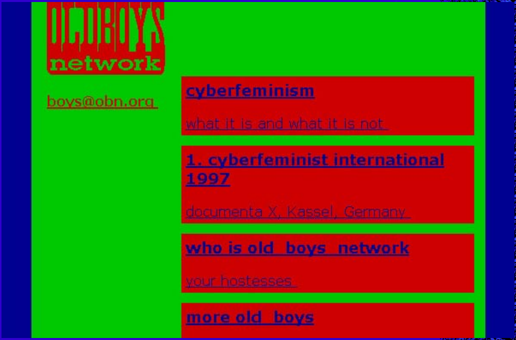
Attack of the CyberFeminists

The Art, Times and Genderings of VNS Matrix + e-nter-view/of/with Gashgirl

By: Mary-Anne Breeze

The primary aim of this article is to construct an in-depth analysis of an Australian multimedia arts collective called VNS Matrix, whilst focusing progressively on one of its members (Francesca da Rimini/Gashgirl). The process and structure of this article will reflect certain technological elements utilised by the artists, for example various email writing techniques/quoted email correspondences and Internet 'language' codes.



OLDBOYS network

boys@obn.org

cyberfeminism

what it is and what it is not

1. cyberfeminist international 1997

documenta X, Kassel, Germany

who is old boys network

your hostesses

more old boys

Figure 1: The title page on the internet site "The Old Boys Network" (from what I assume is an ironic title to say the least). It is a cyberfeminist site that links directly to the symposium that was held at documenta X - a European based art gathering and exhibition event that finished at the end of October 1997.

pHasE oNE: WoT iS CyberFeminIsm?

> "Through the work of numerous Netactive women, there is now a distinct cyberfeminist Netpresence that is fresh, brash, smart, and iconoclastic of many of the tenets of classical feminism. At the same time, cyberfeminism has only taken its first steps in contesting technologically complex territories."[1]

> "I'd rather be a cyborg than a goddess"[2]

So wrote Donna Haraway in her seminal essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century". Haraway is a pioneer of research into the affects that women - as both a political classification and as individual autonomous agents representative of a gender class - have had in electronic mediums, specifically the area of 'cyberspace' (the word that mainstream media circles and popular culture niches use to indicate anything associated with the internet or indeed, in some cases anything remotely technological). In this instance, cyberspace denotes the often tangible but mostly ethereal sense of 'otherworldliness' that may be experienced by users of various electronic mediums - such as communication devices like email programs, International Relay Chat (IRC) and world wide web browser chatlines. It can be a shared psychic and mental experience, for example 'talking' in a 'chatroom' actually involves users at their terminals writing lines of text as each reply is sent to each users' screen.

William Gibson (cyberfiction author extraordinaire) during the writing of his first novel *Neuromancer*[3] "...assembled the word cyberspace from small and readily available components of language...{through a}...neologic spasm: the primal act of popular poetics"[4]. His novels are essentially revamped 90's detective/thriller novels, which employ weird plot divergences and characters caught up in 'the matrix' - a term commonly interchanged for cyberspace. When a Gibson character 'jacks into' the matrix, donning obligatory headgear and virtual reality glove as he does so, the cowboy (for inevitably the hero is mostly male) has to battle a corporate entity and regain his position as an information paragon. He ultimately achieves this aim, albeit in a convoluted fashion, and reinstates his own hero status. This template of the machismo cyberjock completing their own version of the traditional hero's journey narrative is one that cyberfeminists object to, and combat within their own art practices.

This image of 'jacking into the matrix' represents all that is phallocentric and patriarchal in the use of technologies in relation to the shared collective creation of cyberspace. As Alla Mitrofanova[5] says;

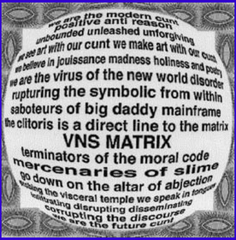
"As a woman I have not enough formal expressions, in discourses there is no cultural expression of the body and the sexualised body...We have silence in the most productive existential experiences. Having freedom we have kind of strong creative obligations to produce more formal expressions in a poetic way. That is what cyberfeminism and other extravagant self articulations are about."

