Interview with Cornelia Sollfrank by Maider Zilbeti in ZEHAR #63

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[Maider Zilbeti]

During the last few years, your interest has been focused on experimenting with new models of authorship. In feminism, and concretely in cyberfeminism, how are the concept and idea of authorship developed?

[Cornelia Sollfrank]

First of all, I would like to mention that authorship as a concept can be applied in all creative disciplines; but as I am an artist myself, for me it makes the most sense to start from the perspective of my own discipline.

If we take a look at the contemporary art world, we are still confronted with a notable difference regarding the number of male and female artists (=authors) represented, not only in the big shows which write art history, but amongst all professional, and (financially) successful artists. This marginalization has structural reasons and has to do with the tradition of defining «art» and «artist» in itself. Feminist art history has made a valuable contribution to that field by investigating the origins of its discipline. In the first history of art, written by Giorgio Vasari about «The lives of the most excellent painters, sculptures and architects» from 1550, a few women were included, but for the sole purpose of demonstrating their secondary position. As Maike Christadler puts it, the female artists were excluded by being included. Vasari's description of the male and female principles and their «natural» relationship to the creative act resulted in creativity to be considered as male, and moreover, authorship and artwork are constituted by distinguishing the male from the female «other». If we want to think about feminist or cyberfeminist models of authorship we first have to understand that history, then we can start to develop strategies to reflect, deconstruct and undermine the tricky role of the female creator.

M.Z.: Which kind of authorship would be needed to achieve the aims of cyberfeminism as you understand it?

C.S.: One of the central questions for feminist theory of authorship always has been, if we want to keep the concept of the individual author — which predominately has been a concept

of male authorship–, if we want to keep this framework and only add the missing female individuals, or if it would be better to think of a different concept in general. From a historic point of view, women never had the chance to fill the author position and to claim the corresponding authority, on the other hand, there is a feminist approach which works on recovering female authors, on re-evaluating them and making them part of the canon. And I think there is no definite answer to that question — a question which seems to produce a number of contradictory strategies.

Michel Foucault considers the author more as a medium through which the whole cultural tradition expresses itself. He writes, that "the author is not the owner of her texts, nor is she responsible for them; she is neither producer nor inventer." For Foucault, the author is nothing but a knot in the net of endless influences, and is far from any "origin". This approach was very helpful for me, and in my artistic practice I combine it with with a playful and performative staging of myself, not just as an author, but as a genius.

M.Z.: Then, where is the figure of the artist/creator that speaks for herself? Does the possibility of undermining individual authorship – a maculine one- lead us to procure political aesthetic practices?

C.S.: That is a very important question, because to question and discuss (male) authorship and its' function does not mean that we can simply leave the concept of authorship behind. authorship does have its' roots in the far-reaching ideas of individuality and subjectivity upon which our western societies (including capitalism) are built. any attempts to formulate critique and new models have to acknowledge that tradition. and that is also the reason why there are a number of reasons why we cannot simply ignore the concept of authorship. The German philosopher Eberhard Ortland has identified various categories of reasons: economic, political, erotic and semantic reasons.

Your question of the resulting political and aesthetic practices should result from the discussion who might have an interest in keeping up certain notions of artistic production as eg.g the genius. the genius is a genuine bougeois concept that creates a role-model for the artist as an individualistic, unsocial, unpolitical outsider or fool. such a role-model does not mean to challenge power structure is society or support an emancipatory understanding of aestehtics. consequently, all practices which do not simply serve the reproduction of the bougeois understanding of the arts – including collaborative and distributed approaches are new models.

M.Z.: So, these new models of authorship are the ones that go for contradictory strategies? Could you mention a contradictory strategy?

C.S.: They may in fact seem to be contradictory, but I would prefer to call them performative in the sense that they make underlying structures visible by occupying different positions at the same time.

An example for such a strategy is my project "Improved Tele-vision".

The work is based on an early music piece by Arnold Schönberg, "Verklärte Nacht". In the mid 1970s first Nam June Paik responded to that piece by slowing it down to 25% of the speed; the result he made available as vinyl record and his friend Merce Cummingham created choreography for the new work. The artist Dieter Roth, who was a big admirer of Schönberg, got very upset by this "abuse of music", and two years later he took Paik's record to a studio, played it four times faster and also made the result — which showed similarities to the "original" but was not identical — available on a vinyl record; this time under his name. When I found out about this series of interventions, I decided to add myself to the genealogy of Schönberg-Paik-Roth by making another, what I called the "final" intervention.

