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The Art of Performing Cyberfeminism (VS 1.2)[1]
A Patchwork

The following patchwork is based on excerpts from a lecture that was given in the framework of the "8th International Performance Conference: networking meeting", Frankfurt am Main, 13-16 of May 1999, organized by ASA European performance network[2]. In the course of the preparations for this conference, the Frankfurt based ASA members who planned the meeting got in touch with me to get some hint to relate the field of performance art with the field of art in electronic networks. Asked for possible contributions, I proposed to dedicate one day to the performance of body and gender in the context of electronic media, thus bringing together important issues of performance art (like "the body" - once and actually again being central to this field -; the shift from early 'essencialist' body art, to more conceptual based practices, and finally to a new theatricality nourished by theoretical reflection) with concepts and practices of (artistic) networking (in "meat space" as well as in the so-called "cyberspace" of electronic networks), thereby also including current perspectives on what is being called "art on the net" as well as what might be called "net.performance" in a more or less literal sense.

Regarding not only the fact the mere number of women artists invited to the rest of the programme was definitely poor, but -- and this was far more important for my decision -- undisputably the major competence in the previously quoted issues is to be found in the field of cyberfeminist theory and practice, I consequently decided to give the whole thing a suitable proportion by combining the performance lecture Stelarc was already invited to give (as the "big act" the organizers wished to provide for the evening public) with a row of equally "big acts" that would offer an insight into this area of theoretical research and artistic practice: Claudia Reiche, whose reflections were dedicated to the human body as a terminal to display specific seizures effected by it's scientific representation; Helene von Oldenburg, who presented new information on the impact of future developments on our daily life to be discovered by further research on

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[1]   Version 1.1 of this text was published in: Next Cyberfeminist International. A Reader, Ed. Cornelia Sollfrank/old boys network, Hamburg 1999, pp. 69-72. While VS. 1.2 was at least slightly overdone, I still have to apologize for the patchwork style and the very raw translation, both resulting from the do-it-yourself transfer of parts of the paper the performance conference lecture was based upon. More developed versions with focus on cyberfeminist networking are to be found in my essays "Cyberfeminismus? Just Do It! Eine Einladung zur Infektion", in: infection manifesto, no. 3: Funktionieren im Kunstbetrieb oder experimentieren anderswo?, Ed. Andrea Knobloch, Düsseldorf 2000, pp 35-39 and "Ganz automatisch ein Genie? Cyberfeministische Vernetzung und die schöne Kunst, Karriere zu machen", in: Musen Mythen Markt, Jahrbuch VIII der Frauenbeauftragten der Hochschule der Künste, Ed. Sigrid Haase, Berlin 2000, pp. 41-49 (in German). See also my essay „agen(t)cy. performing cyberfeminism(s) - Eine Einführung in die Kunst cyberfeministischer Netzwerkpraxis" (based on a lecture held at the Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst Zürich, Winter 2000), available online in the OBN reading room.

[2]   ASA stands for: Art Service Association. See: http://www.asa.de.

the SpiderBug that is already "browsing our brains"; Cornelia Sollfrank, who gave insights in the art of hacking and its possible applications in the field of cyberfeminism; and Margarethe Jahrmann, who led us with her "SuperFEM performance", a glamourous piece of work that combined high tech artistic practice with a strong theoretical background dedicated to the development of feminist avatars, directly into the very heart of net.performance art.

Additionally, as members of the OBN core group[3], Reiche, von Oldenburg and Solllfrank gathered with Faith Wilding and myself for an "Old Boys Networking Workshop" to provide the interested public with a concrete example of cyberfeminist networking practice.[4]

Asked by the organisators of the conference to provide a kind of introduction relating the conference theme - networking - to the field of artistic practice in the context of electronic networks, myself I started the day with a kind of double feature: During the first part of my lecture I tried to bridge the gap to the first day which was dedicated to different notions of classical performance and it's relationship to a more or less classical understadig of 'networking' in and between performance groups by giving a brief overview of the current state of the world wide web as an area where information technology and different modes and politics of representation merge in a specific way, followed by reflections on the conditions under which artistic practice, and especially artistic networking happens to take place in this "contested zone". While refering to this introductory part only with a rather short resumé of some of its keynotes, in the following excerpts from my conference lecture I want to focus mainly on the second part where my purpose was to relate these more basic reflections to the field of artistic strategies of performing (in) networks.

