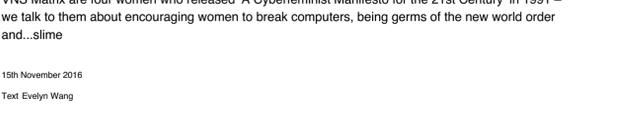


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The Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st century VNS Matrix

## The cyberfeminists who called themselves ‘the future cunt’

ARTS+ CULTURE · FEATURE

VNS Matrix are four women who released ‘A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century’ in 1991 – we talk to them about encouraging women to break computers, being germs of the new world order and...slime

15th November 2016

Text Evelyn Wang

25 years ago, four women unleashed *A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*. They put it on the internet and a giant travelling billboard. From there, it quickly leaked onto the radio and magazine pages and other IRL ephemera, jumping from medium to medium at rapid pace.

*we are the modern cunt, it declares.*

*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 codes*

*mercenarys of slime*

*go down on the altar of abjection*

*probing the visceral temple we speak in tongues*

*infiltrating disrupting disseminating*

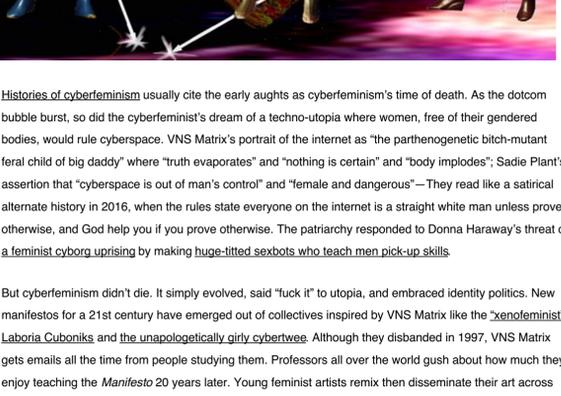
*corrupting the discourse*

*we are the future cunt*

“This blasphemous text...was the birth of cyberfeminism.” At least that’s one origin story listed on the website of [VNS Matrix](#), the famous cyberfeminist art collective formed in 1991 by four Australians — Virginia Barratt, Julianne Pierce, Francesca da Rimini, and Josephine Stars. Together, they “struck at the mass erection of the techno-patriarchal order” with immersive mindfucks and interactive propaganda. Their [manifesto](#) was a “radically transgressive, interactive computer game for non-specific genders” where you joined a foursome of “DNA Sluts” to battle “Big Daddy Mainframe and his techno-bimbo sidekicks” by pew-pewing slime from your clit.

Cyberpunk might have looked the part, but this was real punk — the pure, unadulterated, brewed-in-a-bathub-not-for-softboy-consumption stuff. “Eat code and die,” spits VNS Matrix’s parting [Bitch Mutant Manifesto](#). “Extend my phenotype, baby,” it taunts. “Give me some of that hot black javamagic you’re always bragging about....genderfuck me baby / resistance is futile...upload me in yr shiny shiny PVC future. SUCK MY CODE.”

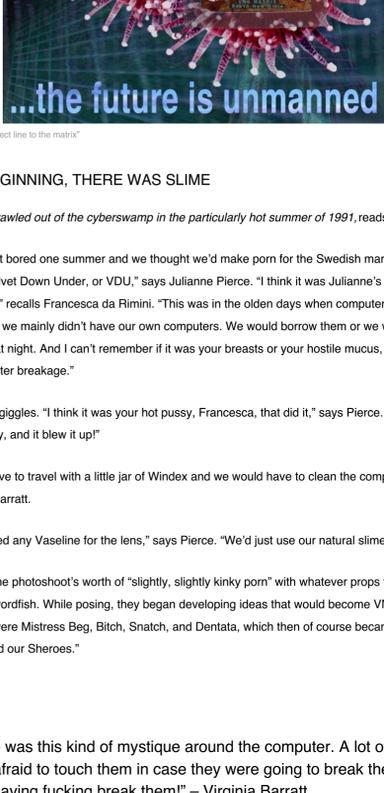
It was something in the zeitgeist. The ‘90s were so ripe for cyberfeminism that the term was spontaneously coined, the story goes, in three places at once — Australia, by VNS Matrix, Britain, by cultural theorist [Sadie Plant](#), and Canada, by artist [Nancy Paterson](#). Like [meatspace feminism](#), cyberfeminism has no one definition or theory or agenda. The first international cyberfeminist conference agreed [only on a list of 100 things it’s not](#): a fashion statement, a trauma, *une pipe*, supporting quantum mechanics, about boring toys for boring boys.



[Histories of cyberfeminism](#) usually cite the early aughts as cyberfeminism’s time of death. As the dotcom bubble burst, so did the cyberfeminist’s dream of a techno-utopia where women, free of their gendered bodies, would rule cyberspace. VNS Matrix’s portrait of the internet as “the parthenogenetic bitch-mutant feral child of big daddy,” where “truth evaporates” and “nothing is certain” and “body implodes”; Sadie Plant’s assertion that “cyberspace is out of man’s control” and “female and dangerous”—They read like a satirical alternate history in 2016, when the rules state everyone on the internet is a straight white man unless proven otherwise, and God help you if you prove otherwise. The patriarchy responded to Donna Haraway’s threat of [a feminist cyborg uprising](#) by making [huge-titted sexbots who teach men pick-up skills](#).

