Suffragettes to She-Devils: Women's Liberation and Beyond

Phaidon

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For all of us:
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The feminization of new technology

Women have been programmed - socially, educationally and culturally - to stay away from computer technology. Computers have been a male domain: first developed on a large scale by the military, they were usually operated by men in white coats (either technicians or scientists, and of course science was a male domain). In visual terms, they produced imagery that was hard-edged, cryptic and male: dot-pattern outlines of Mickey Mouse (or even pin-ups) or squarish nerd-like repeat-patterns.

The advent of microprocessors in the 1970s and the increased availability of personal computers in the 1980s didn't help matters much - the computers became smaller, the culture remained the same. Women had only one role to play, if anything - and that was to be draped over a console in a bikini in order to sell the horrid little box. Cyberpunk, a movement in science-fiction writing that started in the early 1980s, also didn't help. It conjured up images of cyberspace and other visions of the technological future, traversed by hyper, young Punk-males, and created a popular culture in which men run the computers, jack-in and take drugs, while women are reduced to fetishized objects of desire. Needless to say, it all runs on high-voltage violence. The rise of computer video games propagated this image of a fantasy, shoot-em-up, boys computer culture, which reinforced stylized roles for women as ravishing beauties or princesses to be rescued, making computers even more alienating and repulsive to women.

Thankfully, this situation began to disintegrate in the 1990s. A female-driven cyberculture emerged, encouraged from 1985 on by scientific historian Donna Haraway's theories relating to the non-gendered cyborg - the fusion of organism and machine - as having potential for women's liberation. For if gender is rendered obsolete, then women's oppression as experienced under patriarchy is not possible: hence equality becomes achievable. Soon many other female techno-theorists, science-fiction writers and digital artists proved men's God-given technological affinities (and their lack in women) to be a myth. Cyberfeminism, initially a media-hype term coined to describe a small group of theorists, has now become a term by which many female digital artists and designers define themselves, who wish to claim the technology for their own.

Another change, highly significant for visual designers, has made computer technology less alienatingly male. It has to do largely with developments in software and the interface (the means by which we interact with the machine). In previous decades, interaction with a computer was defined by programming languages and software based on linear structures and organizational hierarchies. In essence, the male vision of (corporate) cultural organization - centralized power, hierarchical systems and codes of control - was transplanted straight onto computers. But now, other structures have been developed and have come into play. The lateral organizational structures of webs and networks (found in hypertext, the World Wide Web and the global network of the Internet) are all more akin to the female or feminist vision of democratization and diversity that was first articulated in the 1970s, when women rejected male hierarchies and 'ladders', finding that they could think and live more easily in lateral movements. These developments were combined with a new emphasis on a visual interface, and although we are still often lumbered with lists and menus, things can only get better.
As more women became involved with the new technologies, more
creative possibilities seem to open up. But the accompanying dangers are
very serious. Every techno-feminist knows that social divisions may only be
confirmed and exacerbated by future cyber-developments. The real question
looming in the distance is 'who will have access to or possession of the tech-
nology?', and it is not only women who may be disempowered. The poten-
tial for introducing centralized power structures on the vastness of the
Internet is great; the potential for a small minority owning and controlling
the new currency of information is equally great. So the message of the
moment is that women must not hesitate. They must claim the technology for
their own while the debate and the development is happening — get it, use
it, explore it and transform it — or risk being excluded forevermore, subject
to the same old male-orientated representations and constructs.

At the moment, women, virtual sisters, cyberfeminists, techno-babes,
spiderwomen and cybergirls seem to be transforming the shape of the
future. Women are using digital technology for research, education and
empowerment: for connecting across continents as never before and, as in
times past, sharing experience and information. They are also beginning to
explore its great potential for breaking down divisions of distance or wealth,
as development agencies continue to plant monitors in the most interesting
and unusual places. This is particularly true in certain parts of Africa, for
example, which have 'jumped' a generation of technology, missing out
faxes and going straight on to e-mail and the Internet (see Chapter Five).

Women are also exploring the new technologies creatively. Although
any proper discussion would fill an entire book, it is worth mentioning just
a few highlights on this front. Christine Tamblyn's interactive CD-ROM, 'She
Loves It, She Loves It Not' is a primer on the subject of women and technol-
ogy. It provides an enjoyable and informative compilation of reasons, ex-
amples and references relating to the exclusion of women from technology,
which is shown to be a facet of male domination over women. The message
is enhanced by the creative use of the multi-media facility. The rigid finesse
of the usual male-orientated graphic style of on-screen design is exchanged
for a fluid experience of movement, sound and animated navigational tools
that excite the user to interact with a body of researched facts, literary ref-
erences, television ads, films and anecdotes.

