

# FICTIONING

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THE MYTH-FUNCTIONS OF  
CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHILOSOPHY

David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan

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of mutation of a body rather than focusing on stable difference' (197), tendencies through which new bodies and worlds are fictioned.

In terms of technofeminism, Parisi offers an account of science which is pitched against both reductive phallic economies and an overly instrumentalised register of knowledge production. But Parisi is also writing a future fiction of sorts, laying out the coordinates of a more inorganic sexuality to come. We might also note that, as with Plant's writing, various fictions – including Science Fiction such as *Blood Music* by Greg Bear (1985), *Dawn* by Octavia E. Butler (1987) and *Ribofunk* by Paul Di Filippo (1996) – are quoted alongside and as equivalent to scientific and philosophical sources, in much the same way as Deleuze and Guattari cite fiction in 'A Thousand Plateaus, especially in a plateau like '10,000 BC: The Geology of Morals (Who Does the Earth Think It Is?)' (1988: 39–74). Indeed, Parisi's treatment of fiction and science is characteristic of technofeminism that engages with Science Fiction as a speculative technology.

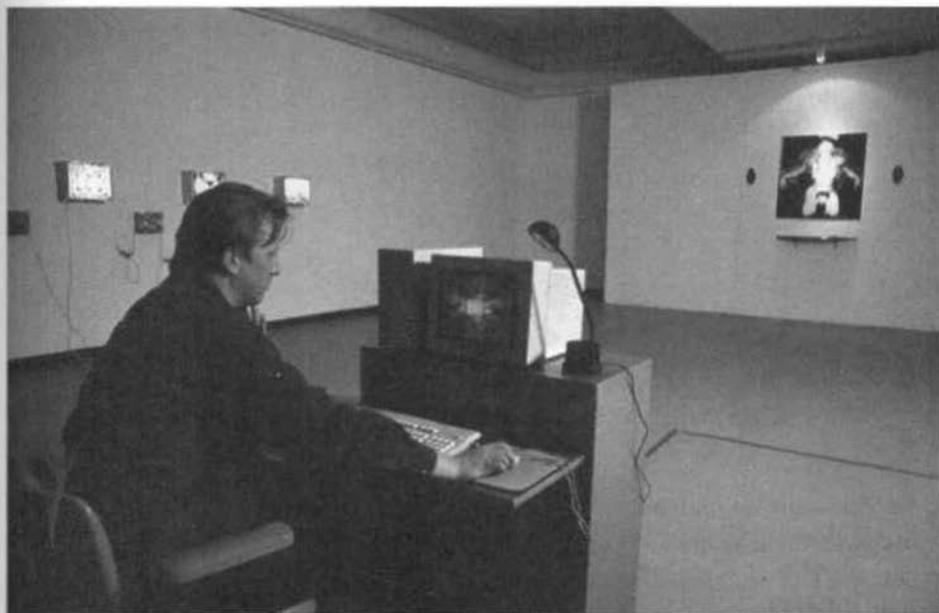
Parisi's more recent work, *Contagious Architecture: Computation, Aesthetics, and Space* (2013), on digital architecture and computational culture, continues her enquiry into abstraction and the digital. In this book there remains an emphasis on a future-orientation that values the incomputable (or abstract) with the aim of infecting physical, biological and technological actualities; Parisi's conclusion being that computation 'can no longer be saved from the uncertainties of unknown worlds, but has instead become as open to contingencies as biological and physical fields of knowledge' (2013: 256) – a statement that should give technofeminists some measure of optimism.

### The Future Cunt

In *Zeros and Ones*, Plant observes that feminists in the 1990s inspired by Donna Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1991) produced many new manifestos amidst waves of enthusiasm for technology (1997: 63). Most notable was the *The Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century* (1991) by VNS Matrix, which offered the maxim 'the clitoris is the direct line to the matrix' (1991) (for the full manifesto see our epigraph to this chapter). Plant points out that this was more than a provocative joke, for the term matrix not only referenced the growing networks of digital



22.3 VNS Matrix, *The Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*, 1991 (courtesy of VNS Matrix).



22.4 VNS Matrix, installation view of *ALL NEW GEN*, 1993 (courtesy of VNS Matrix).

communication but also means womb in Latin (1997: 63). Famously, VNS Matrix – a collective consisting of Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce, Francesca da Rimini and Virginia Barratt – pasted their maxim on a billboard in Australia and distributed their manifesto as hard copy and on websites, declaring war against ‘big daddy mainframe’ and signalling that digital technology was a feminist issue. The manifesto was presented as an image of text digitally expanded through spherisation, producing a vectorised word balloon (see Figure 22.3), and through imagery of slime and viruses joyously connecting the digital to malleable and mutable flesh. The language of the manifesto – declaring cyberfeminism a ‘positive anti-reason’ and cyberfeminists ‘terminators of the moral code’ – promised a corruption of discourse. The entity or entities that would be bring about such a new disorder is ‘the future cunt’ (VNS Matrix 1991).

But if the Cyberfeminist Manifesto seems to identify future entities as female, a computer game and artwork designed by VNS Matrix launched in 1993 indicates things are not so straightforward (or indeed straight at all). *ALL NEW GEN* (1993) – populated with characters such as Dentata and Circuit Boy (Figs. 22.4 and 22.5) – is an interactive computer game that begins with a question asking the gender of the player. Answering male or female blocks the player from entering the game, the correct answer being neither. Here we think of Plant’s and Parisi’s notion of the molecular, and the inversions of binaries and abstract sex: at the very first stirrings of



22.5 VNS Matrix, Big Daddy Mainframe and Circuit Boy from *ALL NEW GEN*, 1991 (courtesy of VNS Matrix).

cyberfeminism we find something like Firestone's prediction of the redundancy of male and female binaries through technology.