Now let us step right into content zone by taking a closer look on the two terms neatly coming together and merging into the sounding formula I chose as headline for some thoughts on.... *Performing Cyberfeminism!*

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[3]   The "OBN core group" existed from 1997 to 2001. In spring 2001 OBN decided to organize in another form. For detailed information on OBN see http://www.obn.org.

[4]   See: "Suck my Code. Performing Cyberfeminism". The schedule is still available online under http://www.kuni.org/v/perf.htm.

(1) Performance

Rather than making use of the German notion of 'Performance' which is more or less limited to the field of fine arts, I want to draw my starting point from the broader notion of the term going back to its use in anglo-american language, where it refers to 'acting' or 'acting out' not only in the sense of "acting on an 'artistic' stage" (be it on theater, be in any other artistic context), but also to acting on the stage of life in general.[5]

Additionally -- and this will be even more important for my following theses --, speaking of 'performance' in this broader sense I would like to recall the linguistic term, circumscribing the concrete use of language to 'act in the act of speaking', i.e. to use a medium of communication to communicate and to act by the way of this use of the medium in the same time.[6]

(2) Networks

Further, let us recall a basic, however simplifying definition of networks by proposing that a net(work) can be seen as a matrix where knots as entities or condensations of energy are connected to each other by different kinds of relations or junctions. Hence, the quality of a network will depend on the strength and the density of these relations and the abilty of the knots (or nodes) to built up relations, to keep them and to use them.

(3) Performing Networks

Considering my notion of 'performance' as sketched out above, for a reflection on the conditions and possible efforts of networking I feel inclined to take the view that a performative use of networks is one of its basic conditions, i. e. that it is central whenever coming in touch with the idea of networks one decides not to remain a passive observer, but to build up, to develop or to work with networks. In other words: *networking itself is (a) performance.* This in mind, of course any discussion about networking and networks will have to keep an eye on who is making use of a medium of communication, under which conditions this use is being made, to which goals and so on.

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[5] See i.e. Erwin Goffman:The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, New York 1959.

[6] In German: 'Performanz', thus different from 'Performance' (whereas angoamerican languages use the same term, performance, for both). See: John Langshaw Austin: How to do things with words, Oxford 1955.

(4) Electronic Networks and the World Wide Web

While all this seems to be for granted for any kind of network based on personal relations be it an electronic network or not, it is not necessarily the case for the so-called World Wide Web. Technically, the World Wide Web is a surface made up of hyperlinked documents filed by different organisations, institutions, companies, groups or individuals on different servers, physically located all over the world. It is important to state that in its present state this network first of all is based on technology and only in part on textual connections. Therefore, even if themselves guided by individual interests and textual concerns, users can browse through these documents, skipping from page to page regardless whether there is a texual link or connection between those pages or not.

Keeping in mind that any network is formed by it's users, one could say that while there will be always a multiplicity of textual networks based on the very structure of the World Wide Web -- some of them built up consciously by connecting the documents via hyperlinks, others built up virtually via the use of those browsing through and thereby connecting documents temporarily by passing them --, the World Wide Web itself is based on the representation of communication as well as on the communication of representation(s) rather than of communication in the true sense of the word. Thus, one could state accordingly that *rather than actually being a network the Word Wide Web is the representation of a network*.

(5) The World Wide Web as an Arena of Representation

Facing this, do we have to admit that in the end the World Wide Web seen as a whole is nothing but a big surface, a window display dominated by some global players patronizing enough to leave some of it's angles for smaller communities to play with their hobby horses and eventually to present them world wide as well? Maybe.

But if the World Wide Web indeed can be seen as an *arena of representation* centered on issues like public appearance, representativeness, the demonstration of power as well as the establishment well known power structures being veiled and therefore easly accepted by consumers via the wide spread delusion of cyberspace as a kind of promised land, it will be the more important to develop strategies that allow to reflect and to criticize these structures, to (re)gain personal as well as political agency within this contested field.