Cyberfeminist practice offers a way of constructing a space within the dominant confines of computer culture - one that celebrates organic creation and non-narrative, often non-linear writing and art practices. One such group of cyberfeminists that have been active in the role of offering one version of this alternative viewpoint in both their artwork and general online practice is VNS Matrix.

VNS Matrix are - Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce, Virginia Barratt,[6] and Francesca da Rimini. They seek to simultaneously subvert and deconstruct dominant power codes and gender imbalances inherent in new technological/interactive systems (such as CD ROMS, and the WWW). They set out to explore and 'infect' certain overarching patriarchal notions of narrative and structure through the use of viral symbology, and believe that " ...women who hijack the tools of domination and control introduce a rupture into highly systematised culture by infecting the machines with radical thought, diverting them from their inherent purpose of linear topdown mastery."[7]

They actively create alternatives to this dominant techno-masculine-defined cyberspace through questioning identity and gender via their installation based site specific works (eg ALL NEW GEN - a game/parody of shoot-em-up computer games) and blurring gender distinctions through their fiction. This questioning/playing with/juxtaposing gender roles is the key focus of one of the artists, Francesa da Rimini (aka Gashgirl). An examination of why this cyberfeminist group deems it necessary to offer such an alternative seems salient and indeed, necessary.

PhaSe tWo: ThoSe cYbErvIXEnS VNS MaTRiX



we are the modern cunt
positive anti reason
unbounded unleashed unforgiving
we see art with our cunt we make art with our cunt
we believe in jouissance madness holiness and poetry
we are the virus of the new world disorder
rupturing the symbolic from within
saboteurs of big daddy mainframe
the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix
VNS MATRIX
terminators of the moral code
mercenaries of slime
go down on the altar of abjection
sucking the visceral temple we speak in tongues
infiltrating disrupting disseminating
corrupting the discourse
we are the future cunt

Figure Two: The VNS Matrix Manifesto.

> "Cyberfeminists attack the patriarchy within one of its bases of power: the creation of rules for communication and the exchange of information".[8]

VNS Matrix claim that they crawled out of a cyberswamp in an extremely hot 1991 Adelaide summer.[9] Other sources dispute this,[10] saying that two members (Josie Starrs and Julieanne Pierce) came together when they started studying as Graduate Diploma students at the University of Adelaide in 1991. Their interest in both French feminist theory (such as that by Luce Irigaray) and the production of computer generated artwork had its genesis here; the two members became four when Virginia Barratt and Francesca da Rimini joined them in Sydney - and the VNS Matrix Collective was born.

The name VNS Matrix is a curious one, and has in its origins Roman mythology (VNS = *Venus*) and the Latin word *Matri* (*Matrix*). Venus is the goddess of love and things sexual, and the word Matrix means "...womb, place in which {a} thing is developed, mass of rock enclosing gems, etc".[11] In terms of technological functioning, *Matrix* has high mathematical and hard scientific connotations attached to it - for example, the *Matrix* in Gibson's books being a virtually real place, in which numbers and codes scroll to form 'real' perceptual events and effects;

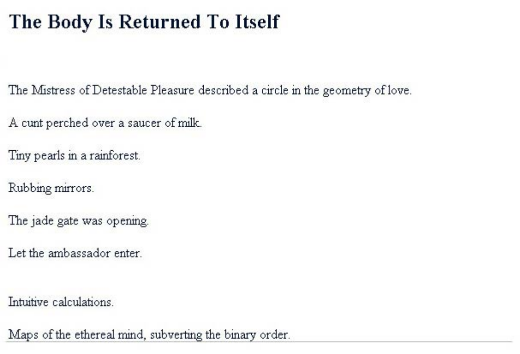
> "'The matrix has its roots in primitive arcade games,' said the voice-over, 'in early graphic programs and military experimentation with cranial jacks.' On the Sony, a two-dimensional space war faded behind a forest of mathematically generated ferns, demonstrating the spacial possibilities of logarithmic spirals..."[12]

VNS Matrix have appropriated the word to indicate a new state of technological functioning that seeks to turn around the largely male defined standards that the word *Matrix* indicates...by pairing it with a word like *Venus*. *Venus* denotes ideas involving seduction, feminine power, control, and love - an epistemologically 'softer' word in comparison to *Matrix*. The *Venus* is coded, however - an audience member must work to establish a cognitive connection between the letters V N S and the word itself. It also may have vague sinister connotations, as is shown in the actions of a Venus Flytrap plant.

