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Interview with Cornelia Sollfrank by Alessandro Ludovico

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A.L.: With the all-girl -*Innen* group you performed the intervention titled 'New Media - Old Roles' at the Computer Fair *CeBit*, Hannover, in 1996. Dressed in fake 'uniforms' you approached male sales managers, distributing a free mousepad with multiple-choice questions about sex, technology, and gender roles. Intervening in the IT core temple of propaganda this gesture of 'actionist simulationism' you were questioning the future-oriented technologies with so traditional role models. Don't you think that almost a decade of practices later, it should have become more popular to disrupt the 'monolithic' illusion of 'personal infinite empowering' still inoculated by techno marketing?

C.S.: A few months before the fair, we had found out that 2000 prostitutes would be brought from Thailand to Hannover especially for the *CeBit* IT fair. The combination of female prostitution and the male-dominated IT business created a very strong image in our minds, and we wanted to respond to that. Our camouflage as convention hostesses allowed us to get very close – even inside – the belly of the beast. We looked neat, and with a smile on our faces we handed out those mousepads. The format was inspired by a questionnaire which has been developed by a psychologist studying men who go and see prostitutes. There are very personal questions about childhood and sexuality, and we combined them with fragments from the computer world. "Who taught you the facts of life? Mother, father, CD-ROM, Internet?" "Has your computer ever faked an orgasm with you? Yes, No, I am not sure." "How affectionate are you with your computer? Do you: stroke, kiss, fondle it, run your fingers through its keys, lovingly wipe its' screen, hold the mouse in a grip of passion?" On the two different mouse pads we had 12 questions like this. It's hard to explain what happened at CeBit. We didn't experience any direct aggression, but on the documentary photographs, one can see the mens' faces when they look at the mousepads …

Regarding your question, I would say that our approach of bringing together feminism and a critique of technology which is driven by anti-capitalism, was and still is rare. After the Internet bubble of the 90s had burst there even seemed to be no need for critique, because the whole IT sector seemed to be very depressed. Now we are experiencing the second wave of IT-propaganda. The euphoria with which *Web 2.0* or *Second Life* get promoted – or hyped – is part of the next bubble. It is all about platforms and that the users create the content. But the intersting question is: who provides these spaces, and for what reasons? What are the conditions for using them, and who makes the rules? The big success of these platforms demonstrates a need for sharing and expression. "Express yourself, we own you," might be the cyncial subtitle of this bubble, but in many cases, obviously, people do not care to be owned.

Maybe 0100101110101101.org should also reenact some old –*Innen* performances in *Second Life*, or rather, if they don't want to contribute to Linden Labs' profit, they could even do it in first life.

A.L.: You were one of the main driving forces behind the seminal events: *first Cyberfeminist International* (1997 at the Hybrid Space in Documenta X), *next Cyberfeminist International* (1999 in Rotterdam) and *very Cyberfeminist International* (2001, in Hamburg). Moreover, you were also one of the founders of the cyberfeminist *Old Boys Network* (*OBN*). Almost a decade later, what's the heritage of all those efforts, and what has changed in the technology/feminist relationship?

C.S.: Before I start to talk about a "heritage", I would like to explain MY concept of Cyberfeminism, simply because there is no such thing as one Cyberfeminism. It has always only existed in plural.
For me it was an experimental setting, an investigation of the relation between language and act, between form and content, and also between art and politics. There was no political agenda in the classical sense, no definition of the term Cyberfeminism. The question was, if and how, and what effects could be created by simply promoting such an artificial term? There were some loose associations inspired by the prefix "cyber" and the good old "feminism." The rest was up to the individuals. What *OBN* did was provide the platforms (sounds like *Web 2.0* !) for bringing all the diverse ideas together on the same website and – from time to time – in the same room. For me, the content was the process of organizing, reflecting and constantly changing the structures which would allow communication and discussion between all these different people and ideas. The setting was pretty autonomous and nomadic, outside academia and the art world, exploring different locations and contexts, but never building a definite form and structure ourselves. Unfortunately, not many people understood and shared this view, so there was a permanent struggle to outfit Cyberfeminism with a – meaning THE – proper political agenda – which for me was not the aim. I considered politics being implicit in our way of working, developing content through the reflection of the form—HOW we do things. For some academics, especially, who are used to producing new content within a hierarchical setting, and without having the chance to look at and question the parameters of their framework, this approach caused a kind of hysteria…

