

VNS MATRIX AND VIRGINIA BARRATT

Interviewed by Bernadette Flynn

The following text comprises two interviews. An audio interview was held with Virginia Barratt in Brisbane in September, 1992, and a video interview was held with VNS Matrix in Sydney, during TISEA in November, 1992. To contextualise her work with VNS Matrix (Virginia Barratt, Francesca da Rimini, Julianne Pierce, and Josephine Starrs), Barratt outlines her development in performance based work and electronic media.

V.B. I started out at drama school, so I was involved in performance from a theatre perspective. I became very disillusioned with that scene and started doing my own performance work. I was working here in Brisbane running the John Mills National gallery with Adam Boyd, writing on performance and doing curatorial work. I became more involved with artists who were working with technology in Brisbane, like Adam Wolter and Tim Gruchy, both of whom I've performed with at different times. I had an incidental involvement with technology, but lots of people who were working through John Mills National were involved with more alternative experimental approaches to performance and art, so I was exposed to different ideas.

In 1989, I went to Adelaide to do a summer school run by the Australian Network for Art and Technology on Computer Aided Art, Design and

Manufacture, but had no idea at the time why I was doing it or how I might apply that to my own work - it just seemed like an interesting thing to do at the time.¹ While I was down there, Francesca de Rimini who was the director of Art and Technology resigned from her position and as I had been doing a lot of work in administration, as an unwaged arts worker, it seemed a logical next step for me to apply for such a position, and I got the job. So my introduction to working with technology was from an administrative perspective as an arts worker and being introduced to a lot of the conceptual ideas surrounding new technologies and developing technologies, which is where I've positioned myself from then on. In my own performance work, I'm very low tech, but I often engage conceptually when I'm writing or working collaboratively.

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Where does the name VNS Matrix come from?

V.B. The name VNS Matrix can be read as Venus, we could be talking about the planet as well as the goddess, or conversely VNS may be a corporate logo or acronym.

Where and when did VNS Matrix begin?

J.P. We formed in Adelaide in August 1991, and since then two of us have moved to Sydney, so we're working over that distance between Adelaide and Sydney.

V.B. Julianne Pierce who is the administrator for Arts Space and myself live in Sydney; Francesca da Rimini who is a film maker, administrator and arts worker, and Josephine Starrs who's a photographer, live in Adelaide.

How do you structure working together over two locations? Is that a problem?

V.B. Although we don't employ the electronic networks to get over the tyranny of distance, for us it works very well, we do a lot of travelling. We skill share, we're very generous with one another, very generous with our

ideas, and our skills. It's in our interests and in the interest of the work to invest time and energy into making sure that we're all sharing skills and ideas. If someone's got the time they do the work; if someone hasn't got the time, they do what they can. If we've got money coming in we'll do workshops in a particular area. What brought us together initially was an interest in trying to write some tacky pornography to make money

F.D.R. We're driven by money and "G-slime", we're riven by G-slime.

V.B. And we realise we're better at making art than money; but we'd like to make art and money. We will do both.

Do you use the technology in your work to critique what others are doing with that technology?

We've all worked in technology whether that's in an office environment as administrator, or as artists. Our motivation is to discuss women's position and to develop a position for women. We do critique those arcade games in the process but that's not our primary aim. Our primary aim is to talk about women, technology and popular culture. We're driven more by the ideas circulating in popular culture and what we see as corrupt elements within that culture and within mainstream culture.

F.D.R. We're occupying a position or a site that hopefully will encourage other people, particularly other women, to play with the technology, to play with the ideas rather than with the thousand functions.

What relationships do you propose between women and technology?

We're driven by a desire to talk about feminist issues in relation to technology; how women can interact with technology and have an effect on the production of images in technology, and in critiquing images created through technology which we see are often fetishistic stereotypical images of women.

V.B. If you're looking at contemporary computer graphics and how women are represented, you've got a fetishistic image of the fembot. Silver Susie is the classic fetishistic fembot. She is a generic type who is featureless apart from perfect breasts and a curved female form that parallel all those perfect women you see in media adverts; except she's a step further in being dehumanised. All the features have gone, she's chrome and she just reflects the viewer. We are trying to combat that sort of thing with our work by inserting a strong and autonomous, non-fetishistic image of women in the technological landscape.