So the name the collective chose in that hot summer was an appropriate one - in the sense that it represents the artistic ambiguities and gender questionings that the collective have been striving to express within their artwork, including the crucial technological production/component - their primary aim being to "...hijack cowboy toys and remap cyberspace".[13]

The first VNS Matrix multimedia work that caught my attention was one of their first major works as a collective, entitled All New Gen. This interactive piece seeks to offer an alternative viewpoint to that presented by certain computer games like Nintendo's Gameboy (which are often violent, sexist, adrenalin inciting games - tailor made for certain types of teenage males). They attest that computer technology and image production is largely governed by a patriarchal perspective, and so have tried to reclaim that space (cyber/virtual space) by creating their own. All New Gen pokes fun at all that is masculine and machismo based in westernised computer culture.

The game features of All New Gen include animations, still images, quick time videos and a chance for players to write their own proposal for the future via a computer terminal.



The Body Is Returned To Itself

The Mistress of Detestable Pleasure described a circle in the geometry of love.

A cunt perched over a saucer of milk.

Tiny pearls in a rainforest.

Rubbing mirrors.

The jade gate was opening.

Let the ambassador enter.

Intuitive calculations.

Maps of the ethereal mind, subverting the binary order.

Figure Three: This still (Fig. 3), taken from the prototype of the game, shows part of the game format, which in this case is text linked to choices through hyperlinked phrases. The game's aim is to corrupt the *informatics of domination* - not letting toys be left to the boys. This is done through a variety of ways, using sexuality/sex as a power tool and female desire as a liberating force, rather than espousing traditional perspective of the feminine-passive. The idea of the virus and medical/visceral imagery is used extensively to represent that information is not always best presented literally but perhaps laterally. Black humour and irony are used to great effect.

All New Gen is set in:

A TRANPLANETARY MILITARY INDUSTRIAL DATA ENVIRONMENT

All New Gen is made up of:

1. 1. BIG DADDY MAINFRAME - the enemy who must be infiltrated through DATA LIBERATION
2. 2. RENEGADE DNA SLUTS - who are watched over by ORACLE SNATCH.
3. They call themselves PATINA DE PANTIES, DENTATA AND THE PRINCESS OF SLIME. They must battle Big Daddy Mainframe and his agents through the contested zone in order to release the :
4. 3. VIRUS OF THE NEW WORLD DISORDER
5. 4. CIRCUIT BOY - a dangerous technobimbo (and one of Big Daddy Mainframe's agents). The DNA Sluts must disarm him by removing his three dimensional detachable penis, and by doing so, turn it into a cellular phone.
6. 5. A BONDING BOOTH - where G-SLIME (fuel required by the player) is replenished if stocks run low.

All New Gen's motto is:

BE AWARE THAT THERE IS NO MORAL CODE IN THE ZONE

This catch cry epitomises VNS Matrix's attempt to be gender non-specific in their references to the interactive nature of the player; men as well as women can play. However, men of the stereotypically masculine defined variety be warned - this is not an artwork for those easily ego-threatened.

The second VNS Matrix artwork I think is particularly indicative of their attempt to subvert technology in its male dominated mode is the image listed in Figure Two, that of the Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the Twenty First Century.

Besides being a highly confrontational work in the sense of its use of bold phraseology like "We are the modern cunt...the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix...go down on the altar of abjection..."this manifesto also uses a visual imagery base that is 'in your face'. The black and white text presented in a distorted spherical shape contrasts with the vaginal elliptical shapes surrounding it; they in turn are surrounded by outwardly radiating black lines that highlight the nature of the shape itself - possibly indicating pubic hair, branching tendrils, or lines of fiction flight.

