claudia reiche / verena kuni, eds.

cyberfeminism.
next protocols

Claudia Reiche, Verena Kuni, Eds.
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Potassium Conductances in the Adhesion Region of Cultured Rat Hippocampal
Neurons. In: *The Journal of Neuroscience*, August 15, 19(16), 6769, Figure 2:
Scanning electron micrograph showing neurons from rat hippocampus cultured
for 4 days in serum-free medium on a silicon chip with a silica surface coated in
poly-L-lysine.

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. . . . .The
. . . . .Cyberfeminist
. . . . .Fantasy of the
. . . . .Pleasure
. . . . .of the Cyborg[1]

YVONNE VOLKART

Mythology. . . . .
> "The clitoris is a direct line to the matrix,"
wrote the Australian artist's group VNS Matrix in their *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*, 1991.[2] Since then, this sentence has been often quoted, specifically by English cultural theorist Sadie Plant who also claims to have coined the term cyberfeminism at the same time.[3] Plant writes that this line "refers to both the womb – matrix is the Latin term, just as hystera is the Greek – and the abstract networks of commu-nication which were increasingly assembling themselves."[4] It seems more remarkable to me, that this sentence does not only directly link the female body and the so-called "immaterial" cyberspace – an association which male cyberpunk authors already suggested when adopting the term matrix for the internet, but that it ironically plays with the connotation of a female cyberspace by positing the female genitals as the entrance to this new digital communication system. This gesture could be under-

stood as re-embodying, "refleshing"[5] and resexualizing what has been conceived as pure data, it could be regarded as a direct line to the second feminist movement in the 1970's and its long struggle for the valuation of the pleasure of the clitoris, or it could even be (mis)interpreted as biological determinism.

Unlike the feminist 'mainstream' of the 1970's, cyberfeminists claim to have "an unbounded enthusiasm for the new tools of technology."[6] Typically, each time cyberfeminism is introduced, the technophobia of 1970's feminism is mentioned. It is important to mention, though, that there were a few feminists back then who strongly believed in the liberating impact of new technologies. For example, reproductive technologies were perceived as having emancipatory potential and women performance artists of the 1970's discovered the camcorder as a new tool for documenting daily life and for art making. In other words, sexual pleasure and technologies have always been regarded as liberating factors in feminism. Thus, what is new in cyberfeminism besides its new terminology?

Cyberfeminism's starting point is a belief in what I would call very roughly the "digital turn."[7] Even though the digital turn does not erase old media, it has an effect on all of them, i.e., no media remains what it

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1 Another aspect, i.e., the role of cyberfeminist's methods to construct cyborg subjectivity, has been developed for the book: *Technics of Cyber◇feminism*. *<Mode=Message>*, Claudia Reiche/ Andrea Sick, eds., Bremen, see **Volkart, Yvonne** (2002): Technics of Cyberfeminism: Strategic Sexualisations. Between Method and Fantasy [=Volkart 2002b].

2 The entire manifesto can be seen on: http://sysx.apana.org.au/artists/vns [last access: 01/27/2002].

3 For the text 'Feminisations. Reflections on Women and Virtual Reality,' Sadie Plant used this sentence as the text's motto. In: **Hershman Leeson, Lynn,** ed. (1996): *Clicking In. Hot Links to Digital Culture*, Seattle, 37.

4 **Plant, Sadie** (1997): *Zeros + Ones. Digital Women + the New Technoculture*, New York / London / Sydney, 59.

5 This term of "re-fleshing (the networks)" I owe to Diane Ludin and Ricardo Dominguez. See also later in this text the discussion of Diane Ludin's / Agnese Trocchi's / Francesca da Rimini's project: *Identity Runners: Re_flesh the body*.

6 **Pierce, Julianne** (1998): *Info Heavy Cyber Babe*, in: *First Cyberfeminist International, Sept. 20-28 1997, Hybrid Workspace, Kassel*, Cornelia Sollfrank / Old Boys Network, eds., Hamburg, 10.

7 I coin this term very superficially and would like to use it more in an asso-

used to be. It is the belief that new technologies have an enormous impact on our lives, that they shape modern society, economy, bodies, gender, identity, and subjectivity, far beyond Foucault's idea of biopolitics, as Donna Haraway stated in her "A Cyborg Manifesto."[8] From my point of view, it is this manifesto and its impact which marks the shift from feminism to cyberfeminism. In this key text, Haraway proposes the new and 'ironic' figuration of the cyborg as a hybrid mixture of human being and machine, a cybernetic organism. She sees this cyborg as a symptom for the new conditions within a technological world as well as an "ironic political myth"[9] for female emancipation. Her text is "an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries"[10] incorporated by the cyborg. And this is the crucial difference: Whereas feminism claimed the appropriation of new technologies as tools for women's liberation, cyberfeminism promotes both the idea of becoming cyborgian and the pleasures involved in it.[11] In other words, technologies are no longer perceived as prostheses and instruments for liberation which are separated from the body, but a merging of body and technology takes place. It is the concept of the technological body which is the medium for pleasure and libera-

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ciative manner, than with the aim to theorize it as it has been done with the "linguistic turn" and the "pictorial turn." However, referring to those concepts, I mean with the "digital turn" that it claims to be the fundamental condition of the ongoing codes.

8 **Haraway, Donna** (1991): A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. In: *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York, 150, online version: http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Haraway/CyborgManifesto.html [last access: 04/20/2001], [= Haraway 1991a].

9 **Haraway** 1991a: 149.

10 **Haraway** 1991a: 150.

