I don't want to be alone in the 21st century

This interview with Laurence Rassel by Cornelia Sollfrank took place in Brussels, at the office of CONSTANT.

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C.S.: The conference DIGITALES just ended. Would you like to describe what DIGITALES is, and what happened in the last days?

L.R.: DIGITALES was started on a very simple idea, to bring together for a short period of time, in the same place, women who were dealing with new technology. When I say women dealing with technology, I mean researchers from an academic background who are using technology as a tool to write, but also women working on the development of technology, then I mean artists using digital technology for their work, and I mean women who decided to use technology to find a job and earn their living and that of their families.

I have realized, as an artist working with new technologies, or in culture, that we never meet other women theoreticians or researchers, or women using technnology to earn their living. When I was working for Sophia, the network of feminist studies, my job happened to be in the same street as a training center for unemployed women, which offered training in digital technologies. There I was, this network's secretary and a member of CONSTANT as artist and cyberfeminist, geographically right next to this women training center, and I simply could not imagine that these people would not meet, share their experiences and talk to each other about what it means to be a woman working in the field of technology.

C.S.: Could you briefly explain what this training center, and what CONSTANT are?

L.R.: Interface3 asbl is a centre and a team for vocational training and integration of women on the labour market in the sector of new technologies. Its aim is to train or retrain unemployed women with different level of education, for a job, and also to answer better society's demands. They are doing a great job there, giving women an education in programming or pc-support and the like, but the training projects are financed by public authorities and the private sector, which means women get in their education what government and companies need now, and not what the women themselves probably would decide that they want to learn.

CONSTANT is a Brussels-based artists' organisation linking artistic and theoretical thinking on the Internet and digital communication for/in/with which I work. Amongst other things, we have been doing the annual multimedia festival called 'Jonctions' for 5 years now.

C.S.: Let us go back to DIGITALES, and how it came together.

L.R.: Yes, for this we have to go a bit in the past. For me the beginning of DIGITALES, was the 'Cyberfeminist working days'. This was organized in 2000, but only as a cultural event. The idea was to organize workshops. As I had a lot of friends around me who wanted to make their website, edit sound, or use DV, I said ok, I know people who can teach, I can put together a workshop program, but from a feminist/cyberfeminist perspective. And the objective of the event was to make one song, one image and one film. There was a great atmosphere, and people were really enthusiastic with discussions also thinking about why and what they were doing in media, but and also argumenting about being feminist or not… It was nice.

And I said to myself, ok, it's nice to be a cyberfeminist but this position stand, reflecting and action should be also brought to others, outside the cultural field, to the working place; I do not mean that making art is not a working place, but what I had in mind was office work, in a company or a call center, whatever. When I met the people from the training center, by chance as I explained, I realized that they were doing a great job of training, but they never took the time to think precisely what it meant they were doing and to reflect beyond. It's ok for women to find a job in that field, but at what price, under what condition, and for which economical system? Regarding the aesthetics of their work, they had no idea about what was going on in net art, or media art. They were trained to suit governement policies and the needs of private companies, and not to be independent thinkers with technology. I was also struck by the idea that academic thinkers produce statistics about the place of women in technology but most of them never meet a real person from there, and do not know anything about the condition of the women they are studying. So, what I initiated, was to ask all the different parties to take a bit of time, and think about what they/we were really doing, and exchange our positions; just for a moment. And it happened.

C.S.: When did the first DIGITALES event take place, and how many people were involved?

L.R.: There were already more than 100 women in Interface 3, the training centre. Plus the organisers' team: Interface3, Sophia, a coordination network for feminist/ gender studies and Constant. So during the 1st Digitales, something like 200 women were circulating/participating if we include the public coming from 'outside' the three organisations involved.

C.S.: Could you give some examples of workshops, or lectures or other formats included in the program?

L.R.: This year included a wide range: from a Linux install party to building your own webradio, to Dress for Success, a workshop by Isabelle Massu and Peggy Pierrot on writing your CV with a critical eye on the standards asked by the employers to women, this workshop was given with SPIP a free and open software. We had researchers on sexual discrimination at

work in the sector of new technology, cyberfeminists, artists, but Mervin Jarman and Marlene Lewis from Mongrel also came to lead a Linker workshop. We had speakers from trade unions, banks, IBM, Amnesty International, we wanted to give a view of what is to work with new technology as a woman, and above all hoped that Digitales was a place where all these people coming from such different fields could meet and talk.