VNS Matrix, a group of four Australian women artists, offer a new
tack on cuntpower for the next century. They formed in 1991 with a mission,
in part: 'to hijack cowboy toys and remap cyberspace'. Their interactive
computer-simulation, entitled 'All New Gen' (1992) employs the constructs and
mentality of boys-own computer games, but subverts the gender
stereotypes. Hence, All New Gen and her band of renegade DNA Sluts [Patina
de Panties, Dentata and the Princess of Slime] go on a journey to sabotage
Big Daddy Mainframe, tangling along the way with various technomutants
such as Circuit Boy (a techno bimbo and Big Daddy's sidekick), whom they
crash computer-style at a convenient point. It is a wild and wonderfully orgas-
mic vision, which also subverts the notions of winning or losing, and even
scoring. For the rules keep changing: ultimately 'the linear is redundant on
the All New Gen Net, and the polymorphous and the perverse rule'.

The notion of connectivity fits comfortably with the space-age futur-
istic mentality of the World Wide Web and the Internet. If we can't have
space stations and be interplanetary, at least we can be cyber-social as
Web sites begin to crop up everywhere, almost cafe-style. It is now possible
to drop in and pay a visit to The Girlie Network, the interactive Web site for
a fantasy television station created by New York's Dyke Action Machine!
or to explore the lively forums of electronic zines such as *GeekGirl*,
created by Rosie Cross in Australia.

The future promises excursions into new dimensions and other
worlds, possibilities suggested in the experimental work in virtual reality
conducted by Diane Gromala, US visual artist and designer.
Her project 'Dancing with the Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies' (1994),
created with dancer Yacov Sharir, combines a physical dance performance
(a real experience of one dancer performing for an audience), with a journey through virtual environments – experienced by
one person (an audience member or the dancer himself) using a head-mounted display and dataglove. The journey is simultaneously viewed
by the entire audience by means of large video projections.

In the VR environment, the dancer/HMD user enters and journeys
through an enormous body – Gromala's – passing through a skeleton frame wrapped with letterforms and text, and entering organs that operate like chambers, and open up into further chambers. A virtual representation of the dancer is also contained within the virtual body, manifested as a series of video-grabs, texture-mapped onto a planar surface. The dancer therefore exists simultaneously in two worlds – as a representation in the virtual environment, and as a performer in the physical space – and can, in essence, dance with himself. The project offers extraordinary performance possibilities, and exists in other iterations, where both audience and dancer don the equipment at various points. (A fuller description and illustrations of the project follow on pages 185–187.)

The experience of both dancer and interactors in the body, immersed
within the virtual world of graphic and typographic imagery, offers clues to
what may lie ahead in multidisciplinary experimentation. It also represents
the ultimate non-linear experience: the reconfiguration of the outer and the inner. This introduces a fascinating prospect for women and their future cyber-explorations. For the private and public dimensions that have defined (and limited) women's experience have, in these experimental terms, ceased to exist. Outer and inner have merged. For the future of women's graphic expression, whether visual or textual, the implications are exhilarating.

Forget about designing the page – become the page.
New technology takeover: finding a voice in the twenty-first century

After decades of exclusion from the male world of computer technology, women have engaged with the new digital technologies of the 1990s in exciting, experimental ways; the [digital] future will certainly be female, and also a lot of fun. Women are using the new technologies for research, education and empowerment around the globe, forming digital networks to replace the snail-mail feminist networks of old. They are also using them for creative exploration, and a few projects are shown here which hint at creative pathways for the future.

The CD-ROM 'She Loves It, She Loves It Not: Women and Technology' (1993) created by Christine Tamblyn, Marjorie Franklin and Paul Tompkins, provides a good starting point for anyone wishing to examine the relationships between women and technology. This is an enjoyable journey through an informative compilation of facts, anecdotes and references. Each page or screen takes the form of an interactive collage that can include: texts explaining the causes and effects of women's exclusion from technology; sounds, such as the pounding of typewriters and washing machines; memos from the great abyss of cyberspace; anecdotal, handwritten letters to the user (accessed through click-on envelopes that wobble suggestively); and Quicktime movie clips of advertisements and films. The free-ranging artistic styling of the screens, as well as the continual movement of animated buttons, and a churning, grating background sound, not only bring the screens to life but also show how stagnant much on-screen design can be when restricted by a hard-edged, modernist grid mentality. In the new world of digital technology, breaking the rules is essential.