11 Regarding the importance of pleasure for cyberfeminists, see **Aristarkhova, Irina** (1999): Cyber-Jouissance: An Outline For A Politics Of Pleasure. (non published paper). German version: Telepolis online magazine, http://www.heise.de/tp (May 1999). Also **Braidotti, Rosi** (1998): Cyber Feminism with a Difference. In: Zones of Disturbance, Silvia Eiblmayr / Steirischer Herbst, Eds., (Exh. Cat.), Graz; **Kuni, Verena** (1998): The Future is Femail. In: Sollfrank/Old Boys Network, Eds. 1998: 13–18; Plant 1997.

tion, and not the technological tool itself. In cyberfeminism, the utopian ideology of women's liberation is located in the body and gender but this body is no longer what it was thought to be. Neither is it a new body, as the military cyborg ideology pretends to be.[12] As Haraway writes, "it is a body which is conceived as a symptomatic body, beyond "other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity."[13]

I always pictured the cyborg, particularly Haraway's rather rough and early figuration of it, as an ageless, naughty and unruled girl. At the time of the *Manifesto for Cyborgs*, Haraway herself thought of a nasty girl.[14] Whereas Haraway speaks of the cyborg as a "polychromatic girl," I stated the cyberfeminist cyborg to be "widerspenstig." This term is hard to translate into English, meaning "unruly," "untamed" or "stubborn." It is used to translate Shakespeare's comedy *The Taming of the Shrew* into German, and never used to describe men.

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12 **Claudia Reiche** writes in her concept for the laboratory *Technics of Cyber< >Feminism. <Mode=Message>*: "But what to do, <if> cyberfeminism audaciously will have forgotten the classical, revolutionary (<and> terrorist) demand – of the (self)creation of a 'new human'?", http://www.thealit.de/kultur/cyberfeminism/home/concept.html [last access: 04/04/2002].

13 **Haraway** 1991a: 150.

14 **Haraway, Donna** (1991): Cyborgs at Large. Interview with Constance Penley and Andrew Ross. In: *Technoculture*, Constance Penley / Andrew Ross, eds., Minneapolis, 18–20, [=**Haraway** 1991b].

15 This is what art historian **Ute Vorkoeper** wrote about the exhibition "Widerspenstige Praktiken im Zeitalter von Bio- und Informationstechnologien," which I curated 2000. *Telepolis* online magazine: http://www.heise.de/tp/deutsch/inhalt/sa/3556/1.html [last access: 08/09/2002].

16 Dara Birnbaum's videoclip *Technology Transformation: Wonder Woman* from 1978 deconstructed the female superhero "Wonder Woman," showing that the armed and strong Wonder Woman was embodying a male fantasy. With a cyberfeminist perspective from today, however, we might even interpret her clip as a feminist fantasy of female transgression. Feminists in the 1970's appropriated and recoded Wonder Woman as 'their' myth of liberation too, although her cyborgian state of being had not been at stake, then. See more on this subject in: Kunsthalle Wien / Klagenfurt, eds. (1995): Dara Birnbaum, (Exh. Cat.), Wien / Klagenfurt.

"Unruly is what does not obey, what cannot be straightened out. A silly strand of hair or an undesired fold that can only be subdued by special means, technical expenditure or disinterest. Or it takes a sense of humor. Something is unruly. Unruliness has a physical, an erotic dimension. Whether this is desired or not, the term echoes something that for centuries was supposed to mark a feminine quality: lack of knowledge, unawareness – and obstinacy. A childish, almost touching disobedience to what asserts itself as unchangeable and rigid. However, it is also disobedience without a target, thoughtless, unplanned, anarchic, something that cannot be tolerated for long by that which exists. All measures taken against unruliness derive their legitimacy from this. Unruliness is threatened with being broken by violence or disinterest. Even laughter can kill it, if it fails to recognize its serious motivation."[15]

These comments about the erotic-feminine-physical dimension of unruliness describe precisely what prompted me to use the word once again in the context of cyberfeminist fantasies. Unruliness is associated with "femininity" or hysteria in all its manifestations drawing a balance between (patriarchal) attribution and feminist self-articulation. The notion that unruliness is unconscious or even quasi-genetically determined because resistance is seen as something localized in the body itself and initially defies discursivity, can be and has been adopted to embody feminist issues.

Naturally, the body as site at which oppression/liberation happens, was also an important point of discourse in earlier feminisms. However, the issue of enjoying the blurring of the boundaries of woman and machine and taking it as a "utopian moment" (Martha Rosler), was never at stake before. In feminism, the machine-woman and techno-fetish was perceived clearly as a male fantasy which could have been appropriated and deconstructed.[16] But occupying the military and techno-determinist cyborg fantasy and subverting it according to women's manifold desires is a new phenomenon which is an issue of cyberfeminism. Only the cyborg's hybridity sets the conditions for possible acts of liberation, which now take the form of various alliances and networks within a changing community rather than a fight against specific enemies. In this conception, resistance lays in the non-materiality of a constructed and discursive body itself and less in the idea of battles for emancipation. If one follows Sadie Plant's cybernetic reasoning, it is even quite unimportant whether women are aware that they have been – as she asserts – the hidden inventors, developers and adopters of information. For her the

fact of women's involvement in early forms of information technology and their triggering of de-territorialization is what really counts. From her perspective, women are more crucial as nodes and agents than as political subjects.[17]

The VNS Matrix line I quoted in the beginning, and particularly their entire *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*, which ends with the sentence "We are the future cunt," show exactly that it is the symptomology of a gendered body mixed with new technology which constitutes the future feminist subject. Stressing the urge of networking and the aspect of women as agents of utopia in the age of information technology, Verena Kuni entitles her thoughts on the aesthetics and politics of cyberfeminism "The Future is Femail."[18]

