Next Bodies

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At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the advancing global hegemonies of corporate biotechnology and digital information and communication technologies (ICT) present radically new challenges for feminist cultural theorists and visual art practitioners. An eclectic emergent cyberfeminism that engages feminist theory and practices in the digital environment has opened the territory of the Internet as a strategic field of artistic production and political intervention. Wired feminists recognize that the instantaneous global circulation of images and texts in the networks of cyberspace is introducing large new audiences to both new feminist representations, and to feminist critiques of the gender relations and capitalist market ideologies that drive ICT.

Feminist initiatives supported by international electronic networks have already emerged in some African countries, in India, and other developing countries. In developed countries, the relatively low cost of digital production and distribution offers younger women artists working with new media important new avenues of visibility and action. In the last ten years, cyberfeminist web sites, participatory electronic art projects, and electronic networking groups have increased from a handful in the early nineties to over two thousand in 2001. Cyberfeminism has adopted many of the tactics of earlier avant-garde feminisms, including strategic separatism (women-only lists, self-help groups, chat groups, networks, and technological training); feminist cultural and social theory relating to women and technology; creation of new images of women to counter rampant sexist stereotyping (feminist avatars, cyborgs, trans- or non-gendered figures); and feminist Internet critique.

The question of how to negotiate the link of cyberfeminism to other feminisms is crucial to understanding the often-contradictory contemporary positions of women working with the new technologies. (1) Cyberfeminism began with strong techno-utopian expectations that the new electronic media would offer women a fresh start to create new languages, programs, platforms, images, fluid identities and even subjectivities in cyberspace and that women could re-code, redesign, and reprogram information technology to help change the female condition. (2) In much the same way as 1970s and 1980s feminist artists appropriated non-traditional media, technologies, and forms--such as performance, installation, video, and media interventions, in order

to present a new feminist content in art, wired women––while often ambivalent about their relationship to early feminisms––are now beginning to appropriate digital technologies that do not yet have an established aesthetic history. This is an exciting moment in which to re-invent a radical feminist visual culture.

Distinctions can be made between two overlapping waves of cyberfeminism: an initial wave (roughly 1990-95) celebrated a cyborg consciousness and the innate affinities of women and machines. A second wave (1997-present) critiques the (relatively) a-political stance of previous theorists and practitioners and advocates the development of an embodied and politically engaged cyberfeminism. (3) Current debates among "new" cyberfeminists are beginning to emphasize the crucial importance of differences within feminism, and of postcolonial discourses and representations to an engaged feminist Internet theory, politics, and practice. In this regard, the central issue of the invisibility of embodied difference in the virtual or "post-corporeal" media remains primary.

Cyberfeminist artists with the technological skills and access must join with other feminists to strategize a visible resistance to authoritarian ICT and biotech industries. Drawing on feminist cultural and post-colonial theory and strategies from past activist practices, they can initiate models for direct action, subversion, and coalition building among different groups of women. Effective tactics for such visual culture projects will: 1) employ collective production and performative action in a specific social context; 2) combine feminist critiques of technology as it relates to differences of gender, race, and class; and 3) engage in cross-disciplinary research in biotechnology, biopolitics, feminist and post-colonial art and theory.

1. The relationship between theory and practice in feminist visual culture needs rethinking. Past feminist art practices—such as those formulated by the Feminist Art Programs in California in the 1970s—sprang up in the context of an international political feminist movement. They employed activist strategies and tactics synthesized from avant-garde movements, feminist theory, and practices of everyday life. Insights gained from consciousness-raising were put to use in generating activist performances and public visual work. Political conditions have changed, however; today there is no cohesive, collective feminist movement to provide a context in which artists, students, and cultural workers can formulate and situate their practices. Most feminist artists work alone, and most prominent women artists have gained recognition as individual art stars in much the same manner as the prominent men.

The blatant sexism and racism of many of the Internet and biotech art works exhibited at major electronic media venues point to a pressing need for critical feminist

interventions in the representational domains of electronic media and biotech. (4) Art projects that seek to create critical discourses around biotech and ICT call for collective or collaborative interventions based on interdisciplinary research, shared expertise, and participatory performative practices. Transnational electronic networking can also be immensely productive for such projects.