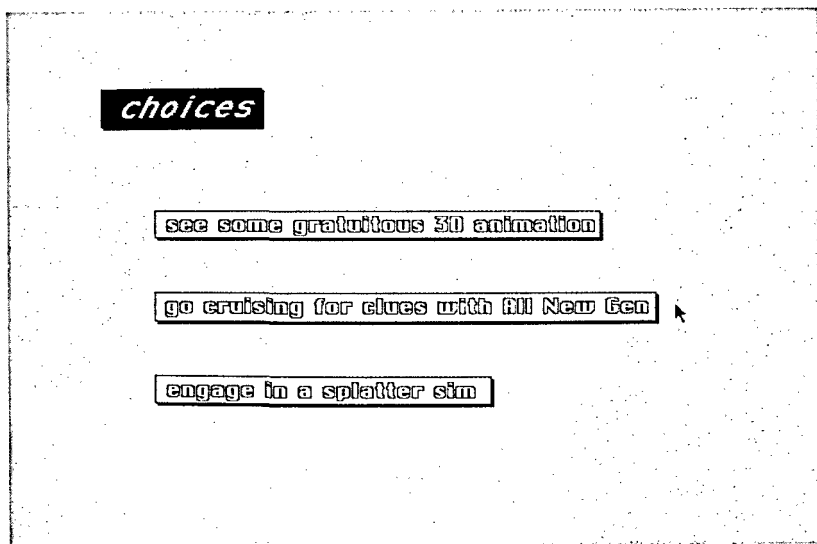
What sorts of strategies are you using to challenge this kind of imagery?

V.B. We're interested in being provocative, blasphemous, ranting against anything we see as technoevangelism and technophobia. We're interested in subverting anything that is a dominant discourse and that includes elitist theoretical language. We're interested in talking about technology and the body, putting some sort of guts and viscera into that clean and sterile environment and talking about sex. That's so antithetical to the sterile computer environment android, without flesh, without biological fluids.

Who do you see as your audience?

F.D.R.I think a potential audience for the work, particularly through the computer-game, is an audience of pre-pubescent and teenage girls. I'm particularly interested in providing a role model or a series of role models for young women who are still formulating their identity as women. The computer-game genre particularly interests me, because the work is getting out into popular culture to young people who would never walk into a gallery. We're not only interested in pursuing a gallery career, it would be good to get out into the mainstream for a youth audience, for boys too, but mainly it's girls that would be interested in our game.

Another representation that I want to pursue is lesbian visibility. I think it's very important that strongly identified lesbian work is shown in the mainstream of contemporary culture. We're really concerned about working publicly with billboards, poster-runs and graffiti. If we



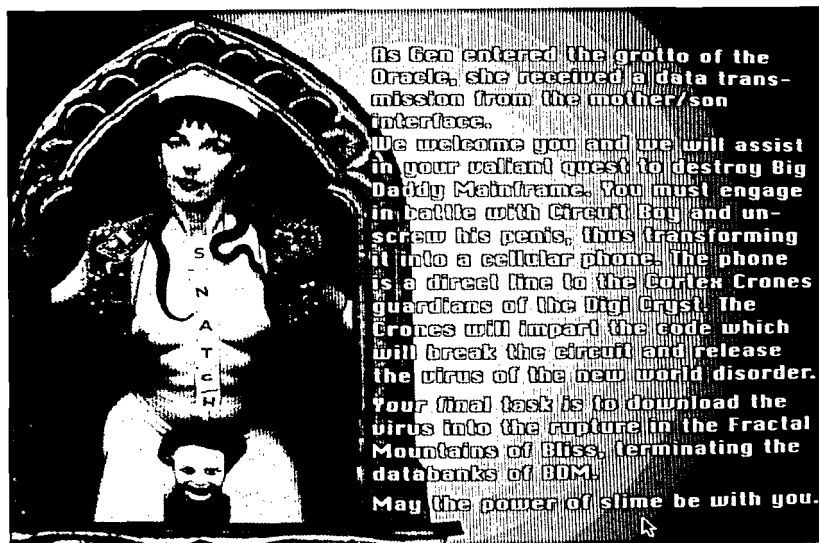
VNS Matrix, frame from *All New Gen* interactive game (1993)

exhibit in a contemporary art space or a museum, we're interested in subverting that structure by exhibiting something which will shock, confront or provoke. We find exhibiting at places like Siggraph really interesting. It's the largest computer expo, the male dominated side of the industry, full of commercial stalls showing product development. Everyone is there from the military to the film makers; it's open slather. Our work is quite sacrilegious in that context: to speak in our terms about their religion, their dogma. We'd like to free Silver Susie and Virtual Valerie and give them their own pleasure and work stations.

