A movement must have a direction

An e-mail interview with Cornelia Sollfrank by Tiziano Bonini
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T.B.: Is the cyber feminist movement still alive? Can it be called a real movement?

C.S.: I would like to quote the German feminist film maker Helke Sander at this point, who said: "A movement requires a direction." In this sense, there never was something like a cyberfeminist movement, because the directions — and also motivations — of the individual agents were too diverse. But there definitely is a cyberfeminist community, built around certain knots; one of them is the old boys network. And like everything which is alive and living, it is in a state of permanent change.

T.B.: What are the actual common projects, appointments, acts of the movement?

C.S.: As I said above, talking about a movement does not really hit the point. Movement implies to formulate political goals in a very traditional understanding of politics. And at least old boys network tends to be more an art project than anything else, or a political organisation but in an expanded sense of what politics is. Nevertheless it is interesting to search for agreements, or to formulate common interests and issues within the cyberfeminist community. What I can say from the network I am involved with, is that our agreement mainly concerns the organisatorial structure of our network. "The Mode is the Message — the Code is the Collective!" is the basis of all the work obn has done so far. On our website you can read the four rules in the FAQ section. Most important for me always was, to understand our network not as an ideological setting, but as a platform which offers space for contradictory approches and so fosters a debate, a discourse. "With regard to its contents - the elaborations of 'cyberfeminisms' - our aim is the principle of disagreement!" So one could conclude that our common projects were about building an ideology-free communication infrastructure.

T.B.: Do you think that women have gained benefits from new technologies as internet or have these instruments worked for women as new instruments of repression and injustice? I mean, do you think that the women of every day, of the road (and not the tech-aware community of the cyberfeminists) are using the technology for improving their life and their social, political, economical, intellectual conditions, or they are just passively exposed to the myth of technology (that is a male-myth)?

C.S.: The question is almost too general to be answered. It is a sociological debate in the end. Of course, it has to do with access; access to technology, to bandwidth, to knowledge. Certainly people all people, not just women who have no access to the new communication

technologies can not make any benefits from it. How should they? I do not belong to the fraction of techno-determinists like Sadie Plant who talk of a feminisation of society which comes along with horizontal communication structures. This is nothing but naive, and serves to cover the actual social and political situation. There is cyberfeminist knots, for example in Bruxelles the 'digitales' festival, which exactly stress this point and offer special workshops for unprivileged people, especially women from socially weak background. So, an educational aspect of Cyberfeminism certainly helps to deal with this problem, but not all cyberfeminist share this concern.

T.B.: Women and art (electronic art).

I think your work, Female Extension, was a nice demonstration of how stupid and sexist can be the art system. Has something changed from that time?

C.S.: My hack into the competition certainly undermined the authority of the institution, because the whole world was laughing about it. In terms of art world versus net.art quite some progres has been made. The institutions better know now what they deal with, and can decide whether they want to or not take responsibilty for such an uneasy kind of art.

T.B.: Have women gained more respectability and visibility in the world of art?

C.S.: Yes and no. Generally western societies try to become more fair, at least on the paper. In times of crisis ususally backlash is taking place which one can clearly witness at the moment, in society in general, but also in the art world. The sick male genius has become a desireable model again to serve the needs of bourgeois decadent collectors and art world managers. Interestingly the term genius never has been attached to 'female'. Which leads directly to your next question.

T.B.: Moreover, what does it mean for a cyberfeminist making art, wether digital or not? Cyberfeminist art is subversive? It's just made to provoke? Has a social aim? Or it means nothing and wants to be nothing, as Tzara said for dadaism? To which "philosophy" (if we can use this term) of art, to which aesthetical practice, or just artistic mood, attitude, you feel closer?

C.S.: If an artsist says his/her art is meant to mean nothing, like Tzara, does not mean that it really means nothing. Dada is the best example. If an art project would claim to have first of all a social goal, I would question if it is an art project. If you want to use the term subversion, I would say, my art or cyberfeminist art reflects on political and social power structures but with means of art. In that sense it is art, but also has a social impact. More important than provocation, which is another thing closely related to bourgeoisie, I would like to name irony and masquerade as strategies.

T.B.: Would it be possible or correct to talk of a 'cyberfeminist ethic'?

C.S.: I think it would not make much sense to talk of an ethic, as an ethic is a set of obliging rules for many individuals. And although the starting point may be the same or a similar one for all cyberfeminists structural discrimination in 3rd millenium there is many varying cyberfeminist answers to the question: "What shall we do?".

T.B.: What is the difference between women 'engaged' in the seventies and you?

C.S.: Well, there is even women who were engaged in the 70s, who now call themselves cyberfeminists, for example Faith Wilding. From my point of view as a kind of late 70s feminist (I am 42 years old today) I would say that there is several differences: 1. The rhetoric has changed. Today people are more aware that generalisations about 'men' and 'women' are not necessarily productive. 2. The standpoint has changed. One basic assumption of the 70s feminists was that women are victimized in our socitey. Today younger women do not want this victimisation as a starting point. They want to feel strenght, beauty and power, and fight fom there. 3. Many concerns which were not given in the 70s are now implemented in society (although that differs from country to county): birth control, abortion, legal right for same payment etc.

T.B.: And what is the difference between you and the women of today that you meet in the streets? I mean, I read the biographies of the members of OBN and I realized that most of you are sort of ubiquitous women, living in more places and cities at the same time, with a long experience in the universities, in the art academies, in the works of the 'electronic society'.

C.S.: It is still a privilege to get good education, but it is also hard work. All cyberfeminists I know are working like crazy, and not just in terms of their individual career, but also for idealistic goals like sharing knowledge, creating mutual support systems, contributing from where they work to develop new social models.

T.B.: You, old boyz, seem to be highly alphabetized and comfortably living in the wired society, but, what about the rest of the women?

C.S.: I cannot answer for all old boyz, but just for me. I don't live too comfotably, because for almost all work I do I am not getting paid. I feel responsibilty not just for the 'rest' of the women but for all underprivileged people. And I have choosen art as my profession which is highly suitable as mindopener for people over here. Other people have other professions, journalists for example, and use other means.

T.B.: I refer not only to those women who build the computers in Thailand or recycle them in China for a miserable salary, but also to the western women in general. Is your kind of feminism able to hit the off-line world, and how, or it is destined to be an autoreferential game? Or this is not one of your aims?

C.S.: Again there is a variety of approaches. There is cyberfeminists taking care and disseminating information about labour exploitation in 3rd world countries Ursula Biemann, subrosa for example, I myself was teaching students about anti-corporate art and activism as another example. Unfortunately none of us has a patent remedy to save the world exactly here and now, and completely. I know this is frustrating, and sorry for not giving you any false promises. But beware of people who pretend to have the right answers!

T.B.: Cyberfeminism is against what? The war? The financial globalization? The male-rooted society? The art system? Copyright of the softwares, of the art product, of the knowledge? Cyberfeminism is in favour of what?

C.S.: Cyberfeminism is AGAINST black-and-white thinking, against falsifying simplifications, against patent remedies. Cyberfeminism is FOR good weather, good sex, good food, and good music:-)