The heritage is, that, in the end, Cyberfeminism has surrendered to academia. Thus we simply share the destiny of all other feminisms. At least, we have invented a new field of working for exactly these academics. Unfortunately, I can't see much other practice. There are only few traces of cyberfeminist spirit alive and informing small organisations, events or artistic production. One of them, and my favourite one, is *constant* in Brussels. (www.constantvzw.com)

A.L.: You made another quite famous double performance during the *Chaos Computer Congress* in 2000. First, screening your documentary of *Clara S0pht*, a female hacker, that you revealed being a fake only after being publicly attacked by the (male) audience that complained about not defending sufficiently her privacy in the video interview. Then purposely 'forgot' there a *Persona* electronic device for calculating fertile days in a woman's cycle that passed unrecognized for its functionalities and was posted in the 'lost and found' congress webpage. What's your concept of 'hacking' today? Is the 'female hacker' still a vanishing species?

There are more women involved nowadays in the hacker scene than in 2000, but the 'woman hacker' as a species is still a phantom. And this non-existence has always represented the limited emancipatory potential of the hacker scene. The so-called techno underground is a male white thing, and in many respects not so different from *CeBit*… And how about the free software movement? Are you aware that less than 1% of free software has been written by females!? If you want to know what the relation of women
and technolgy is in the 21st century, this number explains everything. It bores me to death to repeat these things over and over again. Instead I am looking for a more promising environment to live in than the hacker scene.

The idea of inventing fake female hackers and interviewing them was born after 9 months of research. I was trying to find a few, but the whole research turned out to be really frustrating, and I did not want to finish my work without turning it to something positive. To invent the characters, to write and shoot the fake interviews was great fun; and it was even better to screen them at some hackers' meetings and discuss with the audience. And maybe my fake female hackers helped a bit to pave the way for the real ones…

Although the very technique of hacking goes back a long way before the times of computer, the common use of the metaphor 'hacking' has only become popular after the 1980s when some famous hacks have stimulated fantasies about the almighty intruder. And in fact, for many years, I found the hacking metaphor very useful to explain and understand my own way of working as an artist. It is interesting to find out and exploit the weak points of systems, all kind of systems. Many systems stay invisible until they get attacked; only when they react and start to protect themselves does their very nature become visible. But this perspective is only one of many with regard to aspects of hacking. For me, it simply feels like the the days of hacking are over. It's 1980s. We need something else. What catches my attention at the moment is boxing! The one by one situation, confrontative, clearly being a fight, having a defined enemy and the only goal to bring him/her down, totally fascinates me. It is a change of perspective, on eyelevel with your enemy, the pleasure of confrontation. Differenciated thinking alone is not enough. I am thinking of how we can reanimate dichotomy as such as a productive, as a performative concept.

A.L.: In your work *Improved Tele-vision* you were referring to *Verklärte Nacht*, a piece by Arnold Schönberg. In 1977 Nam June Paik recorded this piece at 1/4 speed on vinyl to express his frustration with Schönberg, while some years later Dieter Roth restored the original tempo speeding up Paik's version. Your work was to build a platform for the 'Ultimate Intervention' to let the user choose which tempo he/she prefers. Was this reflecting the personal possibility of writing participative history and definitions thanks to electronic networked media?