But cyberfeminism didn’t die. It simply evolved, said “fuck it” to utopia, and embraced identity politics. New manifestos for a 21st century have emerged out of collectives inspired by VNS Matrix like the [“xenofeminist” Laboria Cuboniks](#) and the [unapologetically girly cybertwave](#). Although they disbanded in 1997, VNS Matrix gets emails all the time from people studying them. Professors all over the world gush about how much they enjoy teaching the *Manifesto* 20 years later. Young feminist artists remix then disseminate their art across Tumblr and Twitter. “Cyberfeminisms and techno-feminism and cyborg-feminisms and xeno-feminisms and transfeminisms all then start to come together and grow out of this rich humus,” says Virginia Barratt. “They don’t need to tear cyberfeminism down in order to create xeno-feminism. They honour it and they nurture it and they build upon it.”

Just like VNS Matrix had built upon the feminist works before them and their contemporary cyberfeminists. In honour of the *Cyberfeminist Manifesto*’s 25th anniversary, we Skyped with VNS Matrix for a look back at their undying legacy.



“The clitoris is a direct line to the matrix”

### IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS SLIME

*VNS Matrix crawled out of the cyberswamp in the particularly hot summer of 1991.* reads the website.

“We were a bit bored one summer and we thought we’d make porn for the Swedish market. And our original name was Velvet Down Under, or VDU,” says Julianne Pierce. “I think it was Julianne’s breasts that blew up the computer,” recalls Francesca da Rimini. “This was in the olden days when computers were very expensive, so we mainly didn’t have our own computers. We would borrow them or we would go into facilities late at night. And I can’t remember if it was your breasts or your hostile mucus, but there was some kind of computer breakage.”

They erupt in giggles. “I think it was your hot pussy, Francesca, that did it,” says Pierce. “You plugged in your hot pussy, and it blew it up!”

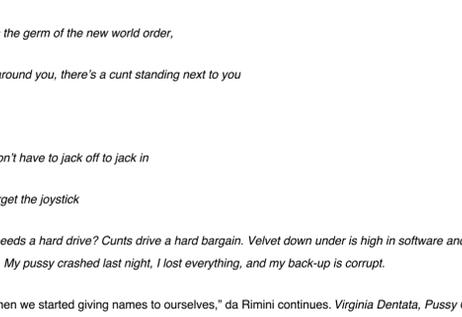
“We would have to travel with a little jar of Windex and we would have to clean the computers after we used them,” adds Barratt.

“We didn’t need any Vaseline for the lens,” says Pierce. “We’d just use our natural slime.”

They made one photoshoot’s worth of “slightly, slightly kinky porn” with whatever props they could find, including a swordfish. While posing, they began developing ideas that would become VNS Matrix material: “Our names were Mistress Bitch, Bitch, Snatch, and Dentata, which then of course became the names of our DNA Sluts and our Sheroes.”

“There was this kind of mystique around the computer. A lot of women were afraid to touch them in case they were going to break them. And we were saying fucking break them!” — Virginia Barratt

VDU became VNS. The manifesto came to life. They tell me about showing the photos from their “little porn shoot” during lectures at universities, and how that would never fly in these prudish climes. They reminisce about sending male academics into states of shock whenever they said the word “cunt.” “That’s really been a consistent mucus-y thread through all of this work, to resist the institution in those kinds of ways,” says Barratt. “Fucking the academy and fucking in the academy. The whole thing about the transition from porn to women in technology is about this slipperiness, that slime can get in through the cracks. With the aesthetics of slime or with the politics of slime, we were able to creep in through the cracks of the techno-porno industrial empire, Big Daddy Mainframe space. That’s what’s really important about the aesthetics and the politics of slime, and how it mobilized us.”



### THEY WERE TOO COOL FOR SCHOOL

VNS Matrix blew up, not just in Australia but across the world. They joined an international community of cyberfeminists cross-fertilizing via the internet, conferences and ideas. But, “there was never really an intention to become a movement,” says Pierce. “It was about us entertaining ourselves, and it has always been very playful. It was really important for us that there was a sense of play and exploration and fun with it. Irony is very important.”

Da Rimini holds up notebooks of vintage hand-scrawled VNS Matrix lore to illustrate the point.

“This is the first drunken version of the manifesto,” she says. “This is very good secret history — you can see how shitty our writing was.”

She recites some choice cuts:

*We believe in the modern cunt*

*The cunt without boundaries, without prejudices, without reason*

*All-devouring cunt*

*The all abundant cunt*

*The future cunt the cyber cunt*

...

*This is the germ of the new world order,*

*Look around you, there’s a cunt standing next to you*

...

