Art

A Brief History of Cyberfeminism

● Izabella Scott   Oct 13, 2016 4:24 pm

Seduction, 1986
Pop Departures at Seattle Art Museum

"By the late 20th century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism," wrote post-humanist scholar and feminist theorist Donna Haraway in her iconic 1983 *A Cyborg Manifesto*. "In short, we are all cyborgs." Her essay addressed the artifice around gender norms, imagined the future of feminism, and proposed the cyborg as the leader of a new world order. Part

human and part machine, the cyborg challenged racial and patriarchal biases. "This," Haraway wrote, "is the self [that] feminists must code."

The field of cyberfeminism, which will be explored by the digital art resource Rhizome as part of their upcoming initiative Net Art Anthology, emerged in the early 1990s after the arrival of the world wide web, which went live in August 1991. Its roots, however, go back to the earlier practices of feminist artists like Lynn Hershman Leeson. Cyberfeminism came to describe an international, unofficial group of female thinkers, coders, and media artists who began linking up online. In the 1980s, computer technology was largely seen as the domain of men—a tool made by men, for men. Cyberfeminists asked: Could we use technology to hack the codes of patriarchy? Could we escape gender online?

Haraway's cyborg became the cyberfeminists' ideal citizen for a post-patriarchal world, but there were other writers leaving an impression on the nascent movement, such as African-American sci-fi writer Octavia Butler. Her Xenogenesis trilogy (1987–89) is set in a post-apocalyptic future ruled by gene-trading aliens. Butler's books broke with conservative conceptions of race and biology, describing aliens that were neither male nor female but a third sex, and who practiced interspecies breeding.

Cyberfeminism's star rose throughout the 1990s, as a growing constellation of women began to practice under its umbrella in different corners of the world, including North America, Australia, Germany, and the U.K. The VNS Matrix, a four-woman collective of "power hackers and machine lovers" in South Australia, began to identify as cyberfeminists in 1992. In their own words, the collective "decided to have some fun with French feminist theory," coding games and inventing avatars as a way to critique the macho landscape of the early web. As one of its members, Virginia Barratt, recalled in an interview with *Vice*'s Motherboard, "We emerged from the cyberswamp…on a mission to hijack the toys from techno-cowboys and remap cyberculture with a feminist bent."

They wrote their own *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century* (1991) in homage to Haraway, presented as an 18-foot-long billboard, which was exhibited at various galleries across Australia. The text bulges from a 3D sphere, surrounded by images of DNA material and dancing, photomontaged women that have been transformed into scaled hybrids. "We make art with our cunts," the manifesto reads. "We are the virus of the new world disorder."

As a comment on porn and the sexist elements of the gaming world, the group developed *All New Gen,* a now-legendary computer game charged with satire. Installed on an arcade machine at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, in 1995, the game follows a group of "cybersluts" as they enter the "Big Daddy Mainframe" and try and topple phallic power with G-slime—goo shot from weaponized clitorises. "We wanted something that was badass and complex, hot, wet, and mind-bending," Barratt once said.

Australian artist Linda Dement also used computer games to code alternative female identities. Her CD-ROM *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* (1995) takes the form of an adventure puzzle game, which Dement described as "a macabre comedy of monstrous femininity." It's a database of surreal monster-girls that Dement assembled from scans of female body parts. They are spliced, amphibious creatures that recall the grotesque photomontages of Dadaist Hannah Höch. An animated narrative in the game reveals that these cyborgs dream of revenge. "If only every woman could kill," one text flashes on the screen. "The next man that touches me dies."

Along with artists and gamers, writers began to contribute to the emerging field. British theorist Sadie Plant launched a project to restore the legacy of women in technology, whose roles had been historically overlooked in preference for their male peers. Her book *Zeros and Ones* (1997), in particular, championed the figure of Ada Lovelace (1815–1852), a math genius and the disputed mother of computer programming, who created the first-ever algorithm in 1843.

CybeRoberta, 1996
Bridget Donahue

In North America, artists from the older feminist guard also took to the web. The new media pioneer Lynn Hershman Leeson had been developing an alter ego throughout the 1970s, named Roberta Breitmore, who she brought into existence with the help of hired actors and documentary evidence that she manufactured. In the '90s, Leeson transplanted Roberta Breitmore into the internet, creating CybeRoberta, a doll whose camera eyes upload the real world online. She later directed a series of sci-fi feature films, like *Conceiving Ada* (1997), which was also based on the life of Ada Lovelace.

On the West Coast, Faith Wilding, a groundbreaking feminist artist prominent in the 1970s for her participation in the seminal installation *Womanhouse* (1972), had begun to adopt the cyberfeminist moniker. Wilding began a collage series in the early 1990s called "Recombinants." The works are composed of images of machines, plants, humans, and animal bodies, creating a point of intersection between life forms and technology. She described the results as "an uneasy, monstrous depository of melancholic historical fragments" in an artist statement.

By 1997, there were enough people identifying as cyberfeminists to warrant a meet-up. The First Cyberfeminist International was organized by a Berlin collective, satirically named the Old Boys Network after the circles of male privilege on which patriarchy feeds. The collective's five women framed the event, which brought together 38 women from 12 countries at Documenta X in Kassel, Germany, as an opportunity "to get [your] hands dirty in the codes and hardware of information technology." During the event, the programmers and artists produced a provocative anti-manifesto called *100 Anti-Theses of Cyberfeminism.* "Cyberfeminism is not a fragrance," it reads, "not boring... not a single woman... not a picnic… not an artificial intelligence... not lady-like... not mythical."