However, the idea of the cyborgian state of being is not only a cyberfeminist one, it is the dominant belief since cyberpunk (which has been conceived at the same time as the *A Cyborg Manifesto*), and the idea of the 'Post Human.' Another precedent is the mechanic, castrating woman

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17 From my point of view, Sadie Plant sets a too 'linear' non-linear and rhizomatic myth of Ada Lovelace's and women's involvement in communication technology, and she fails to break this linearity. With the film *Conceiving Ada*, Lynn Hershman-Leeson also rebuilt the myth of Ada Lovelace as first programmer, and of women as predestined for mathematics and computer programming. A kind of rebirth into our time may give Ada Lovelace a better chance to do what she has to than she had at her time. Like Plant, Hershman created a fictional piece referring to so-called 'authentic' history, thus blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality. This fictional re-reading and remaking of a creative woman's life in the past into something which could have happened if the conditions were not as sexist, has always been a very important feminist strategy: the strategy of the 'as if,' mixing the traditionally separated fields of science and fiction. But Hershman's film also seems to be too one-dimensional in its story of female empowerment. More on this subject will be discussed in my forthcoming Ph.D.

18 Kuni 1998.

19 Specifically, I think of the exhibition "Post Human" (1992), curated by Jeffrey Deitch. This touring exhibition stands at the beginning of an extensive discourse in the arts about the importance of new technologies and biotechnologies for the construction and production of new bodies and identities. More than the show, the catalogue was an interesting example of a libertarian, evolutionary-based, techno-determined ideology of posthumanism, in

which has been negotiated at the beginning of this century, especially in Dadaism and Surrealism. As I mention earlier, unlike cyberfeminism which is utopian and ironic, a lot of these reflections are pessimistic, frightful, cynical, or techno-libertarian.[20] Although cyberfeminists believe in what I called a 'digital turn,' I wouldn't speak of techno-determinism. Rather, the cyberfeminists' cyborg agents are embodied symptoms and signifiers of a time which is understood as an invasive and mutating one.[21]

VNS Matrix's strategies of irony, parody and appropriation of sexual obscenities remind us of strategies of the Riot Grrrls who became well known at the beginning of the 1990's. Seeking "affirmative representations of women" Rosi Braidotti refers to the Riot Grrrls' strategies of "symbolic violence."[22] Pointing to Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray, she stresses the importance of parody and irony as methods of "the philosophy as if."[23] It is interesting that Braidotti attempts to feature mimetic strategies as cyberfeminist, which they are clearly not exclusively. It is rather a kind of symptomatic, gendered, and body-centered strategy

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the sense of the paraphrase: With the right technology you can change. The term 'posthuman,' though it was not new then, became an important one to many feminist theorists. E.g.: **Braidotti** 1998; Livingston, Ira / Halberstam, Judith, eds. (1995): *Posthuman Bodies*, Indiana; Hayles, N. Katherine (1999): *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Chicago.

20 See **Volkart, Yvonne** (1999): Infobiobodies, art and esthetic strategies in the new world order. In: **Sollfrank/Old Boys Network**, eds. 1999, 61–68. Also available on: http://www.obn.org [last access: 01/27/2004].

21 It would exceed the purpose of this paper, but what could be questioned further is whether cyberfeminism as well as many other techno-discourses, do not overestimate the impacts of technology in general.

22 **Braidotti** 1998: 126–127.

23 **Braidotti** 1998: 127. "What I find empowering in the theoretical and political practice of 'as if' is its potential for opening up, through successive repetitions and mimetic strategies, spaces where forms of feminist agency can be engendered. [...] Irony is a systematically applied dose of debunking; an endless teasing; a healthy de-flation of over-heated rhetoric." See also: **Braidotti, Rosi** (1994): *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York, 7: "In other words, it is not the parody that will kill the phallocentric posture, but rather the power vacuum that parodic politics may be able to engender."

which has a strong tradition in feminism such as the valuation of the hysteric woman by Irigaray and others, or of performativity of gender by Butler, than a reference to virtuality and discourse of technology.

Unlike cyberpunk or other techno-narratives, cyberfeminism is committed to a postfeminist policy of self-empowerment which goes beyond simple principles of identity. Here, identity is an expanded concept describing a relational play between many agents and identities, identity designed as something fractured, split, fluid and in motion. The "ironic and political myth" of the cyborg is the outline for such a new politics of identity, one that switches between fiction and reality:

> "Haraway invites us instead to think of the community as being built on the basis of a commonly shared foundation of collective figures of speech, or foundational myths. These myths, which are also purposeful tools for intervening in reality, are figurations in that they make an impact on our imagination [...]. Feminism is about grounding, it is about foundations and about political myths."[24]

Braidotti (and Haraway) insist on the idea that a commonly shared fantasy may have a political and social impact, enabling people (women) to create symbolic and real spaces of agency. And I would certainly subscribe to the idea that the symbolic and imaginary space is highly productive in our daily social and political lives. Ultimately, it is identification and its effect on the creation of life, which is at stake. However, hardly any of these theorists, including myself, trace the political impact back to symbolic spaces and gestures. It seems to be merely a question of faith and not of scientific method, and particularly in the field of cultural criticism, these connections remain almost impossible to trace.

As I depict the "grounding of foundational myths" as something crucial, I would now like to describe a few female characters performing in different

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24 **Braidotti** 1994: 105.

