The code always stays free, and even if there's a recession, the developers are able to work quite self-determined. – But I do not believe that this equals the type of the autonomous artist.

CS: We are mixing up several things now. Hackerdom for example is not a profession. A hacker may be employee in a company, but this has nothing to do with being a hacker. And here you can make comparisons with art. How about being an artist: Is it a profession or not? Would I still be an artist even if I would make my money by practising a different job?

I am organized in the German trade union for media workers–in the department for artists–and am interested how generic interests of artists can be represented. Being an artist should be an acknowledged profession, secure, and insured like the Social Insurance for artists does here in Germany (Künstersozialkasse). But this point does conflict a lot with the idea of autonomy. I am not sure myself how it can go together. Although, I basically insist on my professional rights, it often seems to contradict the status of being autonomous. And this uncertainty of the artists very often gets abused, by treating artist unprofessionally, and exploiting them shamelessly.

FC: A while ago you have said that you contradicted Gerfried Stocker when he equated art with creativity. Being an artist is a profession for you, and therefore a definable and distinguishable subsystem of society. This would also be an anti-thesis to the ‚expanded art' idea ['erweiterten Kunstbegriff'] à la Fluxus—and to Joseph Beuys' idea of "Everyone is an artist�?.[Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler.]

FC: I would simply add ‚potential'. I think there shouldn't be any mechanism or criteria which includes certain people per se, but certainly not everyone is an artist, although everyone could be an artist. But most people don't feel any desire to become an artist anyway.

[At his point we switched off the tape recorder and kept on talking about the necessity of doing things on the one hand side, and discarding them again on the other hand. During that the conversation turned to Neoism and its internal quarrels.]

CS: Such quarrels can become very existential, very exhausting, and weakening. Things tend to become incredibly authentic — something I try to avoid otherwise.

FC: But this is important. When I hear standard accusations, saying that dealing with systems, disrupting systems through plagiarism, fakes, and manipulation of signs, is boring postmodern stuff, lacking existential hardness, my only answer is that people who say this, never tried to practise it consequently. Especially, on a personal level, it can be deadly. You have mentioned the group `-Innen' before, a group you have obviously been part of in the early 90s, before the days of net.art…

CS: Yes, this was in '93-96.

FC: And, if I get it right, it was also a ‚multiple identity' concept.

CS: Yes, and although we handled it very playful and ironic, it started to become threatening — so much that we had to give it up. We had practised the ‚becoming one person' to an

extreme by looking exactly the same, and even our language was standardized. And then we felt like escaping from each other, and not meeting the others any more.

FC: Is this the point where art potentially becomes religious or a sect?

CS: Maybe, if you don't quit.

FC: … if you don't quit. I am thinking of Otto Muehl and his commune…

CS: That is exactly the point where you have leave and go for the unknown, leave the defined sector, and reinvent yourself – which might be not so easy. To do this together, in or with the group is almost impossible. There's probably some marriages which realize to do so, to reinvent themselves and their relationship permanently, to keep it vivid (vital). But with more people than two it's too much.

FC: Are your projects kind of marriages for you, or sects or groups?

CS: Well, it has a lot in common. That's amazing! It starts already with the reliabiliy, which must be there. Because nothing works, if there is not a certain degree of reliability, also regarding the dynamics, how roles are assigned or how people choose them.

FC: Designing such systems also has something to do with control and loosing control, right? In the beginning you're the designer, you define the rules, but then you get involved and become part of the game yourself, and the time has come to quit.

CS: Well, certainly I do have my ideas and concepts, but the others might have different ones. The whole thing comes to an end when the debates and arguments aren't productive any longer. With the ‚Old Boys Network' we are currently experimenting with the idea to release our label. To think through what that actually means was a painful process. You think:�?Oh god, maybe somebody will abuse it, do something really aweful and stupid with it. That's shit.�? But if we want to be consequent, we have to live with that. And the moment comes where you have to learn to change the relation you have towards your own construct—what might be difficult.

FC: What was the case with ‚Improved Tele-vision', where the system already had been set? As far as I can see, this work was the first where you did not design the system yourself, but engaged in an already existing process.

CS: Yes, that's why it was so easy for me.[laughter] I didn't have to work too hard on that one.[laughter]

FC: Can you imagine to consciously leave ‚Old Boys Network?'

CS: Oh yes — meanwhile!

FC: … and ignoring it for like three years — or longer — and after that period trying to engage again, but with an artistic approach which is observing, like in ‚Improved Television'…

CS: Sounds like a good idea, but I am afraid it would not work. My presumptious idea is, that three years after I have left, OBN would not exist any longer. [laughter]

CS: At the same time it is a generic name. ‚Old Boys Networks' have always been around; usually, they are not exactly feminist. [laughter]

CS: One big trap for us was, that we called it ‚network', although it actually functioned as a group. And we refused to realize that for too long. OK, there is the associated network of hundreds of boys, but the core is a group.

FC: But this seems to be a very popular self-deception within the so-called net cultures. I also say that also ‚nettime' and the net culture it supposedly represented was nothing but a group, at least until 1998.

CS: And that is the only way it works. There's no alternative way how a network can come into being. At some point there have to be condensations, and commitments. And ‚networks' dont require a lot of commitment.

FC: So, how do network and system relate in your understanding?

CS: I think a system is structured and defined more clearly, and has obvious rules and players. A network tends to be more open, more loose.

FC: Now, I would like to know, if in your view, systems as well as networks necessarily have a social component. One could claim that purely technical networks as well as purely technical systems do exist. Your work alternatively intervenes in social and technical networks. But, in the end, your intervention always turns out to be a social one. Can you think of networks and systems—referring to the definition you just have given—without social participation?

CS: Not, not at all. Because the rules or the regulating structure always is determined by somebody. Like computer programs are often mistaken as something neutral. ‚Microsoft Word' for exampel. Everyone assumes it just can be the way ‚Word' it is. But that's not the case. It could be completely different.

FC: … as Matthew Fuller has analyzed in his text Text "It looks like you're writing a letter: Microsoft Word" in every detail…

CS: Yes, there are endless individual decisions involved — decisions of the programmer, and from the person who designs the program, and decides how and where to lead the user, and to manipulate the user, making him/her doing certain things.

FC: There's also earlier experiments within art, on designing self-regulating systems. Hans Haacke has bulit in the 60' his ‚Condensation Cube', made of glass. On it's side-walls water condensates corresponding to the amount of people who are in the same room. Such a thing would not be of any interest for you?

CS: No, I don't think so. It is also typical for a lot of generative art that one system is being transformed into another one. I find this totally boring. For me, it is important that the intervention sets an impulse which results in — or at least aims for a change.