In what way does the audience engage or participate in your work - is it interactive?

F.D.R. These works for TISEA are the first part of an installation and the series of five slides are grabs from the game. We've started to develop the characters, scenarios and ideas towards the larger work. For the installation itself, we're envisioning a large walk-in environment which is interactive. Inside, will be an interactive video game where the players engage with "Gen" in her mission to sabotage the data banks of "Big Daddy Mainframe".

V.B. The interactive work will be called "All New Gen" *Gamegirl*. "All New Gen" ("gen" being short for gender) will take the form of a video game common to arcade game parlours. After entering the actual installation, the player's movements around the room will trigger various reactions: slide imagery, projected imagery or different sounds. It just depends on funding, we will probably have to modify our ideas our lot. The hero of our game is All New Gen and her mission is to terminate the moral code, so we're trying to undermine the hierarchical structure, militaristic, authoritarian, hero-winners and losers aspect of the video game culture. The logic will be inverted and perhaps not existent at all. The viewer can ask the computer questions, it may or may not answer for a whole series of game scenarios, the viewer may not win at the end or if the viewer does win, they won't know why.



VNS Matrix, frame from *All New Gen* interactive game (1993)

F.D.R. At this stage, we're still developing the ideas and concepts and learning the technology. We've given ourselves most of next year to work on it, to make the structure, and learn the software and then we're going to have a fabulous work.

V.B. Josie and I are both doing work with Macromind director and we're hoping to use programs like Quick time; we'd like to do more moving animation, video and interactive work than we have to date.

Do you see the work you do fitting within the cyberculture networks?

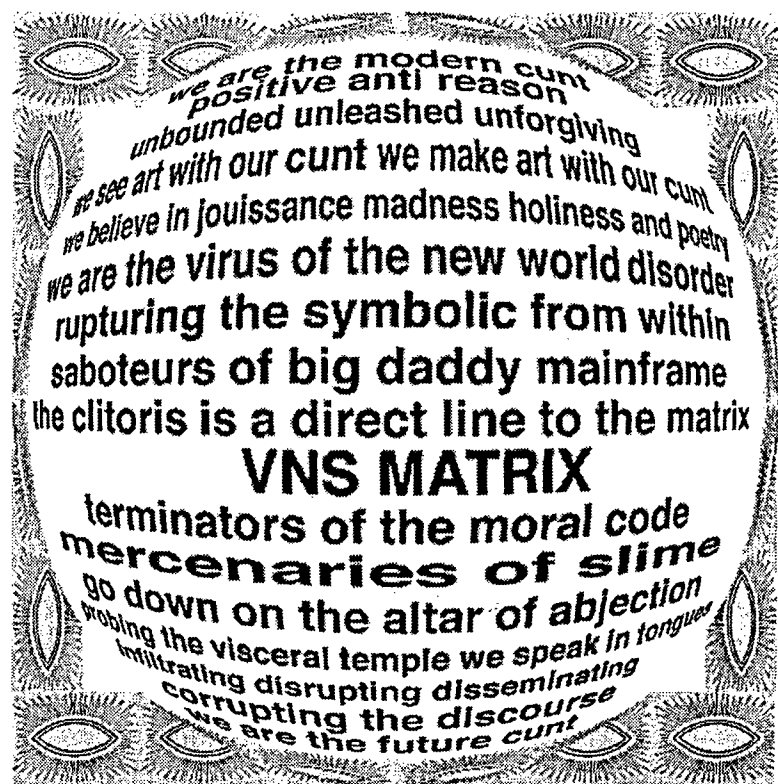
J.P. We certainly use the language from that culture, perhaps reacting to and playing upon it. We're drawing from a lot of cultures, and engaging with ideas associated with the cyberworld and with feminism, which is why we've called our manifesto a 'cyberfeminist' manifesto. We feel feminism needs to claim a space within that area because the language and ideas are very male dominated. We're interested in it, but we don't affiliate ourselves.

V.B. We use the terminology to subvert it, we might say 'cyberfeminist' or 'cybercunt' to provide an inversion of the term or an inversion of the idea. That terminology was constructed by male science fiction writers. If you read the technological future which William Gibson proposes,² keyboard cowboys jacking in and jerking off, there's no place for me there. Cyberculture seems to me to be located in a very male dominated popular culture night-club scene. I can't visualise myself participating in that subculture.

F.D.R. It's easy to replicate the world that William Gibson is conjuring up. His writing is really seductive but we want to create something that's not the girl's own version, the girl's own story of that world.

