

Rachel Greene

Internet Art



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For my dear parents, Professor Mark I. Greene and Bella Greene

Acknowledgments

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Cyberfeminism

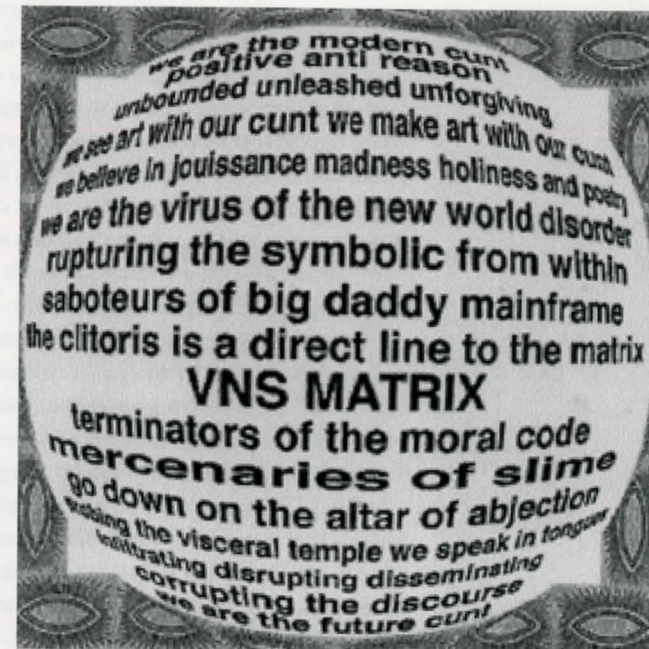
Among these discursive networks, the scrutinizing of politics and the analysis of how gender, race and class informed technoculture often took place. 'Cyberfeminism' was one of these fields of practice. With a decentralized, connection-dependent matrix as the crux of net culture, theorists like Sadie Plant (b. 1964), with whom the Australian collective VNS Matrix [39–40] coined the term 'cyberfeminist', found the net to be inherently female and feminizing. Other feminists, such as Faith Wilding (b. 1943), noted that feminism's migration into information-technology fields was part of 'Third Wave' feminism's occupation of diverse platforms for public action and rebellion. As well as supplying a term of identification (i.e. 'I am a cyberfeminist artist'), cyberfeminism covers three areas, generally speaking. It describes the position of women in technological disciplines and labour, including gender-based divisions of labour within these fields and industries. It also addresses women's experiences of technoculture, including its effects on work, domestic life, social life and leisure. And finally, it comments on the gendering of various technologies, possibly their feminization or eroticization.

VNS Matrix was formed in 1991 in Australia by members Josephine Starrs (b. 1955), Francesca da Rimini (b. 1966), Julianne Pierce (b. 1963) and Virginia Barratt (b. 1959), who left the group in 1996, as a technoart group with the stated goals of using and manipulating technology to 'create digital spaces in which identity and sexual politics can be addressed'. In its communiqués, or the frequently referenced *A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century* [39], the Matrix flaunts strategically changing identities and spectrums of sexual power, as well as the combination of sexual and technical languages. The presence of its members at conferences and on email lists underscored how the intellectual, male-dominated net could be seen as just the latest in a fairly long history of male-dominated media. Where Nettime offered up versions of net users as dupes, often unknowingly deprived of various freedoms or lacking in critical ability, the VNS Matrix took a different approach – overriding accepted net behaviour with sexual and creative personalities, and searches for fun and knowledge.

Their *Cyberfeminist Manifesto* is at once sexual, graphical and technical and, with its explicit language, evokes the 'cunt art' of the 1970s. It can also be identified with 1980s French feminist concepts like *jouissance* and *écriture* which posit, respectively, pleasures and writing that exist beyond discourse and fixed

39 VNS Matrix, *A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*, 1991

40 VNS Matrix, *Cortex Crones*, 1993. Still from All New Gen computer game. The post-binary gender cyborg was the central theme of this science-fiction-based game by the VNS Matrix. Never realized, it does predate the vogue for game art in the first few years of the twenty-first century.





meaning (which was identified as male and bound by conventional language). Further establishing its historical weight, the manifesto itself travelled as a graphic, inscribed in a circle defying linear trajectory – an allusion to the argument posed by feminist Alice Jardine that masculine aesthetics privilege linearity. In an interview posted to Nettime, Josephine Starrs described the group's goals and methods to Dutch art critic Josephine Bosma: 'We started posterizing cities in Australia with that manifesto. We wanted to work with technology, we're all from different backgrounds: writer, performance artist, filmmaker. I was from a photography background. We didn't have access to any particular new technology, but we had access to a photocopier, so we just started writing about technology, because we were worried that it seemed such a boys' domain at that time, in the artworld and so on.... We had this agenda of encouraging women to get involved if they want to look at their relationship with technologies, to get the[ir] hands on the tools and to have fun with it. Part of the project was to use humour in this process.... We tried to make it like technology isn't intimidating, it's fun to use.'