*You don’t have to jack off to jack in*

*But forget the joystick*

*Who needs a hard drive? Cunts drive a hard bargain. Velvet down under is high in software and corrupt floppy. My pussy crashed last night, I lost everything, and my back-up is corrupt.*

“And then we started giving names to ourselves,” da Rimini continues. *Virginia Dentata, Pussy Galore, Pussy Demure, Her Luna Blood...*

“We weren’t interested in infiltrating the mainstream,” says Pierce.

Barratt brings up a “most damning critique” she read the other day of their video game *Bad Code*, in which the author accuses VNS Matrix of selling out.

“We were always getting flak,” she says. “But towards the end, when cyberfeminism 2.0 came along, there was a lot of publications and academic journals that came out talking about how radical cyberfeminism wasn’t sufficiently intersectional and so on and so forth, we were just inverting the binary, the power paradigm, which wasn’t good enough, that we were techno-utopian.”

“A lot of those critiques were well-founded certainly around race and so on, but initially we were doing something that was really hit and run,” Barratt says.

“In a way cyberfeminism was a bit doomed,” Pierce adds. “It just became a bit dour and academic. I guess a lot of people didn’t get our sense of humor and the irony in it, and took it at face value...”

(“*We are Australian* after all,” says Barratt)

...and expected us to be something else. They either expected us to be cyborgs or else radical feminists.”

But VNS Matrix had no interest in dreariness. They couldn’t afford to be, running workshops to teach women computer skills. When they started VNS Matrix, there was a lot of systemic sexism ingrained in local school computer labs. Boys would get five hours, whereas girls would get one supervised hour “with some techy dude looking over their shoulder.”

“For that reason, there was this kind of mystique around the computer,” says Barratt. “A lot of women were afraid to touch them in case they were going to break them. And we were saying fucking break them! Sit on them and break them! Stick your slime in there, do it! We did that by creating something that was cool and enticing, so that young women could go down the street and see this giant billboard and go, ‘Fuck, this is something we could be a part of.’”



### PEOPLE REFUSE TO LET THEM DIE

Then in 1996, Barratt left. *Bad Code* was becoming increasingly frustrating and they all wanted to move their work in different directions. They were exhausted; the fun was quickly running out.

“It was time for other people to pick it up and run with it,” says Barratt. “You’re never going to do that one thing forever. I mean the Rolling Stones did, but that’s fucking nuts.” And then the year the *Cyberfeminist Manifesto* turned 25, the Sydney College of the Arts invited them to do a one-time performance for an exhibition on ‘90s feminism. Together, all four members of VNS Matrix wrote a brand-new text, *A Tender Hex for the Anthropocene*, riffing off of the *Manifesto*. The audience, full of long-time fans and new converts, loved it, got all the ‘90s throwbacks: “Every time we would say a line like we are still the future cunt, the audience would have a laugh.”

“We’re not getting out of fucking bed as VNS Matrix for less than five grand” — Virginia Barratt

“It was fucking awesome to get the band back together for a night,” says Barratt, adding that “I was like people just love us for this one thing and we are this one thing and we shouldn’t ever be anything other than this one thing because that’s what we are and that’s what people want from us. It’s like going to a rock show and wanting the band to sing your favourite song. People want their favourite song from us, which is *A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*.”

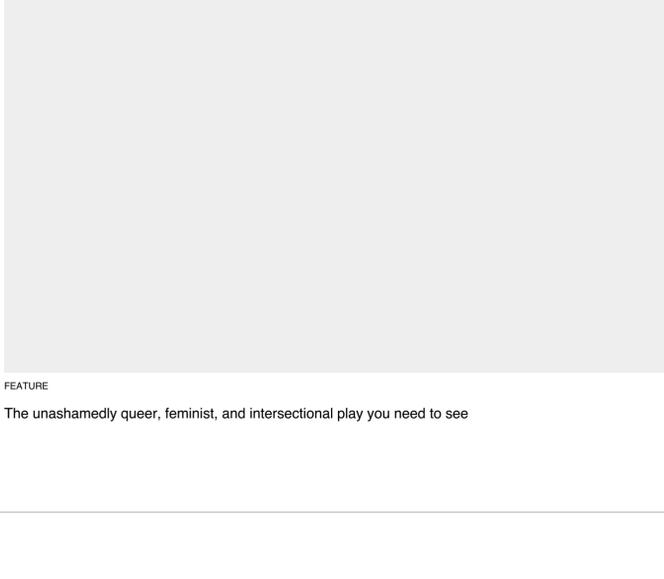
“It’s our legacy,” Pierce agrees.

“We could,” jokes da Rimini, “do it again in 25 years.”

But the anniversary performance “ignited” something and two months later, people are acting like they’ve reunited. They have always received requests for new work since their break-up, but the 25th anniversary has led to a bombardment of requests — often for free labour. “Francesca and I were talking the other day and we just said to one another, ‘You know what? We’re not getting out of fucking bed as VNS Matrix for less than five grand,’” says Barratt. For now, they’ve agreed to newsletter-ed a magazine issue — aptly — on labour and reproduction. It has opened discussions they haven’t had in 20 years, including whether they want a moratorium on VNS Matrix for good.

“VNS Matrix isn’t who we are anymore, but it’s who we’ll always be,” says Barratt.

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