Regarding the fact that the World Wide Web as an *arena of representation* is founded on as well as obtained by its apprance and function as a graphic interface operating with pertinent image and representation politics, it should be especially up to those who are professionals in these fields, be it artists, be it art theorists or historians to be aware and take care of these concerns, as well as engage and search for appropriate strategies and solutions.

(6) The Art of Networking on the World Wide Web

Following, to perform networks on and within the World Wide Web it is important not only to build up alternative structures for community and communication, but also to reach for creative forms of criticism -- not only "to show and to tell", but also to act.

How may this work? Especially facing the fact that -- in contrast to all bigmouth euphemisms and (post)modern myths being spread -- the so-called new media show significant tendencies to mirror the very same power structures and politics of representation we already know from the so-called Real Life. I am sure one will not have to reinvent the wheel. Rather, it should be possible to refer to strategies already introduced and improved within the field of artistic activism. Stating this, I am well aware that wherever 'art' and 'activism' come together -- sometimes to collide and to clash, sometimes to set free explosive reactions in way that might have a constructive effort --, there is a kind of 'liaison dangereuse' one should observe carefully. And if, from an (art) historic point of view, it can be said that in the second half of this century in the western world artistic activism "emerged in the mid-1970s, expanded in the 1980s, and is reaching critical mass and becoming institutionalized in the 1990s", as Nina Felshin writes in her book "But is it art?"[7], one might see a similar, but quickened development already taking place in the field of net.art and net.activism related to the rapid developement of the medium in general.

Anyway, there are some good reasons to hold on and to recollect some central features and strategies activist art can be characterized -- not only by pointing out already existing parallels to artistic features and strategies on the web in general, but especially to show why it still may be interesting to follow some of its footsteps.

(7) A very brief Excursion into Artistic Activim and Activist Art

To name some of this features, I would like to follow again Nina Felshin by citing some of the general -- however kind of idealizing - observations she provides in the introduction to "But is it art?", by this pointing out those I regard as appropriate to be related to the field of artistic networking as well.

"Activist art", Felshin writes, "in both it's forms and methods is process- rather than object- or product-oriented, and it usually takes places in public sites rather than within the context of art-world venues. As a practivce, it often takes the form of temporary interventions such as performance or performance-based activites, media events, exhibitions, and installations. Much of it employs [...] mainstream media techniques [...] to deliver messages that subvert the usual

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7   See: Nina Felshin: Introduction. In: But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism, Ed. Nina Felshin, Seattle 1995, pp. 9-29, p. 9.

intentions of these commercial forms. [...] A high degree of preliminary research, organisational activity, and orientation of participants is often at the heart of its collaborative methods of execution, methods that frequently draw on expertise from outside the art world as a means of engaging the participation of the audience or community and distributing a message to the public. The degree to which these formal strategies -- collaboration among artists, public participation, and the employment of media technology in information delivery -- successfully embody and serve the work's activist goals is an important factor in the work's impact. Whether the forms of these activities are permanent or impermanent, the process of their creation is as important as it's visual or physical manifestation."[8]

Furthermore she notes that "activist cultural practices are typically collaborative."[9] They often prefer to remain anonymous or opt for group names, "thus challenging art world notions of individual authorship, private expressions, and the cult of the artist. [...] The fact that the composition of many of these groups shifts over time [...] further underscores the activist deemphasis of notions of independent expression and authorship", which may be further supported by the "use of such relatively impersonal technological means as reproducible forms, media techniques, and mass communication."[10] And: "Finally, when activist artists extend their collaborative way of working to an audience or community, the process takes the form of a similarly inclusive activity -- public participation. Such participation", Felshin states, "is a critical catalyst for change, a strategy with the potential to activate both individuals and communities."[11]

(8) The Importance of Cyberfeminist Networking

Keeping this in mind, let us now come to the question why the art of networking may be especially important for those interested in gender related issues in the net. While I feel there may be no need to repeat the well known and well proved arguments pointing out that the same gender troubles -- sexism, discrimination, harassment and so on -- that can be experienced in the so-called meat space likewise determine and even dominate cyberspace in many ways, I would like to come back to a problem I already tried to adress with my own "thoughts on the aesthetics and politics of cyberfeminism".[12]

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[8]   Ibid., p. 10.

[9]   Ibid., p. 11

[10]   Ibid.