Another reason the 'cyber', 'sexual' and 'feminist' seemed so compatible in the hands of the VNS Matrix is that the group made optimistic theorizations of network technology popular in the mid-1990s. One of these was the 'cyborg', which referred to a cultural dependence on technology. Cyborgs were a key concept of the time, deployed by the VNS Matrix and advocated as a politically potent feminist aesthetic by Donna Haraway in her 1985 canonical essay, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century'. One should also note that in virtual net environments like Palace, popular in the mid-1990s, graphical representations of self were often thought of as alternative personae, or 'avatars'. That people could be liberated from the standard descriptive qualities of the day-to-day world gave way to theories that the net heralded new kinds of fluid identities, complete with altered hierarchies and unprecedented interconnections. True, these relied on making a distinction between 'real life' and online life, but it was a popular assumption around the time of this manifesto. The projected image portrays the internet as a utopia of fresh social formations and individualities. For women artists in particular, these possibilities held a great deal of aesthetic potential and freedom.



Corporate Aesthetics

Critical consciousness of power imbalances took many forms in net art circles, and one persistent articulation of political frustration online has been anti-capitalist sentiment. One strand of these politics took to claiming that internet territory was artistic, and was bolstered by critiques of the intellectual, creative and moral inferiority of commercial ventures. Dotcoms were often the focal points for this anger, as they were taken to be emblematic of the market-driven, utopian 'Californian Ideology'. The term 'dotcom', of course, refers to the semantic suffixes of new media companies generally founded in the 1990s with the aim of capitalizing on the rise of internet usage and culture by providing specialized tools or content. As providers of solely online-based services, Amazon and Yahoo! are dotcoms, whereas companies like Apple and IBM are not, though they also maintain an online presence.

In art circles, the aversion to dotcom culture and ethos was often marked by expanded uses of satire and parody – employing the intriguing limits of these models to provoke critical consciousness. While a web site called @TMark.com would become an epicentre for this activity in the late 1990s, etoy – created by a group of European artists then operating out of Zurich, Switzerland – was the first to use dotcom aesthetics to reposition art in relation to daily practices. Incorporated in 1994, etoy fuelled its self-styled hybrid of business practices, foolery and confusion with ambitious, though ambiguous, radicalism.

The plan, as articulated on the web site, was 'to establish a complex and self-generating art virus and e-brand which reflects and digitally infects the nature of today's life and business at large: an incubator that turns the essence of digital lifestyle, e-commerce and society into cultural value'. Via identical costumes and highly regimented behaviour, based on detailed research and exhaustive discussions, etoy members brought office aesthetics into the more marginal scenes they inhabited in Switzerland and Austria. Online, their antics included surreptitiously confusing web users about the content etoy offered, and in 1996 a search engine hack called *Digital Hijack*, which redirected thousands of search engine users to the etoy home page. In 1999, etoy became embroiled in a remarkably complicated fight with a dotcom named eToys that brought the spectre of corporate mockery into the scope of American financial markets (see Chapter 3).

Anti-commercial sentiments posing a relationship of binary opposition vis-à-vis the 'artistic', 'pure' and 'progressive' were

41 **Eva Grubinger**, *Netzbikini*, 1995. In this early work, participants download and print out a bikini pattern (a non-technological subject) and customize it for wear. As a result, Grubinger's web site hosts a profusion of hand-made, individualized swimsuits that make it difficult to focus on any one costume or participant. This project highlights an important aspect of the decentralized internet, through which a vast array of data travels easily to be recontextualized in subjective settings.



world of art

ancient and
classical art
western art
modern and
contemporary art
world art
architecture
design
graphics
photography
decorative arts
performing arts
reference

Internet Art

Rachel Greene

An exploration of the exciting and radical ways in which artists have embraced the internet and redefined the conventions of art

When the internet emerged as a mass global communication network in the mid-1990s, artists immediately recognized the exciting possibilities for creative innovation that came with it. This groundbreaking book considers the many diverse forms of internet art and the tools and equipment used to create them, while discussing the wider cultural context and historical importance of the work.

Covering email art, web sites, artist-designed software and projects that blur the boundaries between art and design, product development, political activism and communication, *Internet Art* shows how artists have employed online technologies to engage with the traditions of art history, to create new forms of art, and to depart into fields of activity normally beyond the artistic realm.

Throughout the book, the views of artists, curators and critics offer an insider's perspective on the subject, while a timeline and glossary provide easy-to-follow guides to the key works, events and technological developments that have taken art into the twenty-first century.

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