This particular shape denotes the exact opposite of the phallic object; that of a rough, hairy, inwardly directed space. The image suggests a return to the body, the visceral, and potentially a reclamation of a female space. What could be more evocative of a transgression of patriarchal power bases than an attack through the very means of technology that are seen to perpetuate it? As Kay Schaffer quite eloquently says:[14]

> "...VNS Matrix permit a rethinking of the cultural boundaries between the natural and the technological. They employ linguistic codes - mutations - new forms of text/body/technology...Zoe Sofoulis calls All New Gen a 'post-phallic formation' (Sofoulis,99,104)."

PHaSe thReE: GASHgirl aNd HeR peRsonA plAymATes

aN iNteRviEw wiTh a CybErFemIniSt eXtraOrDinAIre

Figure Four: This image is from Francesca da Rimini's site entitled *Gashgirl*, which is also the name of one of her fictionalised personas/'net' de plumes.

"I am Gash Girl . . .

Puppet Mistress . . .

Voice Idol . . .

Doll Yoko.

Exquisite Aberrant

Intelligence. Ghost AI.

These are my stories.

I will not remain silent.

They are all true.

I am not mad.

I have wept enough.

(Lies. Lies.)"[15]

This extract from Francesca de Rimini's impending novel - once to be called *A Smear Of Roses,* now entitled *Fleshmeat* - gives an adequate but less-than-complete preview of her multimedia artwork. You have to access her work on the Internet to see what wonders she can create within certain technological boundaries, through her utilisation of vivid imagery involving feminine pain, loss and ambiguous strength via structured text fragments.

I interviewed Francesca after her inclusion of part of my hybrid fiction into the doll yoko/dollspace section of her site. This e-nterview was conducted over a period of approximately a week.

MB: Could you describe your art practice as being an online equivalent of abject art? (cindy sherman type stuff?)

GG: i think this current work is not particularly abject.... it deals with extreme psychological states, memories, fantasies, power relations, erotic relations, sexual taboo, amongst other things ... i dont think the work is abject particularly ...i think if anything it might be more aligned to the self-portraits/untitled film stills sherman was doing in the early 70s..constructing oneself as other in filmic mise-en-scenes..endless games of lets pretend, and textual dressing up

MB: On your gashgirl site, you have several works that involve collaborations with various people. Do these collaborations echo the need to use the net as not so much "community" - which implies individual contributions to a collective as a whole - but as a disruptive, fragmented medium/space? How is this related to your choice of subject matter (ie extremes, madness, mutilation?)

GG: much of my recent work arises from email dialogues and online fantasies, contractual relationships & improvisations with friends and strangers -- its more about using the net as a communication space rather than a 'community' space. Emails and online games form these intensely compelling lines of flight (to me) which are both continuous and broken .. its a medium which lends itself to exploring extremes -- i like also creating frameworks and scenarios which inspire other people to play and write...this idea of minor literature perhaps...see that book by kafka, minor literature by deleuze n guattari...

MB: Your online writing seems to creep into consciousness through lateral narrative means - ^networked fiction neurons^. Can you comment on this?

GG: nope..but it sounds good...

MB: Can you define for me your notion of character/identity/alias/personas (eg the use of extended online alias') - wot function do they serve in terms of artistic production?

GG: it is as if they become the ones who perform and write the work ... me, i'm just hands at a keyboard or grabbing a pen, but the avatars/personas are the ones with something to communicate ...they also sometimes have a different emotional reality to me...i really can only write when i'm in some kind of heightened state...my best work comes when i'm kinda fucked up...i write without thinking....

MB: Can you discuss the gestation of your characters/online doppelgangers (eg Gashgirl, doll yoko) in process terms? Are they linked inherently to the technology which embeds them? Or do they stretch into other states of being (therapeutic/cathartic real life encounters/mediums)?