[11]   Ibid., p. 12.

[12]   See: Verena Kuni: Future is Femail. Some Thoughts on the Aesthetics and Politics of Cyberfeminism. In: First Cyberfeminist International. A Reader, Ed. Cornelia Sollfrank/obn, Hamburg 1998, pp. 13-18.

Giving an overview of the different ways (cyber)feminists relate to and the different strategies developed by them to cope with the World Wide Web as an "arena of representation", I tried to underscore the importance of a continuous and critical reflection on the use of labels and images as well as of an ongoing (re)search on and for strategies that may be (more) successful to undermine rather than to confirm the traditional stereotypes of gender.

Whereas it should be sufficient here to recall some of the strategies I am considering as useful for cyberfeminist performance on the net -- beyond them strategies refering to techniques of collage and montage, of copy and of reenactment traditionally being used in the context of artistic and political activism as well as strategies like parody and masquerade that gained importance in the context of feminist and queer theory and activism --[13], following the line of arguments I tried to give in the prevoius chapters of this text I would like to suggest that above all, one of the most important issues of cyberfeminist engagement within the contested zone of the World Wide Web should be the *perfomance of cyberfeminist networking*.

As a kind of outlook and to provide a more detailed perspective, finally I would like to add a personal statement adressing the cyberfeminist network I am situated in myself: the Old Boys Network.

(9) For Example: Old Boys Network

To me, Old Boys Network (in short: OBN) stands for a small, concentrated and thereby potent group as well as being a structure, a cyberfeminist network that is working in and on the net with cyberfeminist strategies and on cyberfeminist issues. Far more than merely a strategic alliance, OBN operates on the basis of personal sympathy as well as mutual acknowledgment and recognition -- a community who obtains its agency by the way of its common sense about dissent as a common sense -- many-voiced instead of an univocal chorus line that needs to be guided by a conductor or a leader. Important is continuous exchange, discussion, and transdisciplinary collaboration, especially in the sense that Old Boys -- though coming from different disciplines, refering to different theoretical backgrounds, having made different experiences, relating to different methods -- have a common basis and field of work: cyberfeminism. No doubt, the fact that we all are prepared and willing to develop common cyberfeminist strategies is another unifying moment.

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[13] See the examples I elaborated on in greater detail in the context of other publications, i.e. Kuni 1998ab and Kuni 1999a (full citation in the bibliography p. 9f.).

Of course it is by no means a mere accident if these cyberfeminist strategies can be aptly seized as aesthetic strategies. This shall not suggest to see the net as a work of art in the traditional sense, nor OBN should be understood as a kind of artistic project (again in the traditional sense). Rather one could state that OBN is a working group acting in the realms of the art world as a operating system ("Betriebssystem Kunst"), but without any obedient reference to the limiting conditions of this operating system.

(10) Old Boys Networking

At this point it might become clear, that OBN's aesthetic strategies are always to be understood as political -- of course not to support any kind of aesthetisation of the political (as it is to be observed widely on the net wherever net.art is being abused to mask economical interests), but rather because any aesthetical is to be understood as political at the same time.

(11) Performing Cyberfeminism

Actually, for me cyberfeminist (self-)understatement and (net-)work(ing) in a very basic sense could be defined as 'working on the code', or, to be more precise: working on the texts and subtexts the net consists of and is built on. Especially, wherever these texts and subtexts (and this seems to be in the very nature of things, respectively in the technology the net is based on) serve to contribute to the consolidation and conservation of the binary code the traditional notions of gender are erected on. The more, to me it is an important -- maybe the most important -- concern of cyberfeminist (net-)work(ing) to analyse and deconstruct the pertinent practices of representation and regulation, as well as to develop effective strategies that are appropriate to queer and to subvert those practices. And, last but not least, to search for new perspectives that might lead us beyond the binary systems of the so-called gender arrangements -- on both sides of the interfaces.[14]

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[14] See i.e. my essay "Gendernauts in Cyberspace? Tracing Trans/Gender Utopias on both Sides of the Interfaces", in: ctrl+shift art - ctrl+shift gender. Convergences of Gender, New Media, and Art, Ed. Nat Muller/Deanna Herst, Amsterdam 2000, pp. 40-47.

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