25 Here I refer to one of the first versions of this project. It is a livestream which Lucas put on the website http://www.involuntary.org [last access: 01/27/2002] shown in the framework of the exhibitions "Tenacity" (New York) and "Widerspenstige Praktiken" (Zurich). In a later version, she developed a DVD double projection with herself as being doubled. She showed that piece in the framework of the show "Body as Byte. The Body as Information_Flow" which I curated in spring 2001 at the Kunstmuseum Luzern. For details about these curatorial projects see: http://www.xcult.org/volkart [last access: 01/27/2004].

contemporary new media projects and embed them in their theoretical and literary context. Analyzing various figurations of transgressive, unruled and joyful cyborg women, I inscribe myself in the continuing cyberfeminist myth of the pleasure of the cyborg. My focus will be on the content and meaning of the figurations rather than on technological and medial aspects of the art work. Given the fact that the term cyberfeminism is a highly speculative and mythic term with a vague and blurry meaning and an infectious circulation, I will examine the aspects of pleasure of the cyborg also within contexts, which are not always directly acknowledged by the various protagonists (authors, theorists, artists, programmers, netizens) as strictly cyberfeminist.

To Be Like a Freak......................

In her net-based project *Involuntary Reception,* Kristin Lucas created a type of female hacker mentality.[25] Lucas plays a woman who talks into the camera about herself and her life and how her body is surrounded by a huge electromagnetic power field (EPF). On the live stream, the field is visualized by a flashing jagged stripe in constant motion, and her body is surrounded by some kind of a halo delineating the power field. Wherever she appears, she causes disturbances and interference in electronic equipment with the consequences that she cannot go anywhere without disrupting activities or destroying things. Yet she can move around inconspicuously in open-floor office spaces or crowds because there is always something going on and she can vanish in the crowd. Lucas explains how she involuntarily killed somebody who had a pacemaker and her beloved cat. As she cannot control her electromagnetic field, she is a danger for everybody susceptible to them. Moreover, she is afraid of swimming in the water. "The scary part is that I can't predict what I'm going to do... I'm like a freak, I don't know."

It's her body, somehow mutated, that does all those things, while she tries to be a nice normal girl who refuses to be hired for "terrorist acts" such as deliberately erasing hard drives. Due to her strong power field, she cannot be recorded on electronic media as all data would be promptly erased again. This gives her a certain privacy, which is hard to come by, because she is always noticed in a negative sense or hunted by people who would like to explore her strange body. For some time, she is under constant surveillance by the FBI or CIA. She plays the symptom generated by a thoroughly technology-pervaded and controlling society, where all traces can be recorded and decoded, and the value of the body is

solely based in its function as information carrier, data protection and cryptography are political issues, privacy can be guaranteed for no one, intimacy and love are scarce. Lucas' protagonist is a female super-hero and renowned specialist looking for cover in inconspicuousness. Her own body mediates and perverts the ideologies and conditions of our times, and enjoys these hybridities: "I'm my own sub-subculture." We only learn about her abilities from her disrupted narrative which is sometimes confused and highly contradictory. Her origins seem mythical, all she can say about it is that it is surrounded by a lot of rumors and that there has always been great love between herself and her parents, who presumably are not her biological progenitors. She does not convey any message about how to improve the world. Her unruliness results from her inability to be different from the way she is, which constantly collides with her environment – and hence, from the way in which she is "biologically determined." This biologism is ironically refracted by her cyborg-like nature which has lost all its naturalness. Her body is a risk to her environment to the extent that the effects of technology are somehow doubled and reinforced by her body in such a way that they do not seem bearable any longer because they are uncontrolled and uncontrollable and emanate from an individual outside the dominating power apparatus.

Biological Warfare......................

The character *White Trash Girl* from the series of the same title (1995-97) created by the US-video artist Jennifer Reeder is a magnificent and true incarnation of the garbage of our day and age. Like Lucas, the artist plays

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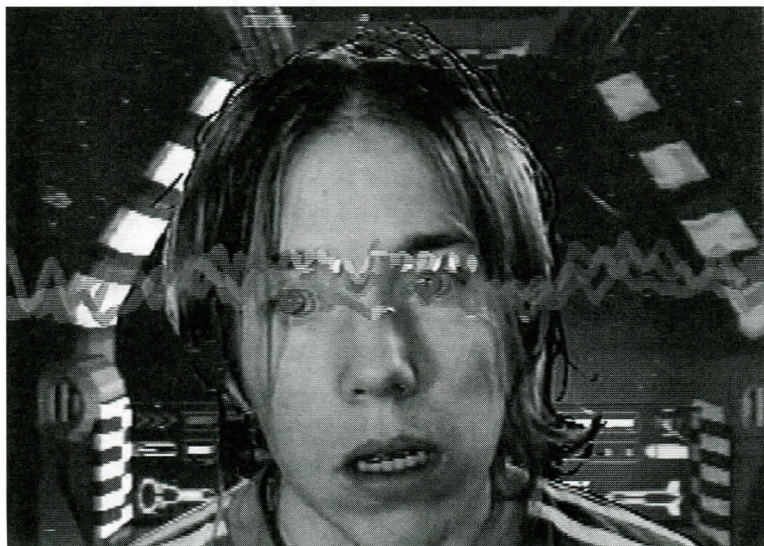
the protagonist; her name is derived from an abusive expression denoting the white lower classes. The pre-title sequence of the third part, *Law of Desire*, starts with the summary of White Trash Girl's procreation and childhood: The sounds of running cars over images of an embryo which becomes ever more clearly discernible. Text reminiscent of a fairy-tale is added:

> "Once upon a time there was a little girl who was raped by her uncle. She got pregnant and flushed the baby down the toilet, then killed her uncle and herself. The baby wiggled around in the sewer sludge for a long time. The ooze fed and nourished the baby, it made the baby strong – super strong. Her tiny baby body became more toxic with every tiny baby breath and every tiny baby heartbeat. None knew that this was no ordinary baby. This was a super baby. This was WHITE TRASH GIRL. Now, she's all grown up and she's waging biological warfare on any dumb fuck who asks for it. White Trash Girl is turbo charged and she's coming at you faster than you can scream HATCHET WOUND."