GG: gashgirl actually formed herself about 5 or 6 years ago when i write a series of fragments about an italian peasant called gashgirl...she was owned by this asshole called Papa Gash ... when i got my character at lambdamoo i decided that gashgirl could reinvent herself as a powerful presence ..shedding the village shackles and becoming a cyber bitch..so the second gashgirl was very much born in the lambdamoo environment...and the people who played with her helped to create her

GG:doll yoko was a character i originally created for vns matrix, for our computer game Bad Code..she was just a head..a bit like that borg bitch in the last star trek film... ..but then when i was in japan and wanted to write about ghost girls, i decided to usurp the original doll and repurpose her for this new work ..and her development was very much connected with a poetic email dialogue i struck up at this time with a mexican zapatista activist living in new york.

GG:all my characters exist in one way or another in so-called real life also.

MB: How much does performance art influence your work? Artists like Virginia Barrat, Rebecca Horn, Vito Acconci, Mike Parr, Stelarc, Kate Bornstein - is the flesh/act meld an important physical component in developing your extremity fiction statements (my term for your writing)?

GG: i prefer reading trash detective novels, zines of all descriptions, going to drum n bass and breakcore clubz, watching hollywood films and beverly hills 90210 to performance art and theory books...a lot of art bores me...visual art any way... i'd rather check my email. dumb type were my favourite performance art experience ...i could watch their stuff over and over .. I loved the way they integrated various media, drag, & politics

MB: Tell me about your video project WHITE.

GG: it's a 9 minite video i made with josephine starrs ...exploring the experience of madness from the perspective of a nameless woman in a white room ...its from a piece of writing i did about 10 years ago...jospephine's background is a photographer and she heard me read the piece at some event in adelaide and wanted to make a film of it with me...her idea was to make the film using mainly black n white stills...chris marker's la jetee was a very obvious influence on us.. .the soundtrack is composed of english, spanish and italian voices ....it's quite stark ...starts with this cinema verite footage from years ago of my mum when she's just been released from a grim spell in our local asylum. we showed white in sydney as an installation, with the image projected onto one wall of a white room at the australian centre for photography. everyday someone would wash the floor with jasol giving the room a nasty hospital feeling. WHITE is now on web tv from a server in new york...this is good cos distributing an actual video is tedious ...anyway..its a www.thing.net/thingnyc/ ...u probably need real audio software to play it

MB: It seems as if you maybe striving to create new currencies of fictionalized meaning through your eroticized violent scenarios and online interactions. Would you agree?

GG: yes..i think so...i just reckon its good for chicks to write more extreme stuff maybe...theres not enough of it around ...and i dont think all that many people are using the moo as i do as both this site to set up intense relationships and then to rework the interactions in a poetic way

MB: Does your work seek to reinvent the body (female/male/degenderless/genderfree/genderfucked) through dependencies on technology and interactivity?

GG: dependencies? is it maybe more expanding ones emotional and intellectual aspects by playing out ideas through mental bodies which never quite forget their physical antecedents but move beyond them? I'm not sure.

as i said once i think..my work doesnt come from an intellectual starting point, neither am i very good at explaining it in intellectual/analytical terms...im happy to make it ...and let others make of it what they will...

MB: And lastly - **Free association time** (single concepts and dichotomies)- if you want to play, just write down anything that comes into your head - if not, that's okay. Its just an easy way for me to list lots of terms I associate with your work but can't really phrase into questions.

[this section of the e-nterview is made up of my stated words/phrases/dichotomies on the left, with Francesca's answers on the right]

Words

Negativity ..negativeland

Deconstruction ..boring books

Sausage meat ..sausage rolls

Fluid...crusty knickers

Blue..blue

Carriage..baby

Dichotomies

Woman/Nature...goddessy things ...new age..feel a bit sqeamish..but i did go to london museum and learn that when the romans invavded england the religion was one which had 2 mother goddesses..a female

Trinity..quite unique i think in world religion..well.according to the museum blurb...

Blood/Static...hep c a girl kisses my neck and i bleed and i have hep c and i tell her not to suck my blood...