Using the computer and its keyboard as the basis for a number of metaphors, the Women's Design and Research Unit (WD+RU) in London produced the typeface-design project Pussy Galore as a means of exploring the propaganda about women embedded in both visual and verbal language. Created for FUSE magazine (issue 12) in 1995, it was devised as a 'conceptual typeface' – the keyboarding of a word yields, not letterforms, but a string of ideological 'icons', appearing in the form of word-clusters or pictogrammes. Use of the various shift levels reveals additional layers of icons with themes, such as bad
Women's voices have been restricted for too long.

Women and technology are visual parts of the future and, for women, technology is the vehicle for their liberation.
language or stereotypes; while asterisks act as a cue to open up textual quotes or animated image sequences. Designed as a real-time system, Pussy Galore remains, above all, an experimental tool for raising awareness and self-expression, as users are encouraged to reconstruct the existing icons (or design their own) and thus build their own linguistic experience.

The cyberspace that hangs over and around Australia has yielded interesting movements in cyberfeminist art and experimentation. The four artists known as VNS Matrix have created a vision of twenty-first century cuntpower in their interactive computer-simulation All New Gen (1992), which takes on the constructs and mentality of boys' computer games, but subverts the gender stereotypes. Hence the heroine, All New Gen, and her band of renegade DNA Sluts go on a journey to destroy Big Daddy Mainframe, and along the way have to tangle with various technomutants such as Circuit Boy (a techno bimbo who undergoes cyber-castration: when his penis is unscrewed, it 'morphs' into a cellular phone). The screens shown here give the gist of the many dangers and ecstasies to be experienced throughout their quest; while in broader terms, VNS Matrix pursue their own aim to 'remap cyberspace'.

In this same spirit of adventure, Australian radio producer, writer and videomaker Rosie Cross founded the first cyberfeminist zine in 1995. Geekgirl aims to be a friendly, fashionable and accessible read for women who work and play in cyberspace, and for grrrls who may not yet be connected to what Rosie X calls 'a tool of butt-kicking empowerment'. Hence the Geekgirl motto is 'Grrrls need Modems'. T-shirts and wild computer covers add to the fun, and the zine itself exists in both hard copy and digital formats – an aid to those who may be in need of a slow introduction to info-tech. Any hesitancy will not last long, however, for the most impressive thing about Geekgirl is the fast and furious, fun-seeking energy which it generates, all heavily contagious. A true vehicle for 'the online woman warrior', Geekgirl also produces Australia's most popular webzine site.
Lastly, the potential for future excursions into other worlds is shown in US artist/designer Diane Gromala’s project ‘Dancing with the Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies’, created with dancer Yacov Sharir and performed in 1994. It combines one dancer’s physical performance with a journey through virtual environments, experienced through an HMD (head-mounted display) and a dataglove. As an experimental performance, it exists in a number of iterations involving audience members and one dancer: sometimes the dancer wears the VR equipment while creating a performance, sometimes a member of the audience wears it while the dancer performs — although in both cases the VR ‘journey’ can be seen by large video projections in real time.

Donning the HMD and dataglove locates the dancer/HMD user within a virtual environment — a body of monumental proportions, with a virtual representation of the dancer contained within it. The body, which has slowly moving parts to represent constant decay and transition, consists of a rib cage, spine, pelvis, heart, liver and kidneys: all texture-mapped with x-ray and MRI images of Gromala’s own body, and wrapped with letterforms and text. The dancer/HMD user enters and travels through this enormous body. The organs act as ‘portals’, which the dancer/HMD user can enter in order to experience another environment — and, if entering an enclosed chamber, the dancer/HMD user can in fact keep on moving through increasingly larger chambers. Each organ represents one of the traditional dervish’s seven veils (in character, text, structure, etc); the heart refers to ‘desire’, the liver to ‘avarice and parsimony’, and so on. The virtual representation of the dancer is manifested as a series of video-grabs, texture-mapped onto a planar surface. Thus in the course of the journey, the (real) dancer can dance with his (virtual) self, and at some future stage of development his virtual self may even be able to interact with or respond to him.

The dancer/HMD user therefore exists simultaneously in two worlds, the physical and the virtual, which interact during the performance. When the dancer/HMD user is wearing the VR gear, he can only experience the virtual environment. The audience, however, can experience his physical ‘dance’, limited by the wires of the electronic gear and the tracking sensors, as well as viewing his journey through the virtual body — seeing what he sees via the large video projections, in real time. Other performance iterations also exist, where both audience and dancer don the equipment at various points.

As one of the first VR projects to fully integrate dance as a primary component, ‘Dancing with the Virtual Dervish’ offers extraordinary performance possibilities, as well as transgressing the symbolic construct of outer and inner experience, revealing new dimensions and new territories for women’s future cyber-explorations.
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