J.S. With this work we're talking about science fiction, we're talking about video arcade games, we're talking about the sort of role-playing games that all the teenage boys are playing at home and buying like mad. As has been mentioned in the TISEA conference, companies in America are doing research to draw girls into their games because not enough girls

A CYBER FEMINIST MANIFESTO FOR THE 21st CENTURY



VNS Matrix, Cyber Feminist Manifesto for the 21st Century

are playing their games, and as has been mentioned, 'women need a reason to be aggressive, men just need a space'.³

Who is "Gen", the heroine of the game?

J.S. We call her an intelligent mist, we don't want to make a physical representation of All New Gen, because whenever you make a representation of a female character it's always loaded with stereotypes. She's our heroine in the arts arena. She represents our drive to critique the way that technology is going in the arts. She's going to have different manifestations, she started off life as a virus in the main frame, which is her most biological manifestation to date, but there will be different representations just as there are going to be different representations of her arch enemy "Big Daddy Mainframe", who is the military industrial data complex. We've portrayed him in this work as the anonymous man in the business suit with his BDN mainframe as his head. He will manifest himself in other ways, but "Circuit Boy" will always be "Circuit Boy".

What does "Circuit Boy" represent?

V.B. Anyone who looks at computer graphics magazine is very familiar with the fetishized limbless featureless image of Silver Susie or Virtual Valerie, the chrome-plated fembots. Basically, Circuit Boy is the inverse of that. We've had a lot of discussion about Circuit Boy amongst ourselves, and I think it's homoerotic; we've created quite a provocative image with Circuit Boy.

F.D.R. He really came more from pornography. Our first Circuit Boy is a bit tacky, we found him in a gay porno mag and we scanned him in but he didn't look nearly as beautiful as this Circuit Boy. We commissioned an illustrator to create Circuit Boy, we gave him the specifications and that's what we came up with.

And what about the "DNA Sluts" - are they violent heroines?

F.D.R. They do have hostile mucus coming out of their cunts. They're into projectile coming, they've just been practising their ejaculation for a long time.

V.B. That's definitely more an allusion to ejaculation and hostile mucus than lasers or guns. The characters of the "DNA Sluts" are ambiguous; they are warrior types; they're not there to kill everyone, although they might corrode Circuit Boy's chrome-plated exterior.

J.S. They've spent so long in the oppressive super hero regime that they have to change their ways, they've escaped from science fiction comic books and come over to All New Gen's side but there's still a bit of the old conditioning in them - they're learning.

F.D.R. They're learning because they love to bond, and when you play "All New Gen", you will be rewarded for bonding with the DNA Sluts. In traditional games you have energy levels and lives. The integral essence in this game is G-slime, and you're rewarded in our game for bonding with the DNA Sluts by an opportunity to replenish your levels of G-slime. They're into love and peace and harmony as well as hostile mucus.

In your work there appears to be a celebration of the body, a return to the body.

V.B. The work is concerned with making the body visible in an environment where women's bodies have been invisible and if they are visible they're totally mutated. It is a celebration of difference, a celebration of the body, a celebration of fluids and viscera in an environment that is not friendly to that. My heroine of the moment is Monique Wittig because she is concerned with the annihilation of all known structures and focusses so passionately on a glorious celebration of the body, in the claiming of the body, the naming of the body, and the naming of the parts.

J.S. The celebration of the body is definitely a reaction to the philosophy perpetrated by lots of computer technophiles who jack into the machine

and want to forget about the body, to reject the meat of the body. In our work we're not finished with the body, the body is an important site for feminists. We don't want technology to forget about the body. Stelarc was saying yesterday that he wants to make photosynthetic skin so that we don't need our digestive system any more; he wants to make skin that will breath in oxygen so that we can hollow out the body and make all these technological implants.⁴

V.B. I find it fairly problematic because I like the flaws in the body. I don't want to be like a piece of beef jerky, I like slime and viscera, it's what pleasure is about. I find it a very unsexdutive, very unappealing vision of a technological future.

F.D.R. People are becoming more constructed, they've got pace-makers, they've got metal implants. Stelarc is exploring this through his art, it's an extreme model but we need the extremity, it's within our culture as we are becoming more cyborg-like.

Is the notion of pleasure central to your work?

J.S. I love working with computers, I want one, I want one, I want access to Big Daddy Mainframe's machines - all of them, all of them. We take pleasure in the resolution, the bytes. We want to make our work entertaining and fun. We're definitely not talking from a soap box, we want to entertain people and we want people to take pleasure in the work. The work at TISEA is work in progress. We want to create something that is more dynamic by working in multimedia. I'm personally very interested in combining video images, flashing LED displays, and sounds to create a pleasurable experience for people.

