prefiguring cyberculture
AN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

edited by
Darren Tofts, Annemarie Jonson, and Alessio Cavallaro
The term "cyberfeminist" arose simultaneously in 1991 for scholar Sadie Plant in England, and the Australian feminist art group VNS Matrix. Like many Australian feminists, VNS Matrix became aware of Haraway's Manifesto when it was reprinted in the journal *Australian Feminist Studies* in 1987, and paid homage to it in their (1992) *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century.* Produced using electronic image-making technologies, it featured a horned woman in a shell amidst a molecular matrix, with a text announcing "the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix" and proclaiming themselves as the "virus of the new world order ... saboteurs of big daddy mainframe ... terminators of the moral code ... mercenaries of slime ... we are the future [etc.]." The group went on to produce *All New Gen,* a series of lightboxes and the prototype of a computer game based on these themes. During the mid 1990s, along with one of the VNS Matrix artists, Virginia Barratt, I conducted interviews with Australian women artists in digital media: we found that almost all our interviewees had read the Manifesto and been inspired in one way or another by it. Slightly later than us, and with a partially overlapping sample of interviewees, researcher Glenice Watson (2000) found that a number of Australian women pioneers of the Internet were committed to the practice of being feminist activists on and around the Internet, though not all identified as "cyberfeminists" per se.

While Australian interest in cyberfeminism had more or less peaked by around 1996, the term continued to attract attention in Europe and the international cyberarts scene. In 1997 and 1999 the first and second "Cyberfeminist International" events were organized by an international group of women (including former VNS Matrix member Julianne Pierce) who ironically call themselves The Old Boys Network. Themes at the second event included "Split Bodies and Fluid Gender," computer hacking and whether feminists could "appropriate the practice for their purposes," and feminist responses to globalization (Volkart and Sollfrank 1999, 4-5), as well as discussions and papers on the problems of defining cyberfeminism, how it might be different from other feminist critiques of technology, its essential pluralism, its connections with praxis, etc. For writers in the *Next Cyberfeminist International* catalog (Sollfrank and Old Boys Network 1999), Haraway was a foundational author to be critiqued. However, one – Nat Muller – observed that Haraway's (1988) "Situated Knowledges" essay, which had been overlooked in favor of the Manifesto, offered some promising openings for cyberfeminists who wanted a more technologically oriented approach than that offered in the discourse-heavy cybercultural studies of the mid to late 1990s. Likewise the early self-proclaimed cyberfeminist Sadie Plant was "the theorist we all love to slag off" (Muller 1999, 75), while cultural studies scholar Anne Balsamo was cited approvingly for her interests in the real conditions of women's working lives and technological engagements (Muller 1999, Ackers 1999). Rosi Braidotti's (1994) critical approach to cyborgism was also accepted. Various contributors expressed dissatisfaction with Haraway's and Plant's too-easy linkage under the "cyborg" banner of those cybergirls of the rich nations with Third World women producing the equipment (one of the standard critiques of the Manifesto):

I am very weary of making these celebratory gyno-social links as in: Ooowww look at us girlies

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16 Versions of the VNS Matrix manifesto have been reprinted in Zurbrugg (1994, 427), and Sofia (1996, 61).
18 I am grateful to Irina Aristarkhova for sending me a copy of the *Next Cyberfeminist International* catalogue.
we're all digital divas whether we're slaving away in a chip factory or whether we're suffering from rep. strain injury or carpal tunnel syndrome. This makes me think of 70s sisterhood feminism … before we start jumping around with terms like 'virtual sisterhood,' we should be sensitive to just how inclusive that sisterhood is (Muller 1999, 76).

Some writers rejected Plant's (1995, 1998) essentialist ideas about the posthuman and machinic character of women's subserviveness in the computer age, along similar lines to my critique, above (see Bassett 1999, Muller 1999), and perhaps best summed up by Volkart and Sollfrank:

Unlike approaches which assume that female resistance is already happening unconsciously in unknown, uncontrollable spaces, we insist on the idea of aware responsibility, reflection and of engaged motivation and intention (1999, 5).

Signaling disaffection with the earlier euphorics of VNS Matrix's Cyberfeminist Manifesto, Sollfrank wrote near the end of a report on her research on female hackers (she found few) that "My clitoris does not have a direct line to the matrix – unfortunately. Such rhetoric mystifies technology and misrepresents the daily life of the female computer worker" (Sollfrank 1999, 48). This interest in practice and the realities of cyberspace life was a theme in several other articles in the Next Cyberfeminist International catalog, which included besides the theoretical contributions I have highlighted others about more technical details of hacking and networking, discussions of various cyber-inspired artworks (or artworks interpretable in cyberfeminist terms), pieces about biotechnologies, the visible human project, and accessing cyberspace in the former Soviet Union; in short, a range of themes quite typical of those discussed in and around cyberarts, and in cyberecultural studies (see note 13).