But the war against big daddy mainframe was not easily won, or always fun, and VNS Matrix disbanded in 1997. Others took up the cause, including a group called the Old Boy Network (consisting of Cornelia Sollfrank, Ellen Nonnenmacher, Vali Djordjevic and Julianne Pierce), who offered a manifesto of sorts at what is considered the first International Cyberfeminist Conference (1997). As Hester comments (2017), this manifesto is written in the negative, through a disidentification, and allows cyberfeminism to be elusive – again an echo of the zero within technofeminism. In '100 anti-theses', the Old Boy Network define cyberfeminism through what it is not. Hester (2017) questions this aspect of technofeminism, noting the decline of cyberfeminism and how a refusal to identify may limit its capacity to make 'collective demands'. In this Hester articulates a problem addressed by many of her contemporaries, including Laboria Cuboniks (the group Hester works with), asserting that it is appropriate to discuss a post-cyberfeminism that builds on the past but rejects disidentification. Instead, Hester proposes the model of '*n* hypothesis', which, quoting Laboria Cuboniks, she describes as: "a mutable architecture that, like open source software, remains available for perpetual modification and enhancement following the navigational impulse" of collective gender political reasoning' (2017).

The *n* of Hester's model, standing for any number, seems to us an exciting fictioning tool, and also a mythotechnic figure that we feel is not so far away from Plant's interest in the inversions of zeros and ones and Parisi's interest in the abstract. Still, we get the point, *n* signals the need for risking collective identifications in full knowledge of the possible breakdown and failure of this project (reminding us of Halberstam's idea of engaging in a collective cause for the sake of collectivity, in spite of probable failure – though it only becomes clear whether something will fail or not

when it has been tried). It would seem that identifying with feminist (and other) causes is a necessary but precarious venture.

Perhaps something of this thinking can be traced to the VNS Matrix. Twenty-five years after the Cyberfeminist Manifesto – after the rise of the internet bully-boy troll and Grand Theft Auto – VNS Matrix began working together again and wrote 'A Tender Hex for the Anthropocene' (2016a), seemingly more reflexive in tone than the manifesto (with references to surveillance, terror and ecological decline), but still defiant and playful. The group write:

The modern cunt  
 Extends secret malignancies towards sameness  
 Buries the virus deep  
 in the zero  
 Dentata still has currency  
 forever bitchcoin (2016a)

On reforming, VNS Matrix cast a spell, and we can't help thinking that the disorder for patriarchy and modern institutions brought about by the fluid and the networked (of the trans, the crypto and the digitally masked) was all fictioned first through the spell of the future cunt. But in the hexing of the Anthropocene, joy is tempered with images of 'screaming horseman' that 'spiral towards the singularity' (2016a). Indeed, the tone at times seems embattled, apocalyptic even, for the digital (and molecular) revolution has birthed a precariousness life, even if somewhat freer of suffocating binaries. Here, in 'A Tender Hex for the Anthropocene', is perhaps something on which to build precarious collective fictionings, identifications and demands.

### Mnemesoid

In *Dark Continent – Mnemesoid* (2016), a performance work by the artist Tai Shani, the precariousness of life is made palpable but erotic. In the performance (see Figure 22.6) a naked woman (an actress) sits in front of a camera reading from an autocue, her dramatically lit face projected in high definition and large-scale; the screen image is sharp and clear, the breathing and fleshy body is hidden in shadows and behind technology. The actress reads a text that informs the audience she is a 'creature of fiction'; for Mnemesoid is 'an open source software programme named after Mnemosyne, mother of the 9 muses and the symbolic embodiment of memory in Greek mythology' (Shani 2016). As a database of many experiences, Mnemesoid is able to render language and images as high-fidelity, sensory episodes that can be presented from a number of perspectives, 'from the POV of self, other, animal or

**'This is a book about loops, the fictional and the real, the virtual and the actual, the past that never was and the people yet to come – and how to occupy them, to live in the in-between, summon demons, talk to cats, compose new temporalities, all in the name of building a future so alien that none of us could even imagine what it might be like.'**

Laboria Cuboniks

## **Maps out the practice of fictioning as a new field of study for art and philosophy**

Fictioning in art is an open-ended, experimental practice that involves performing, diagramming or assembling to create or anticipate new modes of existence. In this extensively illustrated book containing over 80 diagrams and images of artworks, David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan explore the technics of fictioning through three focal points: mythopoesis, myth-science and mythotechnesis. These relate to three specific modes of fictioning: performance fictioning, science fictioning and machine fictioning.

In this way, Burrows and O'Sullivan explore how fictioning can offer us alternatives to the dominant fictions that construct our reality in an age of 'post-truth' and 'perception management'. Through fictioning, they look forward to the new kinds of human, part-human and non-human bodies and societies to come.

### **Key Features**

- Explores the different ways that art practices deploy myth and fiction reality
- Draws on a rich constellation of recent philosophical perspectives – including those associated with the speculative and ontological turns, non-philosophy, residual and emergent cultures, decolonisation and the posthuman
- Moves through counter-cultures, performance studies, continental philosophy, anthropology, afrofuturisms, feminisms, science fiction, cybernetics, neuroscience, artificial intelligence research, electronic music and other digital practices
- Ultimately argues that fictioning is at its most radical and experimental in the expanded field of contemporary art practice

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