C.S.: Actually, I was not so much referring to the music piece itself but more to my colleagues Paik and Roth and their interventions. Paik hated *Verklärte Nacht* because it was so Wagnerian and not the Avantgarde he had expected from reading about twelve tone music. And Roth was a big admirer of Schönberg and could not allow Paik to ruin the piece by slowing it down so much. That's why he took Paik's vinyl disc to a record studio and tried to bring it back to the original speed. I found this fight of the guys about the speed of a music piece funny, but also characteristic. It is very much about being right, and somebody else being wrong. I called my contribution to that fight about the speed of a piece of music an "ultimate intervention", because

it passes the decision on to each single user/ listener. By providing the technical possibility for that process I put myself in the genealogy of the interventions about that piece, while at the same time, I am not determining one speed. I refuse to put myself in the position of a decision maker.That is my contribution.

The piece has two different versions: a website where in the "studio" area the user can manipulate the speed of a virtual record on a virtual record player, and an installation in real space which consists of the painted portraits plus a text panel next to each portrait which displays a text written by the artists with background information about the interventions. Part of the installation is also a sound loop, a mix of four tracks: the Schönberg-track, the Paik-track, the Roth-track and the Sollfrank-track. This sound cannot be manipulated.

One aspect of the work is to make fun of all the 90s Internet rhetoric about interactivity, participation and empowerment. "Make your choice and become Avantgarde!" it says on the Website. The user in fact is able to change the speed of the music, it is fun, but it simply does not make much sense to do so. And this is the case with many sites where you mainly have the choice between consuming this or that, and the propaganda only blurs the real existing built-in hierarchy. Another aspect immediately evolves when you look at the portraits: Schönberg, Paik, Roth, Sollfrank. Famous guys, male geniuses, heroes of the art world, who know what to do, who know what the right speed is … and at the end of the row, myself, young, unkown female artist. Putting myself in this genealogy is a pretension, and a real act of empowerment – even if is only projected. Funny enough it works, as my name now actually appears together with these guys. At the same time, the ironic rupture of the work makes clear that it is not about writing genealogies or about replacing male entities by female entities within the same structure. I am there, in the line-up, but my presence is only projected, which means I am absent at the same time. And my function is different from the function of my male predecessors. I am not one of them. This ambiguity is a condition I feel very comfortable with.

A.L.: A central node of your artistic work is undoubtedly the *nag (net.art generator)* software developed in five different versions together with different artists/ programmers such as, Ryan Johnston, Luka Frelih, Barbara Thoens/Ralf Prehn and Richard Leopold. With the first release its' own scope was probably sublimated in the *Female Extension* action with a Perl script that generated 289 (female) virtual artists that collected and reassembled material on the web, submitting them to the Net Art Competiton EXTENSION of the Hamburger Kunsthalle in 1997, 'hacking' it in the end. The museum press releases emphasizing the high woman participation was the result of the action, with the curators acknowledging every name+submitted work as real artist+work of art. This fitted in the artistic tradition of questioning the critics' real ability of judging and selecting works of art, and, even more important, questioning authorship and genre, a hot topic in feminist art. Which consequences have you noticed after *Female Extension*? Are you still investigating feminist art?

C.S.: I have to make a small correction: the script did not generate the artists – it was me, inventing all the names, but the script actually generated the works which I submitted to the competition under these artists' names. It was the first and very rough version of the *nag*, but the basic principle was already there: an easy-to-use computer program, which is accessible through a website, which collects material from the Internet after a user has typed in a search term, and

which by copy and paste merges the text and visual material together, using additional filters and random parameters.

Of course, the whole routine of juries and judging in the art world is a real problem, but questioning this was only a side effect of *Female Extension*. The focus, for me, was the shift which *net.art* was about to take in 1997. For the first time, big and powerful art institutions (like the museum in Hamburg, but also *documenta* e.g.) wanted to participate in the Internet hype by showing *net.art*. This was a change because *net.art* had up to then mainly happened independently; it had created an own context and had nothing to do with juries and curators. Those early days, sometimes ironically referred to as the "heroic times," were over in 1997. From then on, the former *net.art* context fell apart and people followed their individual careers in the art world. *Female Extension* was about marking this historic shift. The fact that all the extra net.artists in the competition were females was another nice side story. Of course, nobody expects a large majority of females in a techy field: surprise, surprise!