C.S.: What is your idea behind bringing the different fields and people together?

L.R.. I always say, "I don't want to be alone in the 21st century." Either we go all together, or nobody will go. I feel bored in a society where I cannot exchange anything. That was the selfish part of DIGITALES, to be able to speak with other women working with technology, meaning to know each other and to exchange vocabulary, tools and theory. I myself wanted probably to prove that it was really possible at least to exchange words and tools. And of course, I want to change the world, or save it, like Aki in Final Fantasy ("the question is, would I be on time to save the world" (laughter), and being able to exchange knowledge, tools and dreams is a first step.

This year DIGITALES #2 also had very concrete results: for example, race issues will be integrated in the politics of ADA, a new platform of Belgian training centers on women and technology. As a consequence of DIGITALES it will be written into their policy and job; they will focus on racial discrimination in jobs applications and launch research, actions and surveys. Another result is that the Flemish and the French-speaking university researchers on women and technology have met in 'flesh', for most of them for the first time, and decided to go on with meetings and exchanges; furthermore we hope that free software and open source software will be taught now in the training centers. Members of Brussels-based free radios have learned sound editing. A group will go on working on the audio archives to be streamed on Constant webradio, etc. I could not have said before DIGITALES that this were the goals of our meeting, but it is what happened.

C.S.: What have DIGITALES to do with Cyberfeminism?

L.R.: It's hard to explain, pull apart, because it is closely knitted together.

C.S.: Could you describe what your idea of Cyberfeminism is?

L.R.: Cyberfeminism is different things for me; it depends on where I am, and what I am doing. But one constant thing is to ask myself, wherever I am: 'why', íwhat for', íunder which condition', ífor what economic system'; it is about deconstructing situations. Imagine a woman sitting in front of a computer and simply ask all these questions! And the other thing is to be able to project oneself into the future. Not to be nostalgic, but to be able to imagine a future, and to have the vocabulary, and the aesthetics to create it. This is what empowers me,

because I can imagine myself with more power, with more knowledge about technology, or being able to deal with biotechnology. Before Cyberfeminism I was not able to imagine my body in the future. As I did not want to be a mother, I did not want to be a worker, I did not want to be a theoretician… Now, I have the option to be a Cyberfeminist, which suits me perfectly! In a way, it includes all the options, but at the same tim! e it is different and much more. It might serve also as a role model: "When I grow up, I will be a Cyberfeminist." [laughter]. Sorry, that I cannot be more precise, but this is how it works for me. And for me DIGITALES means to change, to alter a place slightly, to take it and to shake it; smoothly like a virus, or even like an earthquake…

C.S.: Talking about role models, and the deconstruction of categories, how do you see your role as an artist?

L.R.: Well, I am trained as an artist, but nowadays when I am asked to provide a cv, I mention first that I am a cyberfeminist. But cyberfeminist is not - yet - recognised as a job, as artist is. And as people know that I am organizing and producing events, I enjoy telling them that I am an artist, because not being a curator or a producer it confuses them, as I am doing what I am doing as cyberfeminist and artist.

C.S.: Can you make a link between the organisational work you are doing, the building of structures, and your understanding of art?

L.R.: I follow a very simple path. When you learn to draw, you look at something. You learn to abstract from that something elements like light, shadow, lines. You do no longer see a lamp, a table, a woman. Seeing in 2d is a way of deconstruction. When I finished my education, I could draw everything, also from memory. But then I realized that everything I had been told about art and the art world was bullshit. What is the art world? What is the field of culture? Its real place, its real life, its economy? I decided to go and find out for myself, to deconstruct it. Maybe it is a bit arrogant to put it like this, but in a way it was like looking at something you want to draw, and I saw how it worked.

At this point I started to create a perception, a sensation. When you are an artist, you put something in place, it may be a product, it may be an action, so as people can feel, see or understand something. For me it was putting people, words, machines together in the same room, and the people being in this place could have a sensation or could understand something, and go away with this understanding.