Inside/Outside.....

Lust/Suffering...catholic girlhood

Body/Culture...watching gay boys in sydney go to the gym

Technophobia/Epigenesis...i dont know what ephigenesis means..i still get scared of VCRs....they are the only machine which makes me feel dumb..

Displace/Entrench...gypsy nation

Professional/Amateur...hal hartleys film amateur...not as good as his earlier films...he and atom egoyan are 2 fave filmmakers

Hysteria/Contentment...blood n guts

Format/Chaos...boring science book..nasty mandelbrot set grafs,....failing geometry

Cut/Breathe...scars, asthma, taking too many drugs

Reproduction/Religion...conspiracy theories with mafia and the vatican and the world bank

Ritual/Democracy... personal anarchy

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1. owner-nettime-l@Desk.nl Precedence: *Bulk Notes on the Political Condition of Cyberfeminism Faith Wilding and Critical Art Ensemble*. This email was sent as part of the nettime mailing list, Sun Sep 07 18:53:05 1997.

2. Found in Haraway's book *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge 1991) p 149-181.

3. *Neuromancer* was first published in 1986 by Grafton Press. I once heard a cyber-mailing list myth that Gibson wrote all his novels on a large, black, pre-electronic typewriter and had no use for computers in his life. On watching a TV interview with Gibson a few years ago this subsequently turned out to be the truth (his version of it, anyway).

4. Benedickt, M. (ed) *Cyberspace:First Steps* (USA: Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication-Data 1993) p.27.

5. owner-nettime-l@Desk.nl Precedence: *Bulk Notes on the Political Condition of Cyberfeminism Faith Wilding and Critical Art Ensemble*, Sep 1997.

6. Virginia Barratt has since left the collective.

7. This is a quotation from the primary VNS Matrix internet site at: http://sysx.apana.org.au/artists/vns

8. from (nettime) *Josephine Bosma: What Words Are Worth (extract from MUTE)* 26/10/97.

9. From a 1992 press release from the Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide.

10. One of these sources is Kay Schaffer, at the Department of Women's Studies Adelaide.

11. The Oxford Handy Dictionary, 1978, Chancellor Press, p.538.

12. from *Neuromancer*, Grafton Press, 1986, p.67. Gibson goes on to describe the matrix in terms of it being the template of Cyberspace itself.

13. 1992 press release from the Experimental Art Foundation, Lion Arts Centre North Terrace Adelaide.

14. Quoted in *The Contested Zone:Cybernetics, Feminism and Representation*., 1996. http://www.acs.lamp.ac.uk/oz/schaffer.html

15. This is an extract from Francesca da Rimini's novel Fleshmeat. It is due to be published in August 1998.

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NEt biblIOGraPhy and FRANCESCA DE RIMINI fOlIo

http://www.icf.de/starrs/info.html

http://sysx.apana.org.au/artists/vns/

http://sysx.apana.org.au/artists/vns/gashgirl/

http://www.geekgirl.com.au/geekgirl/001stick/vns/vns.html

http://www.arcade.uiowa.edu/gw/comm/GenderMedia/cyber.html

http://www.acs.lamp.ac.uk/oz/schaffer.html

http://www.georgetown.edu/users/holmj/cyberfem.htm

http://www.peg.apc.org/~experimenta/emaf96/internetrix/speakers.html

http://www.thing.net/thingnyc/html/happenin/reading/reading.html

http://www.thing.net/ttreview/janrev97.01.html

http://sysx.apana.org.au/~gashgirl/zombie/

http://www.ozemail.com.au/~wise/sick.html

http://206.251.6.116/geekgirl/003broad/pierce.html

http://www.cc.rochester.edu/College/FS/Publications/Haraway/Cyborg.html

Various editions of EMESH (obtained through experimenta@peg.apc.org)

http://www.hotwired.com/braintennis/96/37/index4a.html

http://www.theory.com/r-fractured_flesh.html

http://kali.murdoch.edu.au/~cntinuum/VID/wildbiol1.html

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