A very personal consequence of the project is that the curators from the museum won't talk to me to this day. This most likely means that they really hated my intervention; and it looks like they still even hate me, now. Very sad. I can't say that I am sorry about the intervention, but it would have been nice if they had taken it a little bit more easy. Maybe their irreconcilable reaction shows that I seriously hit the target.

Last year I started a new series of works which explicitly engages with feminist art again. *Revisiting Feminist Art* looks back at 40 years of history. What were the pioneering and radical works in feminist art of the late 1960s and early 1970s? I have selected five works and repeat these works today. The thrilling moment is the repetition, doing the same thing again, which, of course, never will be the same. For example, walking Monty Cantsin as my dog on a leash in 2007 in a gigantic suburban shopping mall is different from Valie EXPORT's performance in 1968. Apart from the personal experience of reenacting the works and taking all the risks involved, it is part of the work to investigate social changes regarding the role models. What does the same action mean in a changed context? And did the context really change, and if yes, in what respects? These are the concerns of the work.

A.L.: The actual striking step of the *net.art generator* is to produce quantities of 'unique clones' of the 'flowers' series by Andy Warhol. He incidentally, produced a series of hundreds of 'variations' and was even sued (losing the legal dispute) for copyright violation by Patricia Caulfield, the photographer whose picture is the basis of the Warhol series. You algorithmically encoded his pop strategy, playing in the same way with changing the parameters defining a work of art. Did you face legal problems because of that? What thrills you most in changing the possibilities used to develop a work of art?

C.S.: The legal problems only occurred recently, in the last years, since many people have started becoming hysterical about copyright. When I started working with the generators 10 years ago, nobody cared about that aspect. Almost all material, the *nags* are reworking is copyrighted. But the programs do not use the material 1:1. It gets reworked and alienated. That's the whole point, that machines make new work by reworking existing material. The work is not about copyright, but it is about shifting the creative process away from a human to a machine, in this case a

computer program. But if the copyright paranoia keeps up growing, I will have to close down the project soon.

You referred to Warhol and his pop strategy before. I think I am going a step further than he did, because with the generators, people can make their own images. If you take some time and make experiments, series, you get a feeling how it works, then you can make really beautiful images. And everybody can download and get their own images printed, or go to the archive and download stuff that others made before them. Art from everybody for everybody, isn't that pop?

When I recently got large prints of the Warhol flowers made for an exhibition, the guy from the printing studio was very excited about the images. As he had the data on his machine anyway, I said to him, that he could easily make some extra prints for himself. I would not care. He became a bit embarassed and admitted, finally, that he had already done so. He was afraid that I would get angry at him, but instead I was amused by the fact that he liked the images so much that he even 'stole' them. In 'exchange', I asked him to send me a photo of the prints hanging above his sofa at home. Actually, I think this is a much more interesting installation than having the images exhibited in a museum.

A.L.: You perfectly short-circuited this process in the video *I don't know* where you plausibly simulate a conversation between you and Warhol, cutting an old interview of him with your questions. Focusing on automation, authorship and copyright, the conversation is sarcastic but very well balanced exploiting the very Warhol spirit, which is completely denied by the super-rich Warhol Foundation. So, are you then affected to Warhol as an unnoticed pioneer of the controversial copyright debate, or would you prefer to metaphorically be the woman who shot him in the sixties?