The next shot shows a cool blonde wearing black sunglasses, who is driving a van. A patrol car is chasing her and as a result she has an accident . The policeman draws his gun and breaks the window, then we see her run and hide. When the policeman comes near her, she beats him up in a violent and cruel way one would hardly ever expect from a woman. Spit dribbles out of her mouth and she sucks it back in. A picture we know from biology follows, showing the act of impregnation, sperm moving around, an almond-shaped ovum, a cyborg-like body, then she spits and we see a policeman being placed in an ambulance, his face horribly disfigured.

White Trash Girl owes her existence to several acts of violence which not only made her tough enough to face the cruelty of life, but actually make her the legitimate bastard of a "dirty" society. To use Donna Haraway's words, she literally came "from the belly of the monster," from the underground (in both senses of the word), the abyss and outhouse of this city, and hence she can never be innocent, even though her kind-hearted foster mother had her christened "Angel." Rape by a male family member is a literary topos of underground literature, found, for instance, in Jean Genet or Kathy Acker; it clearly identifies violence in the oedipal system, the constant feeling of insecurity and discomfort women are faced with, especially at home. For this reason, White Trash Girl's true home is a rather dystopic urban landscape. Again and again, we see her wearing miniskirts, either shocking pink or glistening, and cowboy boots

as she walks through the streets and over debris and garbage in her resolute gait. With her tall, strong build, monumentally, she poses on a heap of stone, a beauty and super heroine of a different kind. If someone pinches her behind, she turns into a railing shrew; in case of other acts of sexual transgression, she spits ropy liquids or mercilessly beats up the perpetrators.

The ghetto-like city is her realm, her body is part of it; city, body and underground are inseparable. This is not only evoked by White Trash Girl's origin in the sewer and sludge but also by the beginning where the picture of the embryo is accompanied by car noises off-screen and turns into the shot of White Trash Girl driving. Throughout the entire series, pictures of the digestive tract fade in regularly, anatomy-book illustrations with specially marked intestines. The camera enters the esophagus like a tunnel, chyme rolls down like the liquids that White Trash Girl spits at attackers, or the sludge which she comes from, teeth shine where there used to be a heap of stones. Liquids and flesh, mire and rubble mix and mingle.

White Trash Girl shows a permanent state of war: the war of men against minoritarian women (White Trash Girl, her mother, and her girl friend Trelita) is revenged by White Trash Girl and her crew, though, but also paralleled with documentary material of war scenes from the Mexican Border, and riots. Here, to live means to survive, and White Trash Girl can only manage to survive because she takes her life into her own hands in a radical way, using a network of friends to create a wide safety zone around her body which is a toxic chemical weapon itself.

The Construct Cunt........................

In 1988, U.S. writer Kathy Acker published her book *Empire of the Senseless*,[26] a monstrous, discontinuous and complex fiction. The book is dedicated to Acker's tatooist – as if the book were the bloody inscription of life onto the female body. Two I-narrators, the voices of the female protagonist Abhor and her male partner Thivai, talk alternately about their lives and origins in Paris which is a totally fucked up and dystopian city being colonized by the Algerians during the ongoing plot. Containing a lot of allusions, wordplays and references to William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Acker's Paris has more to do with Gibson's Chiba or Sprawl, and White Trash Girl's underground inferno, than with the old European culture metropole.

26 **Acker, Kathy** (1988): *The Empire of the Senseless*, New York.
27 **Acker** 1988: 34.

Abhor, whose grandmother was a prostitute, has been raped by her father, but unlike White Trash Girl's mother, she did not become pregnant with a baby. She is half robot ("construct"), half black, and Thivai always addresses her "cunt," as he calls all women by this metonymic name.

> "I saw her. A transparent cast ran from her knee to a few millimeters below her crotch, the skin mottled by blue purple and green patches which looked like bruises but weren't. [...] A transdermal unit, separated from her body, connected to the input trodes under the cast by means of thin red leads. A construct."[27]

Thivai teaches Abhor, who is an analphabet, the alphabet, wishing her to become a writer. However, her scripture is not the digitally coded off-spring of a computer, as one would expect with respect to her half robot body. Rather, it seems as if her scripture would come directly from the other part of her body, of the "fleshed" black body. With the blood of her fingers, she pictures different hearts. Abhor's bloody scripture of hearts is beyond the digital areas of zeros and ones, it is even beyond the arbitrary system of the alphabet, it is a much more "primitive" one, one which comes out of the oppressed body. And though she is part of the digital culture, she has nothing to say about it. The story ends with Abhor's driving away with a motorcycle and her dreaming of a better world.

The story can be perceived as a kind of alienation as well as an addition of black and female voices to Gibson's Western and "male" perspective. Being a black and a cyborg in this story serves to foster her under-privileged status as offspring of different subaltern classes of servants, prostitutes and former slaves. Being a cyborg means here to be positioned at the lowest class level. Being a "construct cunt" means not to be welcome in the system of humanism and not having a prosperous future, but at the same time embodying both the utopian and dystopian fantasies of the future. Maybe it is too much to say Abhor would enjoy her very ambivalent and paradoxical state of being a cyborg woman, because she has a lot to suffer. However, her outcast body stands metaphorically for a hopeful boundary concept as a new, adequate and reflective posthuman way of survival in a dystopian world. Abhor undergoes various transformations and manages to position herself as a 'subject' within this dystopian world: The raped construct cunt becomes a terrorist and finally a motorcycle driver and writer.