2. Far from being obsolete, feminist political philosophy and gender theory have crucial bearing on the new working and living conditions (for women) created by the global deployment of ICT. Worldwide, women's lives are being profoundly altered— particularly in the areas of production and reproduction––in ways that often lead to extreme physical and mental health problems. This is as true for highly educated professional women (including artists) in academia, the sciences, and the medical and computer industries, as it is for women clerical and factory workers in the just-in-time telecommunications and home-work industries, and for rural and urban women working in electronic chip factories and in assembly sweat-shops. A crucial concern for cyberfeminist artists is to address and counter the increased economic and political stratification and exclusion reinforced by global capital and ICT.

Since most women still work a "double shift" of production and reproduction of labor, the demands and pressures of the high-speed consumer economy affect us differently from (most) men. Increasing levels of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, depression, and stress disorders among professional women (the most documented group), not to mention the myriad social and personal stresses faced by pink and blue-collar women workers, attest to the high human costs of late capitalist economies of production. In strategizing cyberfeminist projects relating to women's productive and reproductive labor, we must contest the unquestioned value placed on speed and efficiency and the concomitant failure to heed the limits and needs of the organic body.

3. Feminist theorists have shown how the new biotech reproductive order colonizes the female body as a pre-eminent laboratory and tissue mine for a lucrative medical/pharmaceutical industry. (5) Moving beyond the strictures of conventional academic feminist theory, cyberfeminist artists must develop activist practices that educate and engage a wide public directly, and instigate informed debate about the far-reaching repercussions of these technologies in women's lives. Disturbing developments in bio/genetic technologies such as Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART), transgenics, and genetic modification of plants are profoundly affecting human genetic futures and the environment worldwide. Cultural critiques of corporate biotech industries should therefore be a major focus of feminist action and artistic intervention.

Organic bodies and bodily processes––particularly those of women and fetuses–– are being invaded at the molecular level and re-engineered to meet the cyborgian and eugenic requirements of a rationalized global work force and consumer market. Feminists working with these technologies--scientists, researchers and technicians, as well as non-specialist but informed activist artists––are in a critical position to work together to devise interventions into these increasingly naturalized technological discourses and practices. As informed amateurs, artists can often operate in a wider field of discursive debate and engage in more radical projects than is possible for most professionals. Cyberfeminist artists can combine visual media and scientific research in performative projects that raise consciousness, educate audiences, and model interventionist tactics. Critical practices can expose the profit motives and neo-colonial ideologies driving many of the new flesh, reproductive, and genetic industries, helping audiences to assess their political, economic, social and eugenic implications.

In conclusion, it is time to call on cyberfeminist artists to create a radical new visual culture that critiques and resists the patriarchal and authoritarian ideologies driving corporate biotech and ICT; and to produce critical art works and cultural theory based on an informed analysis of the risks as well as the benefits of digital technologies. With such tools in cyberfeminist hands, it might be possible to create a new international feminist front!

Notes:
1. See Faith Wilding, "Where is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism?" n.paradoxa 2 (1998) 6-12; and Critical Art Ensemble and Faith Wilding, "Notes toward the Political Condition of Cyberfeminism," Art Journal 57, n. 2 (Summer 1998), 47-59.
2. See VNS Matrix WEB pages << http://sysx.org/artists/vns/
3. María Fernández and Faith Wilding, "Situating Cyberfeminisms,"Domain Errors: Cyberfeminist Practices, an anthology edited by the subRosa collective forthcoming from Autonomedia Books (2002).
4. For example: ARS Electronica's "Next Sex," (September 2000), Exit Art's "Paradise Now,"(November 2000), and ISEA's "Beyond the Screen" (December 2000). Enthralled by the promissory spectacle of biogenetic technologies, many artists are unthinkingly producing projects that promote corporate interests and eugenic ideology.
5. For a bibliography on feminism and biotech see <www.cyberfeminism.net>.

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