C.S.: Good question! There are a lot of paradigmatic ideas and strong characters in art history one has to work one's way through, and Warhol is certainly one of them, for me a very important one. What fascinates me about him, is that on the one hand, he radically undermined the rules of the art world via (uncontrolled) serial productions, by offensively using reproduction technologies, and by totally refusing the idea of personal, artistic expression. This totally denies the traditonal 19th century idea of the male genius, and there I see a link to emancipatory and feminist approaches to art. Additionally, he was perfect in creating his image; probably this was his most important work of art, escaping from the authenticity dictum, refusing essentialism and constantly performing roles. Another link to feminism. On the other hand, he got seduced by power and money; in many ways he was very affirmative, even became reactionary in the 1980s, supporting Reagan's election campaign for example.

Certainly, he had gained a lot of power himself, fame and money, and thus influence! He offered many people space to work in the factory (another early platform for people to express themselves), where he supported and at the same time exploited a whole scene. Although he probably was not the most typical representative of the hierarchical male-dominated art world, I can imagine why Valerie Solanas shot him. He had become an icon for success in a society which she hated. I have to admit that I am also a big fan of Solanas. Her *SCUM manifesto* still is a good read – for me it is the best medicine against depression. Again, I can see myself on both sides!

A.L.: You also said that you consider your journalistic activity as art, obtaining information usually inaccessible to everybody. Do you think that this would be considered the most polite kind of social engineering, one of the hacker's most specific practices?

There is no need to be polite as an artist! And that's not the point of social engineering, but sometimes camouflage is the only way to get access to things you need. Sometimes I am even performing as an artist – if I need to get access to the art world, for example.
I would say I am using my journalist identity to get access to information which I think might be useful for my artistic practice. So, I am occassionally performing as a journalist. Generally, writing is part of my artistic work, writing fake interviews for example… Mixing facts and fiction is a good way to generate productive confusions. In that sense, I am certainly still a hacker.

A.L.: You're also quite active locally in your city (Hamburg), often coordinating and promoting cultural production and dissent with many partners, such as the new THE THING Hamburg. Which initiatives did you contribute to in the last years and how important is it to be active on a local level?

C.S.: For about 8 years I have been actively engaging in local cultural policies, mainly trying to fight neoliberal tendencies that cut the small budgets for individual artistic production and small organisations, only to shift the money towards big representative events and buildings. At the core of the activities, I am running a local mailing-list called [echo] which loosely organizes around 500 people. A mailing list is a perfect way of organizing a large number of people, especially for a local context, as well. You can stay in touch, build a kind of community by sharing information, and if there is urgent need for action, you can send out a call and organize real-life meetings. That is the advantage of local networking: you are referring to the same context and can regularly meet people. Virtual communication turned out to be a very powerful tool for a local context.

One example I would like to mention is the artists' initiative *TammTamm*. *TammTamm* is an ongoing protest action by more than 100 artists against a planned maritime museum in Hamburg. This museum will be run by a private foundation, containing a private maritime collection, but the city funded it with 30 million Euros. Apart from the formally shocking contracts which leave all the decision making power to the director of the foundation (the collector), this person is a known right-wing media mogul, an anti-democrat, who celebrates in his collection mainly the heroic past of the First and Second World War navy. Just as the large number of small artist run spaces are working almost without any public money, large sums are going to that kind of project. In our initiative each participating artist adopted a member of parliament and discussed the museum project in a personal dialogue. All the discussion results and lot of extra information are published on the initiative's collective website, tamm-tamm.info.
One of our most recent projects is the launch of THE THING Hamburg. Inspired by the idea of the first THE THING network from 1991, we pursue the idea of artist-driven discussion about art and society by applying theoretical discourses to our local environment. The two thematic issues we have published so far were on 'self-organisation + existence' and 'art + publics'. For the end of April we are planning a relaunch with a lot more forum features. It would be nice to reenact the early idea of THE THING: to build local discussion platforms in different cities and connect

them. One of the most challenging demands for artists in the future could be, to develop spaces, forms and structures which enable emancipatory practices.

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