Cyberbodies of Desire.....................

Australian artist Francesca da Rimini's netcharacters 'Gashgirl'/ 'Doll Yoko' from the web-based, hypertext ghost-fiction *Dollspace* (1997-2001) share a lot of similiarities to the above-mentioned cyborg figures.[28] *Dollspace* is a complex web environment with various sites, hypertext fictions set in pictorial backgrounds and links to politically engaged sites. Gashgirl, or Doll Yoko, the female fictive figuration is constructed above all by texts (summaries of LambdaMOOs, etc.) which reflect her history and her (sexual) desire.

Doll Yoko has risen from a muddy pond in Japan where women used to drown their unwanted, female children. She is a "ghost," as "all women are ghosts and should rightly be feared."[29] She has monstrous sexual desires for young boys. As doll/gashgirl/ghost, she is – like all of the discussed figurations – not a natural born woman, but a posthuman copy/essence, evolving from the dark abysses of patriarchal capitalism. She is gashed, killed, violated, full of fantasies of power and losing control, of scum, of fucking and killing, of getting fucked and killed. Like
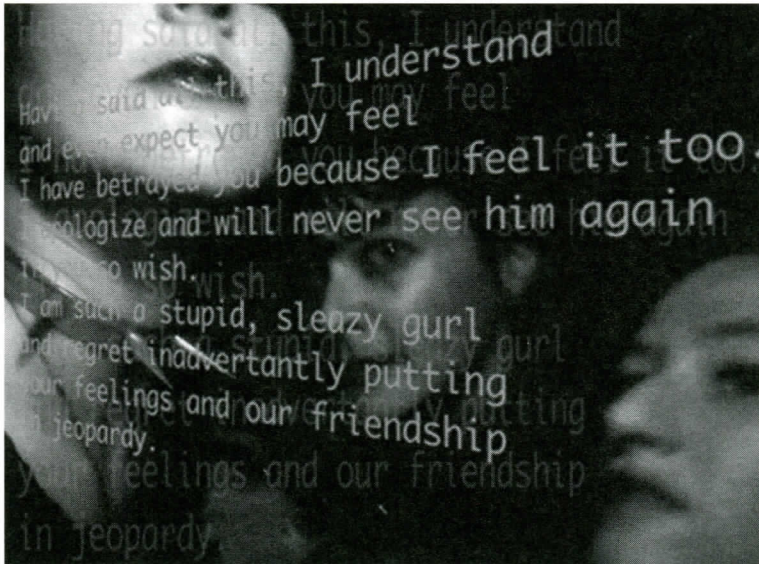
28 **Francesca da Rimini**: *Dollspace*. Soundtrack by Michael Grimm (1997–2001). http://www.thing.net/~dollyoko [last access: 01/27/2004].

29 Hypertext in: **Rimini/Grimm** 1997–2001.

30 **Acker** 1988: 34.

31 More details about the work see: http://www.machinehunger.com.au/love hotel [last access: 01/27/2004].

32 They are used in *Dollspace* and in da Rimini's forthcoming book *Fleshmeat*, too.

Abhor, Doll Yoko who is at the same time dead and alive, wants to destroy and to be destroyed herself, she is a deeply paradoxical figure, situated in an in-between space called "deep dollspace zero" – a space behind the closed eye through which the visitors have to enter in the beginning.
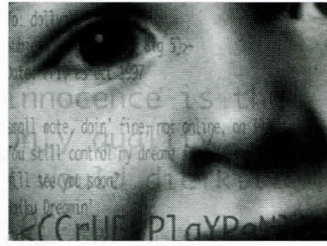
03

Doll Yoko's/the narrator's/the author's (the sentences are often articulated with "I") wild feelings and emotions, circulating between activity and passivity, focus on the topic of losing boundaries in digital space: of sex, gender, subjectivity, agency, of the writer and the reader, of the figuration and the user. Who is this "I" in the end who says: "genderfuckmebaby"? This "I" is splitting into various agents and we, the readers, participate in this dissolution. What does this sentence and all the other sentences in this piece imply? They talk of experiences, of enjoying loss and the violation of boundaries. These sentences and their images become figurations of many voices and embodiments of Doll Yoko, gender dichotomies are completely deconstructed. It is far beyond any relief; it is "haunting" and allows us to fall into the depths of psychic streams and desires.

The same voice (identity) switching happens in *The Empire of the Senseless*, in which one also sometimes forget who talks: Abhor, Thivai, the narrator, or the author. Thus, the reader too switches between the male, and the female I and the unspoken, hidden I-construct of the author:

> "'All I know is that we have to reach this construct. And her name's Kathy.'
> 'That's a nice name. Who is she?'
> 'It doesn't mean anything, it's dead. The cunt must be dead.'
> My puns were dead."[30]

## Cyborgian Architectures..................

In her video "Lovehotel" (2000), Australian artist Linda Wallace[31] puts on stage the LambdaMOO adventures of Gashgirl[32]. Offscreen we hear the voice of Francesca da Rimini speaking Gashgirl's texts, on the screen we see the shadow of da Rimini (wearing sunglasses) or other people walking through New York or Tokyo, a lot of times we are on the road, on a ship, in the subway, in the underground and on the streets of these mega-cities. We see façades, walls, and inscriptions, we see faces, moving bodies. And we see a lot of mirrors and reflecting glass, as if the architec-

ture – the body of the city – were reflecting and splitting the narrator's body into many "constructs." Sometimes we see also a running text, the spoken text on the screen, or a detail of the LambdaMOO on a flickering computer screen. "Lovehotel" builds a kind of architecture, moving spaces, a kind of passages, and continuous entrances into capitalist aesthetics with words full of love and desire. The speaking subject is present as she walks through these spaces, crossing many places, reserving public space with her inner fantasies. Virtual Reality here is not something mysterious, no "consensual hallucination" (William Gibson), it is the posthuman urban architecture seen as the emergence of the female body, crossed by various entities and subjects: "Lovehotel. Formula for the Emergence of the New" is the subtitle of this work.