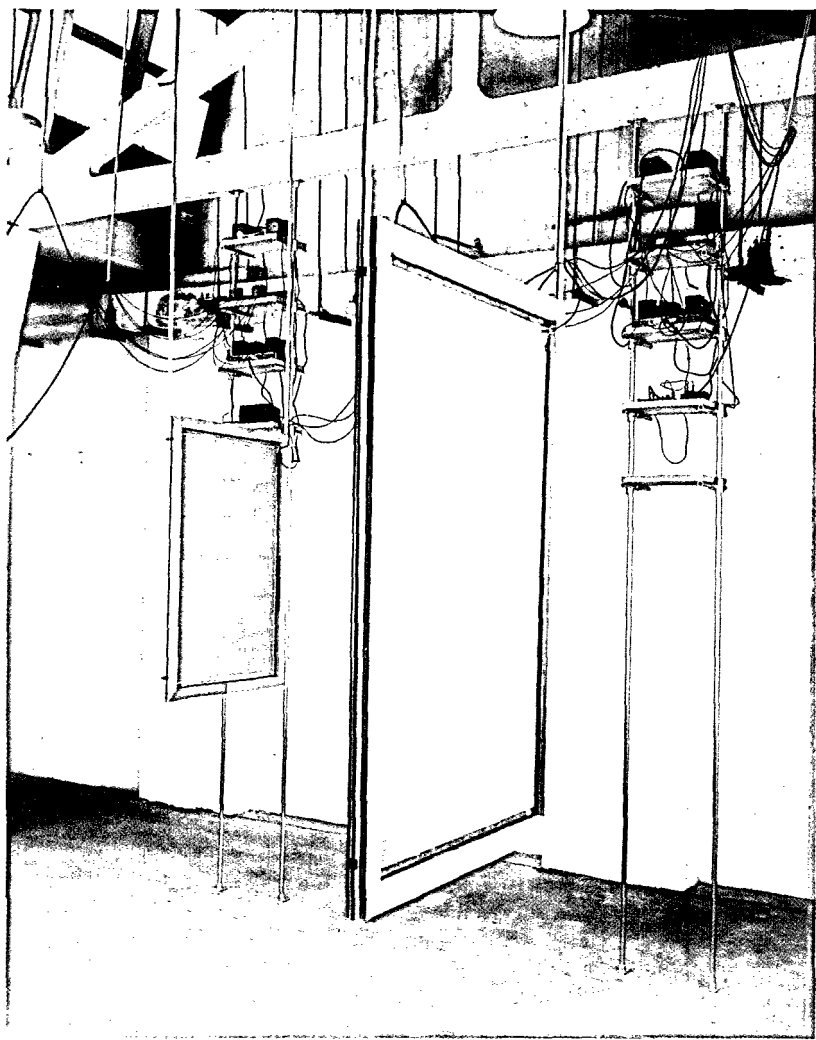
V.B. None of us own computers so we have to scam wherever possible, that's just the nature of working in this area. Part of the process is infiltrating institutions and accessing the technology whenever and however. We use Macintosh which isn't the high end state of the art stuff. We might borrow a Quadra from Apple Macintosh for a couple of weeks and work really fast to get as much done as we possibly can or we might develop a relationship with a particular institution.

F.D.R. We use photographs scanned in at high resolution and collaged against the background. So much computer work looks generic. Either people are painting with the computer or doing total collage - you don't see this sort of imagery.

V.B. The use of black and white photographic imagery is inserting a fleshly, real presence into that technological environment, putting some guts into the computer which returns to the pleasure of the body, the pleasure of the gaze, as we construct the gaze.

Notes

1. Australian Network for Art and Technology (ANAT) is an organisation based in Adelaide concerned with developing the links between the arts, science and technology.
2. William Gibson coined the term *cyberspace* in his science fiction novel *Neuromancer*. N.Y.: Ace, 1984.
3. "Women need a reason to be aggressive, men just need a space". From Nancy Paterson's paper, "Lust and Wanderlust: Sex and Tourism in a Virtual World", presented at TISEA (1992).
4. Presentation by Stelarc at TISEA in the poster session on the "obsolete body".



Joyce Hinterding, *Electrical Storms* (1992),
Bond Store Building, 9th Sydney Biennale

(photo: Chris Fortescue)