100 anti-theses

cyberfeminism is not ...

1. cyberfeminism is not a fragrance
2. cyberfeminism is not a fashion statement
3. sajbrfeminizm nije usamljen
4. cyberfeminism is not ideology
5. cyberfeminism nije aseksualan
6. cyberfeminism is not boring
7. cyberfeminism ist kein gruenes haekeldeckchen
8. cyberfeminism ist kein leerer kuehlschrank
9. cyberfeminism ist keine theorie
10. cyberfeminism ist keine praxis
11. cyberfeminism ist keine traditio
12. cyberfeminism is not an institution
13. cyberfeminism is notusing words without any knowledge of numbers
14. cyberfeminism is not complete
15. cyberfeminism is not error 101
16. cyberfeminism ist kein fehler
17. cyberfeminism ist keine kunst
18. cyberfeminism is not an ism
19. cyberfeminism is not anti-male
20. sajbrfeminizm nige nesto sto znam da je
21. cyberfeminism is not a structure
22. cyberfeminismo no es uns frontera
23. cyberfeminism nije poslusan
24. cyberfeminism nije apolitican
25. cyberfeminisme is niet concreet
26. cyberfeminism is not separatism
27. cyberfeminism is not a tradition
28. cyberfeminism is not maternalistic
29. cyberfeminisme id niet iets buitenlands
30. cyberfeminism is not without connectivity
31. cyberfeminismus ist nicht mehr wegzudenken
32. cyberfeminismus ist kein oxymoron
33. cyberfeminism is not on sale
34. cyberfeminism is nor for sale
35. cyberfeminismus ist nicht gut
36. cyberfeminismus ist nicht schlecht

100 Antitheses of Cyberfeminism. Via obn.org.

Cyberfeminism resisted easy definition and, as the manifesto showed, there were multiple iterations and conflicting notions of what it was—and was not. By 1997, the movement was running into trouble. Haraway and Butler's texts had called for the dissolution of gender and racial hierarchies, but it was increasingly clear that cyberfeminism had failed to address race at all.

What's more, the notion that the internet could be employed as a categorically liberated space proved to be too optimistic. It was following the Cyberfeminist International in Kassel that Wilding mounted an important critique of the movement. "The Net is *not* a utopia of nongender," she wrote in *Where is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism*. "It is already socially inscribed with regard to bodies, sex, age, economics, social class, and race."

The cyberfeminists, Wilding claimed, had failed to actively interrogate the biases entrenched in cyberspace. "Being bad grrls on the internet is not by itself going to challenge the status quo," she went on. "Cyberfeminism presents itself as inclusive, but the cyberfeminist writings assume an educated, white, upper-middle-class, English speaking, culturally sophisticated readership," Wilding and Maria Fernandez wrote in the book *Domain Errors: Cyberfeminist Practices*.

The movement's advocates may have been bold and brazen, but while purporting to move beyond hierarchal divisions, Wilding felt that they had, unwittingly, reinstated them. She extended her practice to explore the intersection of feminism with other technologies beyond the internet, such as biotechnology—the next frontier for gender discrimination. She founded subRosa, an art collective that critiqued the racial and gender biases in assisted fertility and genetic engineering.

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By the 2000s, cyberfeminists had morphed into new forms of feminism. "The

narratives around liberation from racism, sexism, and so on in the brave new virtual world were promises that were empty," Barratt of VNS Matrix reflected. "New strategies needed to be developed."

Feminists continue to utilize the web as a crucial tool for connecting women all over the world in order to overcome racial and gender privilege. The Global Feminism movement, for instance, aligns closely with advocates for racial justice in its campaigns for women's rights, while post-colonial feminists like Chela Sandoval have talked of "an internetworked global feminism…for women of color who want to connect globally across diasporas." As Wilding conjectured in *Where is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism*, "But if grrrl energy and invention were to be coupled with engaged political theory and practice... Imagine!"

In the later 2000s, as developments in biotechnology continued to advance, techno-feminists like the trans-feminist philosopher Paul B. Preciado further deconstructed gender through methods such as hormone use. In his text *Testo Junkie* (2008), Preciado records his unsanctioned use of testosterone as both performance and political activism. Gender, Preciado demonstrates, is not a natural order, but something we can hack, and eventually code. He frames his hormone experiments in relation to radical amateurs of the past—women as healers, midwives, and herbalists, who were often labeled as witches for their unauthorized acts.

Today, the Xenofeminists, a collective founded in 2014, are members of a "gender-abolitionist" movement that advocates for "gender-hacking" across the web. They believe the only way to ensure gender self-identification and self-expression is to make sex hormones available to all. This means challenging the current systems of pharmaceutical production—which protect and regulate hormone access—and building open-source gender-code platforms for hormone production to allow "laypeople" to grow them at home.

Just as Haraway and Butler envisioned building and destroying machines, identities, and categories, the Xenofeminists aim to incite an accelerated explosion of gender, "to enlarge our existing repertoire to one hundred blooming sexes." Viva Cyberfeminism 2.0.

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