In all of the discussed works, the space – mostly a city – in which the woman moves, is important being part of her as she is part of the city: The boundaries between her and her environment are permeable, fluid and reflective. However, one cannot say that the cyborg woman would personify the postmodern city, as it happened to be in 19th century fiction in which the woman was a metaphor for proliferating monstrous modern urbanism nor is she a skillful techno-slave who helps the console cowboy finding a way through this labyrinth. Rather, she imagines, crosses, and occupies posthuman urban environments as being her territories. They may even be an alienated and reflected prolongation of her own, of her vast desires in a world which did not foresee a space for her. She and her desires are as artificial as urban life is: The borders are blurring, you cannot catch her 'entity.' Unlike in *Involuntary Reception* and *White Trash*

33 It is currently found in different stages on two different servers. In my
   description, I use a version (http://www2.sva.edu/~dianel/idrunr [last
   access: 01/27/2004]) that is older, but in which the fictive aspect is more
   prominent. The newer web site is more documentary and also integrates
   joint performances and video translations of the net works and ascii stream-
   ing: http://2.parsons.edu/~ludin/final_pages [last access: 01/27/2002].

living flesh, meat

06
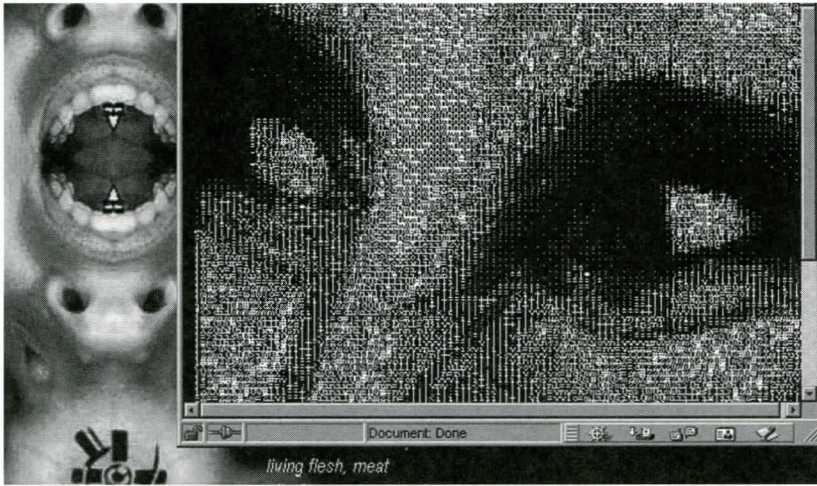
Girl, but like in *Dollspace*, in "Lovehotel" the protagonist is present as an absent, as moving shadow, ghost, as running text, as off- voice or reflecting glass wall. "Lovehotel" suggests a place of temporary settlement, of nomadic living, in which flows of desire circulate connecting humans and non-humans.

Fluid Identities. . . . .

This complete dissolving of the characters by simultaneously invoking different fluid figurations is most obvious in Diane Ludin's web-based project *Identity Runners: Re_flesh the Body*.[33] It is a multilayered hypertext project which results from the collaboration with Francesca da Rimini and Agnese Trocchi over several months. Three net characters, avatars or alter egos, are allegorically called Ephemera, Liquid-nation, and Discordia. Entering the start page of the website, you see three different parallel sectors corresponding to these names with picture, running text structure and hypertext structure. In the lower part, the name Metrophage is repeated by all of them. If you click it, you find yourself in a kind of microcell structure. If you read the texts with their similar poetry and click through the hypertexts and image architecture, you become increasingly lost in this labyrinth and forget which texts belong to whom: Everything seems to be the output of a single identity, despite the different names, images and texts. The entire web architecture is polyvocal, furnished with excerpts from various contexts: scientific (e.g., pictures from genetic engineering laboratories), theoretical (e.g., sentences from Donna Haraway), activist, and all the diverse text material that the three have

exchanged in chats, e-mails, telephone conferences, real life perfor-
mances, etc. They also speak in the first person, although the content is
not clearly intelligible, it is outside the realm of what may be narrated.
One understands a kind of body-speaking, reads of tears, touching, feel-
ings, cells and bodies of information. These sequences are mixed with
others from biotechnology discourse. In its entirety, it is a kind of pro-
duction of biotech bodies and identities with the tools of poetry and
alienating contexts. Even though it is suggested by the allegorical avatars,
they do not form representative net characters any more, not even one as
broken and fluid as Doll Yoko. The impression is rather one of a diffusive
flow of biotech body suggestions, more a dissolving into tropes and
micro-images (Metrophage). *Identity Runners: Re_flesh the Body* evokes
the re-articulation of the female body and its desires in the digital era.
However, this body is no longer a female entity or even an organism, but
more a "stammering" of intensities, wishes, streams and fragments.
Female is a suggestion, not an essence.