Coming in conjunction with cyberpunk fiction and the personal computer revolution, the Manifesto was well placed to give some focus to expressions of hope and fear about the emergent technoworlds. As I earlier suggested (after Lykke 1996), Haraway's work, especially the Manifesto, has been important in enabling people from outside the fields of science studies to feel empowered to talk, think, criticize, write, and make artworks about the new forms of being and experience, and new kinds of sociotechnical and biotechnical hybrids emergent into the 21st century. Even though some of the post-Harawayan cyberfeminists have found problems with the Manifesto and its utopian dreams, it is still the case that the work was enabling for many scholars, artists, critics, and activists, who can take from it concepts and vocabulary to help name some of the new experiences and possibilities – both scary and pleasurable – afforded by technologies of the late 20th century, and to put some of these into perspective in relation to historical developments in science and industry over the 19th and 20th centuries.

There was a certain infectious euphorics of impurity in the Manifesto's vision of a hybrid identity committed to "partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity": the cyborg myth offered an appealing way out to those frustrated by the purisms of identity politics, as well as those white women who experienced forms of hybridity besides those lived by their non-white or non-Anglo sisters. The Manifesto's account of the "informatics of domination" outlined the broader power-knowledge context in which the breakdown of purisms became more legible than they were within the dualisms of "white capitalist patriarchy" and the kind of feminism generated in/against it. The former Catholic girl's celebration of blasphemy, irreverence, and iconoclasm fitted in well with the images of "bad girls," flirting on the edge of pleasure and danger, that were cultivated by sexual radicals like lesbianfeminist sadomasochists of the 1980s (and got a hetero-
Gregory L. Ulmer, Professor of English and Media Studies at the University of Florida, is the author of Heuretics: The Logic of Invention (Johns Hopkins 1994); Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video (Routledge 1989); and Applied Grammatology: Post(e)-Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys (Johns Hopkins 1985). In addition to two other monographs and a textbook for writing about literature, Ulmer has authored some 50 articles and chapters exploring the shift in the apparatus of language from literacy to electracy. His media work includes two video tapes in distribution (one with Paper Tiger Television, the other with the Critical Art Ensemble). He has given invited addresses at international media arts conferences in Helsinki, Sydney, Hamburg, Nottingham, and Halifax as well as at many sites in the United States, and is on the faculty of the European Graduate School. Ulmer's Internet experiments are organized around the problematic of electronic monumentality – concerned with the mutation of the public sphere in electracy and the consequences for national identity. His current work is a collaboration with the Florida Research Ensemble on the project for a new consultancy – the EmerAgency – as described in their coauthored book, Miami Miautre: Mapping the Virtual City.

Samuel J. Umland is Professor of English and Film Studies at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, where in addition to film he teaches courses in media theory. He edited a collection of essays on Philip K. Dick, Philip K. Dick: Contemporary Critical Interpretations (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press 1995). With Rebecca A. Umland he co-authored a critical biography of the late British film director Donald Cammell, forthcoming from FAB Press (UK).

VNS Matrix (Josephine Starrs, Francesca da Rimini, Julianne Pierce, and Virginia Barratt [until 1996]) emerged from the cyberswamp as VNS Matrix during a steamy southern Australian summer, circa 1991. From 1991-2001 the group made new media, photography, sound works, video installations, computer games and public art works in Australia and overseas exploring ideas around technology, sexuality, and control in technoculture from a feminist perspective. Together with Sadie Plant, VNS coined the term “cyberfeminism” in the early 1990s.

Catherine Waldby is Reader in Sociology and Communications and the Director of the Centre for Research in Innovation, Culture and Technology at Brunel University, London. She is also Adjunct Associate Professor at the National Centre in HIV Social Research, University of New South Wales, Sydney. She is the author of AIDS and the Body Politic: Biomedicine and Sexual Difference (Routledge 1996), The Visible Human Project: Informatic Bodies and Posthuman Medicine (Routledge 2000), and numerous articles about science, technology and the body. She is currently researching social aspects of tissue transfer, with a focus on blood, embryos and human stem cell technologies.

McKenzie Wark is the author of three books, including Virtual Geography (Indiana University Press) and Celebrities, Culture and Cyberspace (Sydney: Pluto Press). He is co-author of the collaborative anti-hypertext work Speed Factory (Fremantle Arts Centre Press) and with Brad Miller co-authored the multimedia work Planet of Noise (Australian Film Commission). He is Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, and a Visiting Professor in Comparative Literature at the State University of New York, Binghamton.

http://www.mcs.mq.edu.au/~mwark
"Cyberculture has a history, a deeply layered and non-teleological history, a history full of surprises both good and bad, a history replete with consequences for what it means to speak of the human in "informatic" or "posthuman" idioms. This passionate, multi-lobed conviction is the generative organ of this wonderful book. The shapes of history matter here as much as its temporalities, as much as its subjectivities. Indeed, shape, time, and subject mutually reconfigure each other in the prefigurings in fiction, science, and technology that this book explores. Prefiguring Cyberculture explores what the editors call the "continuous present tense." That is the always unfinished time in which classifications of what may count as human and nonhuman morph within lived technologies that bear the stigmata of the signifying monster called information.

Reading this book is an exercise in reconfiguring how we see how we are in this formation called cyberculture. In the process, readers enjoy what binds the authors and editors together—the capacity to be surprised in the belly of the monster."

DONNA HARAWAY