As the parameter of the intervention was the speed of the music, I decided to open up the decision about the speed of the music to the audience, the listener. On a platform on the internet, the user can decide herself at what speed the music should be played, and in the sound installation I made for an exhibition, I create the genealogy of Schönberg-Paik-Roth-Sollfrank through a series of portrait paintings of the four of us, each accompanied by a text which gives some additional information, while in the background one can hear music that consists of a mix of the different versions of the piece.

M.Z.: Does the performativity need a multiple authorship to work?

C.S.: I would go so far as to say that performativity is the expression of multiple authorship, but this does not necessarily mean that different people have to be involved. Multiple authorship can very well be a concept being performed by a single person.

M.Z.: Does multiple authorship work inevitably compose contradictory strategies?

C.S.: I would say no. Whether or not the layer of contradiction comes into play depends on the context. In a case, for example, where a number of people create a product together, let's say a computer program or a game–these are commonly used examples for new models of authorship in the realm of digital media–the only purpose is to create a functional product.

The interesting implications here are not the ones of authorship, but the ones of economy. Within the art world this might be different because the subject is still the major reference, maybe not necessarily for production, but certainly for the perception of the work.

M.Z.: Is it possible to say that only multiple authorship creates political aesthetics?

C.S.: Are we talking about political issues as a motif of artworks? Are we following the idea that art is political per se? Probably not, as both these approaches easily allow the co-option of the works by the mainstream art market and thus neutralize all radical or resistant qualities. The slogan of the Old Boys Network — the first international cyberfeminist network which I co-founded in 1997 [www.obn.org]–was " The mode is the message, the code is the collective." This slogan expressed our idea that all radicality originates in the way HOW you do things and along with it, the idea that political resistance starts with HOW you get organised, and I always considered our FORM of organisation as a kind of aesthetics. From here we can build a link back to your question.

Political aesthetics are probably not something an individual is able to create within one work or art but are a system of references; a context which resists the possibilty of co-option–from whomever for whatever purpose.

M.Z.: You talk about the mainstream art market. Was this mainstream art market the one that pushed you into legal arena?

C.S.: The starting point for my engagment with copyright issues was when an exhibiton which I had planned to carry out in Switzerland was cancelled because of alleged copyright infringement. That was in 2004. Since then I have been investigating copyright and 'intellectual property' issues and their relationship to art. And it is important for me to state that I am doing that work not as a victim of the system; on the contrary, I am using the law, legal experts and the whole logic of the legal system as material for my artistic work.

Actually this area has many problems, and the way it is developing is very alarming and partly absurd. All I am doing is to use the methods of my discipline (art) to illuminate some of those problems. If this strategy will not just create aesthetic results, but also have a political impact that would be most desireable.

M.Z.: Could you please describe one of your actual projects that is moving in this direction?

C.S.: Starting with that case where my exhibition was shut down in Switzerland, I began to build an artistic "case study". It uses what has been the bone of contention–the famous Andy Warhol flowers–as a precedent to act out all possible aspects of one artist using the work of another artist as part of his or her new work. First, I did my own legal research, which resulted in a video. Then I consulted four specialised lawyers to receive their professional advice (another video installation), and finally I constructed a fictitious conversation with the artist (Warhol) to discuss the case with him (again a video). Additionally, I created some more variations of the flower images in different formats (digital prints, painting, animation)–in order to create more examples of reworkings. Again, what I am targeting here are the philosophical aspects of authorship and originality which, of course, are directly linked to copyright. At the moment, I am about to finish the study with a request for written permission from to the Warhol Foundation to use the flowers for artistic reworking. The result of that will

be displayed in an exhibition about art and copyright this summer at Media Art association HMKV in Dortmund, Germany.

M.Z.: Is this exhibition an exercise ot put your theoretical concepts of multiple authorship into practice? What will be the next step in your political-aesthetic strategy?

C.S.: I never work step by step but do different things and follow different strategies parallel. The biggest part of my work at the moment is doing research for a PhD at the University of Dundee in Scotland. I am writing about questions of art, copyright and knowledge economy, and trying to analyse, but also synthesize, aesthetic and artisitic strategies in the field.

Another ongoing project is the internet platform THE THING Hamburg. This is a platform for art and critique, mainly for the local community in Hamburg. I am co-founder of the platform and co-editor of the magazine-part. Although there is not much discussion any more about it, the role of small and tactical media is very important, and it has not yet been made much use of in the art world. For some reason, people are staring as if they were hypnotised at the not just glossy, but also totally reactionary art magazines.