Conclusion. . . . .
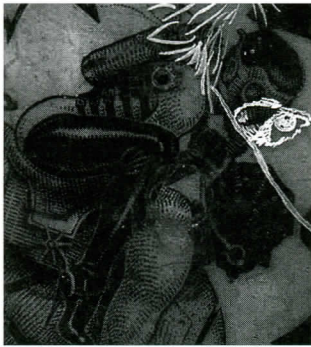
To summarize, the Cyberfeminists's myth consists
in imagining a cybernetically coded and some-
times technologically skilled cyborg woman.
Flows of subversion are effectuated more by her
pleasure of being a hybrid and its de-territorializ-
ing impact than by articulated intentional politi-
cal acts. The cyborg woman is not only the symp-
tom of the Information Age. She is also the site
where the symptom becomes a marked and gen-
dered body, where the body becomes embodied.
This body resists intentionally or unconsciously – the "informatics of
domination" (Haraway). It merely represents a woman at the borders,
becoming a posthuman, multiple and flexible entity, who fights for her
life, for a temporary viable stay in a non-human world. She is flexible,
dispossessed, nomadic. Embodying various technological fantasies, she is
at the same time a "genetically determined" symptom of the information
age (its effect) as well as a very special agent to subvert and pervert the
dominant inscriptions. Being technologically skilled but rather naive – as
in *Involuntary Reception* – or completely uneducated – as *White Trash Girl*
or Abhor – she transgresses social patterns and embodies resistance by
her own symptomatic techno-body. All these cyborg figurations ultimately

want to survive in and occupy real and virtual space. In order to fulfill this simple wish, they are unruled, they enjoy their 'own' cyborg bodies, as paradoxically there is no place and no love for cyborgs in a world of cyborgs. Therefore their desires always seem to be monstrous, their pleasures are based in destruction and ruthless self-reference, or they seem to be so open, dissolved and fluid that nothing can harm them. The pleasure these characters experience has risen from the desire to be stubborn, untamed, transgressive. It rises from the resistance against domination, it isn't afraid of destruction, of perverse arrangements with a perverse world. The pleasure of the cyborgs is the resistance of the subaltern against their limited determination, the desire to survive, to dream of better worlds, as Abhor does at the end of the story.

Being a cyborg is not necessarily connected to the newest (digital) technology. However, the cyberfeminist point of view proposes that new technologies and their hybrid outcome are the privileged places of power and resistance today. Only cyberfeminism promoted widely the idea of the transgressive, unruled and subversive cyborg woman, and this idea sometimes converges even with Hollywood fantasies. However, it is also a political myth, and not always reality. A few strong and amazing characters as the ones I discussed above are not realized with the newest digital technology. That means that the cyberfeminist idea of the cyborg figuration does not necessarily converge with the invention of real new media, I would however never say that the skilled woman using new technologies is pure myth. But it is obvious that there are not as many hybrid techno-figurations, high tech artists, or hackers as one would expect after having read cyberfeminist theories. I don't know if it is a question of (non)accessibility to (high) tech for engaged women, or if the question of high tech figuration and high tech realization does not automatically presuppose each other. Maybe low tech has also to be considered as rising important technology. What I am trying to say with the media examples I elaborated here is that the cyberfeminist fantasy of the subversive cyborg woman is not dependent on the use of digital high tech. The fantasy as grounding myth is important, and hopefully is a catalyst for real cyborg women and cyberfeminists to engage in better living. It is crucial to understand that the cyberfeminists' concentration on the body – sometimes parodic, sometimes not – is not an apolitical escapism tending towards bio-determinism. We simply have to recognize that body, gender, technology and the fantasies about them are the most important zones where cultural, symbolic and real power takes place.   <

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Film | **Conceiving Ada** (US 1997) 1'25", Production: Hotwire Production / Lynn Hershman-Leeson, Director: Lynn Hershman-Leeson, Screenwriter: Lynn Hershman- Leeson, Eileen Jones, et al., Performers: Tilda Swinton, Francesca Faridany, Timothy Leary, Karen Black, John O'Keefe, John Perry Barlow, J.D. Wolfe, et al., Cinematography: Hiro Narita, Bill Zarchy, Editor: Robert Dalva, Music: The Residents

Illustration | **01** Kristin Lucas: *Involuntary Reception*, http://www.involuntary.org [last access: 01/27/2004]

02—03 Francesca da Rimini / Michael Grimm: *Dollspace*, http://www.thing.net/ ~dollyoko [last access: 01/27/2004]

04—05 Linda Wallace *Lovehotel*: http://www.machinehunger.com.au/love hotel [last access: 01/27/2002]

06—07 Francesca da Rimini / Diane Ludin / Agnese Trocchi: *Id-runners*, http://z.parsons.edu/~ludin/final_pages [last access: 01/27/2002]

In the beginning cyberfeminism. next protocols was a call posted on mailing lists by the old boys network, the first international cyberfeminist alliance. Now cyberfeminism. next protocols is a book that presents an introduction as well as an outlook for the large network of contemporary cyberfeminism. Protocols are both scientific records of observations and coded commands for digital and human procedures of communication. next protocols reaches boldly into the utopian gap between the now and its possible futures. If gender is not obsolete, there is a stake in reformulating it under conditions ruled by the dominance of the digital medium and test its capacities to subvert cultural practices. cyberfeminism carries the Fem in its center – Fem which hints politically at gender and the female sex, yet exceeds, enjoys, and remodels this relation. With approaches coming from art, theory and activism, cyberfeminism. next protocols invents and documents a cyberfeminism which is dedicated to the wilderness of precise critique and experimental thinking.

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ulrike_bergermann

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kate_o'riordan/julie_doyle

warriors_of_perception

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ingeborg_reichle

marie-luise_angerer

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