C.S.: Are you talking about creating a situation?

L.R.: Yes, situation sounds right. I was a conceptual artist without knowing it. What is really important for me, is what happens in between the images, between the people and the image. I

was fed up with showing my canvases and my stuff in an exhibition, for people to say "Oh, how nice!", "How bad!", or "I buy it" and then nothing happened. What I wanted was to create a relationship with the people I am showing my work to. Also with CONSTANT we no longer call what we do ífestival', but we call it situation.

C.S.: What do you expect from the situation or from the relationship with your íaudience' or the people you invite to your situation?

L.R.: That they go away with something, a word, an image, a bit of practical knowledge; that they stop in the street or when they see a movie, a website and notice something they wouldn't have noticed before. It is like, again I can't find another image, like you put a friendly chip in their mind, it will change slightly or completely their perception. That is what happened to me when I encountered feminism, Chris Marker, cyberfeminism, you, mangas, electronic music, Terre Thaemlitz, sci-fi, hip hop, fan culture, I don't want to make the whole list, there are so, so many people, friends I met, saw, read, that they changed my mind, they let trails on you, in your perception. To be an artist for me was to intervene the in-between people and the world, maybe it is what i call the perception.

C.S.: What role plays CONSTANT for in the way you are practising art?

L.R.: CONSTANT is/was our undercover identity. We used it as a way to publish what we were doing. It allows to act as artist, but not under your own name, to create situations, organising festivals, meeting days. Being non-profit organisation, a group, allows you to move that way. And now, it is really a group. That is why I say, maybe I can go further now and do my individual work under my name. I do no longer embody a group which did not exist. At the beginning, it was called group, but 'we were only one'. I mean I was one. Then we were two. Now, it is a real group, it has changed, and I can go back to my own things.

C.S.: What is your vision for the future, your personal dream?

L.R.: I would like to be quieter. Not wanting to change the world all the time, and take all possible action, but to be more relaxed. You know, when you are painting and drawing, you spend hours with an empty mind, just creating lines and colors. It's a pity that my mind is not empty any more. I miss the feeling of time passing by. The other thing is that I want to be rich and famous.[laughs].

When I look at the things I have done until now, besides the organisational stuff, I see myself as a performer. My body, my voice, are in the middle of everything. But I have to protect myself more. Maybe it would be better not to be in the center any more, not to take everything I do fleshly, and personally. But still, it's my job, my profession, and it's hard to step back.

C.S.: If you would now start and do work under your own name, what would that be?

L.R.: I would like to finish stuff I began years ago. Now, I have the technique to finish them. I took a movie, and we remade it ourselves, edited it, but we played it in my own perspective.

C.S.: What is the original movie?

L.R.: 'La collectionneuse', done by Eric Rohmer. I thought it was a chauvinist movie, and my favourite one, I know him by heart I wanted to be Patrick Bauchau's part, and when I got a camera I wanted to re-make it inverting the gender roles to prove how chauvinist the original was. But I realized that it was not that easy. So I asked all my friends what they had seen and I made a movie about what they had seen, so there was no movie, but only people looking at a movie. As we all live under the influence of the myth of the author, one thing I am doing is to deconstruct the author. And in this movie, there is no author, only spectators, only viewers. I want to finish that concept, and go further.

What I am interested most at the moment is sound; for me people who make music and sound are people who defined themselves as artists and think globally. They choose consciously the technology they use, how their products are distributed, aware of what is happening with copyright laws, how much they get paid for a concert, often they are also producers and produce other people work and when radio is used it is a way of speaking with your own voice, but also inviting other people to speak, for a conversation, or for a monologue… Also I met artists who I really like, I mentioned Terre Thaemlitz, he is writing theory with his audio cd, and at the same time performing on stage dressed as a woman, so wearing content on his own body, using, being all what's possible: to be a theoretician, to be a body, and to be someone producing an art product.

Another thing I would like to do is to make a cyber heroine in 3d, because now I would like to confront myself again with representation. Feminism for me came after my art studies. I had already stopped making images. Now, with all what I know, what would be the image of - maybe a woman?

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